

U. Warlord 201

Chapter 201: The Dust Settles

The members of Team Zenith cursed themselves for their helplessness and inability to help Zhang Lie in need.

However, while the moonlight wyrm was roaring in triumph, a figure suddenly landed above its eyes, launching a sneak attack against it the same way he had against the liminal superior-grade moonlight wyrm. As a peak-grade lifeform, the moonlight wyrm reacted near-instantaneously, but Zhang Lie was even faster.

The moment the moonlight wyrm made a move, Zhang Lie activated [Eclipse] once more, and a gigantic winged tiger descended on the wyrm. At that moment, the wyrm felt as though the space all around it had frozen, and it was unable to move even a muscle.

"[The Boundless Blade: Requiem of the End]!" Zhang Lie seized the opportunity to thrust Venombane into the moonlight wyrm's right eye, releasing the rest of his genetic energy in one extraordinary attack and devastating the interior of the wyrm's head.

The moonlight wyrm slowly crumpled to the ground, and Zhang Lie crushed the superior-grade moonlight wyrm soulshard that he had just obtained. As the peak-grade moonlight wyrm fell to the ground, a pure-white orb swiftly condensed over its horn.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade moonlight wyrm and obtained its soulshard. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade moonlight wyrm, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

The will of the world's announcement dragged the gathered hunters back to reality.

"Captain, what happened?"

"Master, you didn't die?!"

The hunters racked their brains in an attempt to figure out just what had happened.

"Come over here and help me up, will you?" The moment Zhang Lie grabbed the peak-grade soulshard, he collapsed to the ground, and the other hunters rushed over to help him up.

Only then did Sun Mengmeng notice that Zhang Lie's body was trembling violently, a clear sign of the aftereffects of the blood ant soulshard. She had used the same soulshard during the battle, but never to such a degree.

"Claim our spoils and head back to the Blacksteel settlement immediately!"

Indeed, the moonlight wyrm was a legendary creature, and there was no need to advertise that they were the ones who had slain it. Despite the fact that the Blacksteel settlement was surprisingly empty that night, they couldn't guarantee that there were absolutely no hunters around. They were all exhausted and drained, so if someone were to find them at this juncture...

They encountered no one on the way back until they reached the entrance to the settlement, where they found a three-hunter party heading out. When they saw Zhang Lie and the others, along with the moonlight wyrm carcasses they were carrying, they were all rather surprised.

They passed by each other without incident, but news of their encounter with Team Zenith and the mysterious lifeform they had hunted quickly spread throughout the settlement. One of the hunters described in surprising detail just what he had seen, along with a few images he had surreptitiously taken from the back.

This information then quickly spread to the real world.

In Odinstadt, within a suite in the largest hotel in the area, Yan Long was frowning as he repeatedly tried to contact Zhang Lie to no avail. The doorbell to his suite suddenly rang, and the robotic housekeeper announced, "Commander Su Feng is here."

"Come in!"

"Yan Long, have you seen the news?" Su Feng asked immediately as he stepped inside.

"What news? I've been trying to contact that damn brat all this time..."

"I knew it! Just read the news and you'll see why he's been ignoring you." Su Feng laughed, then handed him his holographic reader.

[Revealing Zhang Lie's last-minute preparations for the Void Cup!]

A tabloid article appeared in front of Yan Long's eyes, and he glanced at it skeptically.

"What's this?" International media articles were lampooning Zhang Lie's behavior, and some even suggested that he had ended up as China's champion because he was the illegitimate son of some bigwig in the Chinese government.

Su Feng laughed. "Don't actually read it, just have a look at the pictures."

Yan Long narrowed his eyes. "What? This was from five minutes ago? So this lad's still in the Blacksteel settlement, even now! Just what are these two serpent-type lifeforms to be worth so much trouble?"

"I've had my men look into this. Don't you know about the legends of the first realm? If I'm not mistaken, these are the legendary moonlight wyrms."

"No wonder he would hunt them down now," Yan Long murmured.

"I told you he was that sort of fellow, didn't I? There's no need to worry about him."

"No need to worry? How could I not? If he shows up, he'll surely take first place in the worldwide tournament. Don't you know how long it's been since we've had a Chinese champion? I'll bring him over even if I have to kidnap him!"

Su Feng rubbed his head. "Well, whatever, I just came by to share the news. If there's nothing else, I'll be leavi—"

"You're free, aren't you? Want to have a drink?" Before Su Feng could leave, however, Yan Long extended him an invitation, one which Su Feng mulled over and accepted.

"That impudent brat, hunting down a legendary lifeform while I'm sitting here trying to get a hold of him! If I were a few decades younger myself, I swear, I'd—"

"Oh, I think I remember what you did at his age. Don't you remember chasing after—"

"Ah, stop, stop! Let's return to talking about Zhang Lie, shall we?"

Zhang Lie and the others were likewise enjoying some drinks together. In Team Zenith's suite in the Blacksteel Inn, by the time Zhang Lie had emerged from a long, relaxing bath, a veritable feast had been laid out for everyone,

The main highlight of the feast, of course, was the peak-grade moonlight wyrm flesh.

"Captain!"

"Master!"

The hunters were still a little shocked to see him well and alive, after having thought that he had perished to the moonlight wyrm's tail.

"Alright, alright, why are all of you so reserved? It's not as though it's our first time interacting with each other. Sit down and let's dig in! We'll spend the rest of the day recuperating, then head to Odinstadt tomorrow."

Indeed, this was the one and only peak-grade feast that the first realm of the dimensional world was likely to ever host.

Given the size of peak-grade moonlight wyrm, the hunters didn't intend to rest until they had consumed all ten peak gene fragments' worth of meat.

"Right, Captain, just what happened at the very end? We all thought you died!" Li Feng asked, his curiosity clearly piqued.

"There was no choice. The moonlight wyrm's far stronger than we were, so we had to take a risk. It would have been difficult for me to defend against the moonlight wyrm's last strike, but dodging it wouldn't have been a problem. However, if I had done so, we would eventually lose the battle of attrition, so I had to come up with a plan instead.

"By sacrificing my wolfman transformation and activating the stealth ability inherent to Venombane, I successfully hoodwinked the serpent into thinking that it had won. All of you saw what happened next. Of course, the moonlight wyrm would relax and demonstrate its superiority after seeking revenge for its mate, and that would surely be the best time to strike.

"I suddenly appeared out of nowhere and launched a sneak attack at the wyrm while it was celebrating its victory. You've all seen how tough its scales were, so I chose to strike at its eyes instead."

Zhang Lie was exuberant at his victory and how well his plan had gone. He made his decisions sound simple in hindsight, but executing those actions in practice had still posed a considerable risk.

"Captain, I can't help but marvel at the plans you concoct even in the heart of battle! I know I can't compare with you, but let me at least give you a toast!"

"Fang Yi, when are you going to change your bootlicking habits?!" Sun Mengmeng jeered, causing the entire table to laugh.

Chapter 202: Towards Odinstadt

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade moonlight wyrm, you received one peak gene fragment.
Current total: 1]

[...one peak gene fragment. Current total: 8]

As the hunters devoured the feast, pleasant announcements from the will of the world chimed in their heads. The hunters' genetic energy fluctuations grew more and more intense; after all, these were peak gene fragments, each one of which was even stronger than ten superior gene fragments!

Even Yang Ze, who had gotten the fewest peak gene fragments out of them all, had seven. This meant that, excluding any limit fragments, Yang Ze had the equivalent of a hundred and seventy superior gene fragments, something that any other hunter could only dream of. Except for the members of Team Zenith, no hunter could achieve such a feat.

"Captain, we obtained two moonlight wyrm soulshards during the hunt, right? What do they do?" Yang Ze asked, clearly interested in the superior-grade soulshard that the first wyrm had dropped.

"Not two, but only one peak-grade soulshard," Zhang Lie corrected him.

"What? But, Captain, didn't the liminal superior-grade wyrm produce a soulshard too?" Yang Ze asked again.

"Yes, that's right, but I smashed the superior-grade one to pieces during the last fight!"

Yang Ze was stunned. "What, Captain! That was a superior-grade soulshard! How could you smash it to pieces?"

"I'm not lying to you—it's really been destroyed. I'll get you one in the future if you still want it," Zhang Lie replied with a smile.

"No, no, it's fine, but just what can the peak-grade soulshard do?" Yang Ze asked again.

This time, however, Zhang Lie replied with another mysterious smile. "That's a secret for the moment."

No matter how the other hunters tried to get Zhang Lie to spill the beans, however, Zhang Lie refused to say anything more. As they consumed more and more of the wyrm's flesh, everyone finally obtained all ten peak gene fragments from the peak-grade moonlight wyrm, and their positions as the top seven of the worldwide stage of the Void Cup were all but secured.

Zhang Lie's stats would have shocked any other hunter.

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX; Ninecarp Transformation, Third Form: Winged Tiger
Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (advanced), Eclipse (novice)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Galewolf (mutated), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (superior), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Forest Wolfman (superior), Flamewing (superior), Runic Salamander (superior), Moonlight Wyrms (peak)

He had obtained eight superior-grade and one peak-grade soulshard, and his framework and techniques had essentially all reached the limit of what was possible in the first realm. Given his

stats and experience in his past life, it would be difficult for him to find an opponent in the second realm, let alone the first.

Although the other hunters of Team Zenith were a step below Zhang Lie, they were still far above the majority, if only because of their peak gene fragments.

Because Zhang Lie and the others had managed to obtain peak gene fragments even in the first realm, their foundations would be far stronger than those of any other hunter. This would be a significant advantage once they ascended to higher realms. That night, the hunters were once again relieved that they had made the right decision in joining Team Zenith.

A day and night in the dimensional world corresponded to a mere few hours in the real one, and by the time it was dawn in the Blacksteel settlement, Zhang Lie and the others were ready to head to Odinstadt.

They returned to the dojo and packed a few essentials. It was 11 PM on Earth; when Zhang Lie saw the dozens of unread messages from Yan Long, he ultimately chose to head to Odinstadt overnight so as not to anger Commander Yan Long further.

Teleportation arrays were the main mode of transportation for just about any hunter or lifeform in the galaxy, and areas with teleportation arrays around them were sure to be densely populated.

Even the smallest array in Odinstadt was still littered with all sorts of amenities for hunters and the general public. Tomorrow would be the first day of the tournament, so tonight was the last night in which many of the competitors could relax. As a result, there were lots of people nearby, enjoying food and drink as they watched hunters teleport to the city.

With a flash of light, three figures blinked into existence, all wearing crimson armor with the most expensive accessories available for purchase. From one glance alone, it was evident that they were no ordinary competitors.

Within a nearby restaurant, a man seated by a window suddenly shouted, "Ha! As expected, the strongest hunters arrive last. Do you know just who those hunters are?"

The other customers seated nearby murmured to each other, and someone called out, "Looking at how cocky you're acting, it must be the top three hunters of England, no? But I heard that the top three this year are far weaker than the top three five years ago."

The first hunter to speak frowned. "Those are all lies, I say! The top three hunters of England are all from illustrious, knighted families! They've dominated every match in the preliminary stages."

"Dominated? You think the winner of a twenty-minute fight can be considered dominating? Why don't you go look at the Chinese preliminaries?"

The first hunter retorted, "What do you mean? Are you looking down on English hunters?"

"That depends on whether they've shown some true talent, no? Don't you know what their nicknames are? The three wastrels of England: Farrell, Fred, and Richard. They might be better than the other hunters of your country, but on the international stage? I think not!"

Genetic energy flared from the first hunter, as though he were intending to start a fight.

"Enough! Violence is prohibited in this establishment! Any offenders will be detained!" A waiter rushed over almost immediately.

Detained! Both hunters immediately backed away from each other; neither were native to Norway, so it would be troublesome if they truly were detained. Furthermore, if that really did happen, they would miss the exciting spectacle that they had traveled to see: the worldwide stage of the Void Cup.

In the end, they could only grit their teeth and ignore each other. The restaurant was quiet for a little while longer, but conversations erupted whenever some famous hunter or team appeared from the array.

Just then, seven black-armored hunters appeared in a flash of light and instantly became the topic of conversation. Inscribed on their breastplates was the word 'Zenith'—they were representatives of the Zenith Dojo, along with their leader, the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!

According to the Chinese media, he was an existence that no other hunter in the first realm could defeat, a dragonsoul warrior of China and galaxy fighter of the world federation, who had managed to found a dojo in his early twenties.

Perhaps foreign media might downplay his strengths and twist his deeds, but his abilities and accomplishments were obvious. The fact that he had killed a three-star black-tipped scarab alone during the Kez invasion was proof enough of that—no ordinary first-realm hunter would even be able to get close to one and leave unscathed, but not only had Zhang Lie done so, he had annihilated the three-star scarab.

As a result, Zhang Lie had quite a lot of fans even among foreign hunters.

"Isn't that... it is, it's the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Sensing this aura for myself, I'm now starting to understand why people think he's the favorite to win the tournament..."

The Zenith hunters had yet to fully acclimate themselves to their newfound peak gene fragments, and the aura they were giving off was indeed quite frightening.

However, there were a few hunters staring at Zhang Lie with narrowed eyes.

"Head! Head! Our target has appeared in the northern sector of Odinstadt. Requesting that the operation commence!"

"Do it—no matter the cost, even if you have to drag the entire city down with you!" a malicious voice ordered.

They weren't the only ones who treated Zhang Lie as their target. Within the restaurant, several silent customers immediately paid their bill and rushed out.

The members of Team Zenith could feel the killing intent directed at them from afar, but Zhang Lie was confident that their plans would be foiled. "Here's a good opportunity to test your newfound strength, everyone. If anyone dares to strike at us, retaliate with full force!"

Chapter 203: Fending off an Assassination

Almost as Zhang Lie gave his command, two streets away, situated in a tall building, a sniper team launched the first shot of this skirmish.

None of the seven hunters of Team Zenith reacted, but the sniper bullet somehow dropped to the ground, sapped of all momentum, three meters away from the group. As though it had experienced some tremendous pressure, the bullet made from S-gold alloy was squashed into a thin disk.

"Did someone just fire a bullet?!"

"A terrorist!"

"Summon the guards, the guards!"

Commotion erupted in the nearby streets, and the pedestrians and hovercars in Odinstadt rushed away in panic. However, Zhang Lie and the other members of the Team Zenith continued walking forward slowly, inexorably, as if they were impervious to the attack.

In the middle of the panic, a white-haired old man tripped and fell in front of Zhang Lie and the others; instead of helping him up, however, Zhang Lie shot a bullet of genetic energy straight through his forehead.

The man died instantly.

"Captain, this—!"

"Can't you sense his killing intent? He's surely part of the group of people targeting us."

At the same time, even more gunshots rang out from all around them. Zhang Lie raised his head.

"Li Feng, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Yes, Captain!"

Li Feng would obey Zhang Lie's orders without question. He immediately began circulating his genetic energy as he activated his lightborne beetle soulshard and beams of light shot out all around him.

Moments later, cries and yelps of pain came from the surrounding buildings.

The main force quickly approached. As if realizing how acute Zhang Lie's senses were, they appeared directly from the streets. A dozen hunters, each with a frighteningly strong aura, surrounded Team Zenith.

"Your death has come, Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!" the leader of the hunters shouted. From the fluctuations in his genetic energy, it seemed that he was a second-realm—or even a post-second-realm—hunter.

"Is that so? Let me guess just who's behind your deployment. The Long clan? The Qin clan? The Li clan? The Wang clan? Or all of them combined?" Zhang Lie didn't seem to think much of their strength.

The old man didn't respond. He activated a toad-form transformation-type soulshard, and his team of hunters launched attacks toward Zhang Lie and his team instantly. The dazzling glow of soulshards filled the streets of Odinstadt.

The leader of the hunters, now a speckled toad, used its tongue as a sharp sword that could be contracted or elongated at will. He would have been able to take down a regular first-realm hunter within three blows, but against Zhang Lie, the transformation seemed more like a paltry parlor trick than anything else.

Zhang Lie frowned. He shot out a bubble of genetic energy toward him, which expanded into a black torrent of water that drowned the toad. The toad didn't have any time to react; caught within the water, it slowly disintegrated into nothingness, leaving behind only a steaming pool of black acid.

At the same time, the other members of Team Zenith began to retaliate.

Their leader's gruesome death shocked the other hunters, who were momentarily distracted by the sight. Vines crept up their legs, impaling and rooting them to the ground. The force of their combined auras, eclipsed that of a regular third-realm hunter, and the assassins clearly hadn't expected such overwhelming strength.

Even the third-realm hunters among them weren't able to do anything to Zhang Lie; indeed, their leader had died within just a few blows. Could they really handle such an opponent?

This was a question the clans backing them now had to consider carefully. Their clan heads had commanded them to assassinate Zhang Lie no matter the cost, but it didn't seem as though any of them would even be able to defeat Zhang Lie or his team.

A few reckless hunters continued to rush forward, but none of them were able to cross within three meters of Team Zenith. Given the disparity in their strength, those hunters who charged forward were all but committing suicide.

Of the seven hunters of Team Zenith, only Li Feng had activated a soulshard to get rid of the snipers targeting them, and their primary target, Zhang Lie, had killed three third-realm hunters without even a weapon in hand.

Fewer and fewer of the assassins dared charge forward, and some even seemed to want to retreat. Zhang Lie's guess had been quite right: the backer behind this assassination attempt was clearly multiple clans.

The gathered hunters were dressed and equipped differently, with contrasting frameworks and fighting styles, and distinct accents. Zhang Lie didn't stop them from retreating, because he knew that they would be too terrorized of his strength to dare to attack him ever again.

At the same time, the guards of Odinstadt, along with Su Feng and Yan Long's own troops, finally arrived at the scene. Because the assassination attempt took place in broad daylight, news of the event quickly spread throughout Odinstadt.

"Zhang Lie, what's going on? Why didn't you inform us that you were heading over?" Su Feng questioned him with a frown.

"Well, I was thinking of giving you all a surprise..."

"A surprise? More like a shock! Were you injured?" Yan Long interrupted, extremely displeased by the turn of events.

Nevertheless, both Yan Long and Su Feng stood up for Team Zenith as the Odinstadt authorities tried to figure out what happened, and they were quickly escorted to Yan Long's hotel. Two officers took Zhang Lie's testimony regarding what he had experienced, and he wasn't disturbed after that.

Recordings of the failed assassination were immediately publicized by several of the hunters nearby that had witnessed the entire event, and Zhang Lie became the talk of Odinstadt not an hour after he had first stepped foot in the city.

"Well? What exactly happened?" Yan Long and Su Feng frowned as they questioned Zhang Lie, somehow feeling as though they had become his parents.

"What do you mean, what happened? You both saw it, didn't you—someone was trying to kill me!"

Yan Long pursed his lips. "Don't pretend you weren't just baiting them. What's the deal with the legendary lifeform you slew?"

Zhang Lie cocked his head and pretended not to understand. "What legendary lifeform? Did you send someone to spy on me?"

"Oh, just you keep pretending!" Su Feng presented Zhang Lie with the article on his holographic reader.

"What? Who took this picture—it's from such a terrible angle!"

"Alright, now—tell us about this legendary lifeform. What were the spoils? Do you think you can win the championship?" Yan Long asked again.

Zhang Lie knew that he couldn't dodge the question any longer.

"There were two moonlight wyrms, one superior-grade and one peak-grade. I obtained a peak-grade soulshard, but I'm keeping its abilities secret for now."

"Peak-grade? A peak-grade lifeform in the first realm? That's impossible!"

Su Feng expressed his disbelief—everyone knew that the first realm could only harbor superior-grade lifeforms at most! There was surely a mistake. Although Yan Long didn't comment, the disbelief on his face was evident as well.

Zhang Lie released a bit of his aura, which caused both Yan Long and Su Feng to narrow their eyes.

"Do you believe me now? I don't know how it happened, but this is the truth. I saw it by accident, then planned to hunt it down the day before the worldwide stage of the Void Cup."

"In that case, you now have ten peak gene fragments?" Yan Long pressed.

"Yes, I and every other member of Team Zenith!"

Yan Long and Su Feng were both flabbergasted. Yan Long slumped back down into his seat, his face flushing red with excitement.

Chapter 204: A Frightening Foundation

How could Yan Long fail to be excited? There were seven hunters in the first realm who had obtained peak gene fragments, six of whom belonged to China!

Peak gene fragments were rare even for second-realm hunters, and most would ascend to the third realm as soon as they had capped out their mutated gene capacity. Only a rare few hunters would advance having capped out their superior gene capacity, and even fewer their peak gene capacity.

Most second-realm hunters would be overjoyed just to have any peak gene fragments at all—such was their rarity. However, Zhang Lie and his team had acquired these precious fragments in the first realm! Although the first realm was colloquially known as the newbie realm, and the effect of these gene fragments less intense than in the second and higher realms, even a first-realm peak gene fragment was still a peak gene fragment.

How could Yan Long not be astounded by such good news? It was no wonder that they managed to avoid being assassinated by a team of second- and third-realm hunters. Without a doubt, the hunters of Team Zenith would become pillars of China, because their foundations were more solid than any hunter past or future!

It looked as though he really had to impose severe sanctions on any clan that dared to strike at Team Zenith.

"Good, very good! As expected of one who bears the title of Dragonwolf—in that case, you'd better take the first seven places in the worldwide tournament! Who do you think tried to assassinate you today?"

Zhang Lie laughed. "Who else? Some combination of the Wang, Li, Qin, and Long clans, no doubt."

Su Feng knew a little of the enmity between Zhang Lie and the Wang, Li, and Qin clans after attending his dojo's opening ceremony, but Yan Long was quite amazed at the number and strength of the clans that he had managed to offend. In addition to the He and Qian clans of the capital, there were six major clans in all that considered Zhang Lie an enemy—and he was barely in his twenties!

"That many? Explain the situation at once. We'll do our best to annul these grievances. As for you, focus on winning the championship!"

"Don't worry, Commander Yan. I'll handle my own affairs on my own, and China will certainly have a good showing at this Void Cup."

"You're certain?" Yan Long reaffirmed.

"Yes, Commander! If there's nothing else, I'll be leaving now."

"Make sure we don't have to clean up after your mess within the next few days!" Yan Long called out again.

"Yessir!" Indeed, for the hunters of Team Zenith, quiet meditation and cultivation was what was most urgent to them at the moment.

Su Feng sat back down to confer with Yan Long, and the two of them shared a smile.

"What do you think we should do, Yan Long?"

"What, don't you have a plan already?"

"Alright, then—I'll deal with the Wang clan in Ning, as well as the Qin clan. Can I leave the Long clan in Lingnan, as well as the Li clan in the north, to you?"

"Leaving the harder clans to me, eh? I see how it is. Fine, it's settled. I'll have my men reach out immediately." Su Feng nodded, then left Yan Long's suite.

When Zhang Lie returned to Team Zenith's rooms, he found Yun Bing and Chu Feng there waiting for him. Everyone there had been pleasantly chatting away until his entrance.

"Zhang Lie, are you alright? Did you get a scolding from Commander Yan?" Chu Feng joked.

Zhang Lie laughed. "I'm alright. Commander Yan had us stay in our rooms so as to not cause trouble."

"You're the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, after all, favored to win the tournament! Both your competitors and your enemies will be out for your blood," Yun Bing added.

Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng immediately protested Yun Bing's words. At some point, they had grown used to young clan heads like Yun Bing and Chu Feng, and they no longer shrunk back in their presence.

"Zhang Lie, will you tell us about these sensational pictures of you returning to the Blacksteel settlement late at night? I know these are the carcasses of moonlight wyrms—we almost died to them because of you!"

"One was a peak-grade lifeform—that's all I'll say on the matter," Zhang Lie replied.

"A peak-grade lifeform!" Chu Feng gasped.

The Yun and Chu clans were both major clans, and they certainly knew just what hunting down a peak-grade lifeform in the first realm implied.

"In that case, you..." Even the usually calm and collected Yun Bing seemed to be at a loss for words.

Although she had sensed the fluctuations in the wyrm's genetic energy for herself way back when, and thought it stronger than a regular superior-grade lifeform, she hadn't suspected that it would actually be a peak-grade lifeform.

The existence of a peak-grade lifeform in the first realm of the dimensional world sounded like pure fiction. It had been widely recognized as fact that the first realm could only harbor at most superior-grade lifeforms, and this revelation upended an entire century's worth of knowledge.

Not only that, Team Zenith had even managed to hunt down the peak-grade lifeform! This meant that every member of Team Zenith had a few peak gene fragments...

"Zhang Lie, won't you let me know the next time you encounter something like this? I'll do anything, even be a common bellhop if need be!" Chu Feng cried out.

If only relationships between Zhang Lie and the Chu clan hadn't been ruined because of his father's decision to remain neutral! Otherwise, there might have been a place for him in the moonlight wyrm's hunt. Peak gene fragments, rare even in the second realm—and Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith had obtained them in the first!

Of course, Yun Bing was feeling much the same way. If only she had been a little more persistent! Perhaps her father would have been more amenable to her pleas then...

Unfortunately, what was done couldn't be undone.

"Right, Zhang Lie, please let us know about something like this the next time around." Yun Bing made the same request that Chu Feng did, surprising the members of Team Zenith. Indeed, they hadn't quite realized just how important the ten peak gene fragments they had obtained were.

"I'll keep that in mind," Zhang Lie replied. It was true that Zhang Lie appreciated Yun Bing and Chu Feng, but in the end, they weren't as close to him as the members of Team Zenith, and he wouldn't dedicate too much effort to helping them out.

In the end, he could only rely on those teammates who were truly and wholly loyal to him. Yun Bing and Chu Feng nodded, understanding the rationale for his noncommittal response and the boundaries that separated them all.

The two of them had come to visit Team Zenith's suite to ask about the hunt and to confirm that Zhang Lie was safe and sound; their objectives achieved, they turned to leave.

"Alright, we'll be taking our leave now. I didn't expect that someone like you would be hurt in an assassination attempt, but I still had to confirm it for myself. I'll see you all soon at the start of the tournament—you won't need it, but good luck."

Chapter 205: The Long Arm of the Law

Yun Bing and Chu Feng left after confirming that Zhang Lie was fine. After they did so, Zhang Lie had everyone work on assimilating their newly obtained peak gene fragments into their body.

The suite turned silent, but outside the suite, the entirety of Odinstadt was in an uproar about the public assassination attempt that had occurred. News of the attempt was spreading all around the world, and it naturally caught the attention of the media and of those competitors aiming to become Earth's champion—for example, the favorite to win the tournament before Zhang Lie's arrival, Charles Murphy.

Within the penthouse suite in the best hotel of Odinstadt, Charles Murphy was glancing at news articles about the assassination attempt, a European leader seated before him.

"General Hill, there's nothing interesting to be found here—these monkeys are simply making a fuss to advertise their supposed champion! Once we're on stage, I'll let them know just what truly strong hunters look like."

Hearing Murphy's words, Hill frowned. "I just knew someone as arrogant as you would give me such a response. You need to understand just who he is—the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, the hunter who first developed and revealed the existence of limit fragments!

"Although we've managed to make a potion that'll allow you to temporarily break through the constraints of the first realm, don't forget that he's the pioneer of all this. If I'm not mistaken, what he's revealed to date is only the tip of the iceberg. In other words, it's quite possible that he's ahead of us even in terms of our research direction.

"You've seen his dojo's opening ceremony, haven't you? Can't you sense just how strong he is at full power? He managed to fend off a whole group of second- and third-realm hunters today, almost all

by himself! You have an amazing gift that allows you to handle even multiple peak-grade soulshards at once, and you might be able to replicate the same feat, but you would surely have suffered quite a few injuries.

"If nothing else, remember this: if you end up facing him in the Void Cup, you need to make him drop his guard, and then strike back with full force. There's no other way for you to win. Dr. Federenko has commanded that we have to win the Void Cup this year, and I'm here to direct you as per his recommendation. You deserve to be proud given your skills and accomplishments, but that doesn't mean you can get complacent," General Hill urged.

He was tired of lecturing Murphy, and Murphy was even more tired of being lectured at.

"Alright, enough! I understand—tell Federenko that northern Europe's sure to win the Void Cup!"

"Good, I'm counting on you!" General Hill left Murphy's suite immediately, unwilling to stay even a moment longer.

Such a scene happened in the rooms of promising champions all over Odinstadt; everyone wanted to win, after all. Even before the competition began, Zhang Lie's dominating presence was already increasing the stress that all the competitors were feeling.

Of course, those who were most incensed by Zhang Lie weren't these competitors, but rather a few clans thousands of miles away. In the Long manor at Lingnan, the elder Clan Head Long stared at the soldier in front of him with fear and astonishment. He knew the soldier before him, Zhou An, the current commander-in-chief of the military troops stationed at Lingnan.

He was decisive and ruthless, and his appearance at the Long manor made the old clan head suspect that something was amiss.

"May I ask for what reason you've come to visit, Commander Zhou?" the elder clan head asked, his tone intentionally relaxed.

Zhou An's silence, however, only increased tensions further. Only when a red light flashed by Zhou An's wrist did he respond, "Do you really not know, Elder Clan Head Long?"

The old clan head paused in contemplation, but ultimately shook his head. The Long clan hadn't made any big moves recently, and none of their hunters in the military had reported anything amiss. What could have gone wrong?

"In that case, let me be explicit. The red light you saw just now was an alert that the military's are now in place to seize all the Long clan's assets—yes, all its assets, all over China—including this manor. One command from me, and the Long clan will vanish overnight. Does this perhaps jog your memory, Elder Clan Head?"

Zhou An's words struck the Long clan head and his assistant, standing behind, dumb. "What?"

"I believe I've made myself clear. If you doubt my words, feel free to open the windows and look behind you."

The elder clan head staggered up to the window, where he saw the reflection of sunlight on metal on just about every visible surface.

"Clan Head, there's something wrong. Something's very wrong!" the first elder shouted from outside the conference room, shocking the clan head so much that he almost fell to the ground. He hastily instructed his assistant to ensure that no one barged into the conference room.

If the military truly wanted to get rid of the Long clan, there would be no need to provide any warning, and Zhou An wouldn't be here in front of him. The fact that Zhou An had appeared meant that there was something he wanted from the Long clan, something that would guarantee the Long clan's survival.

"Commander Zhou, the Long clan has been an honorable clan, one that has supported the country through weal and woe. For what reason—"

"Indeed? The Long clan has long had a reputation for being bossy and domineering to the citizens of Lingnan. Recently, it's even grown so bold as to dare scheme against honored members of the military! Long Lin, do you recognize your crimes?!" Zhou An called out, finally revealing the reason for his appearance.

Long Lin recognized the implications at once, of course, but he had no clue why the military would do so much just for Zhang Lie. Was he really the illegitimate son of some military commander?

Before he could say anything more in his defense, however, he heard, "Do it— no matter the cost, even if you have to drag the entire city down with you!" The recording was his final command to the assassins in Odinstadt.

"Elder Clan Head Long, aren't you the one whose voice is recorded here? Explain yourself!" Zhou An shouted.

Long Lin gritted his teeth. "Indeed, I was the speaker of that recording—but so what? Zhang Lie killed both my sons. Am I not entitled to seek revenge on their behalf? Will the military exhibit such favoritism to a first-realm hunter? Commander Zhou, the Long clan can trace back its roots for millennia. You might be able to extinguish us all today, but we won't go out without a bang!"

Zhou An scoffed. "First, the reason Zhang Lie killed your sons was because they tried to kill his team. Is this how far the Long clan has regressed after millennia? Furthermore, let me be even clearer: if I were to destroy the Long clan today, no one fifty kilometers away would hear of the news. Do you think the military isn't aware of your clan's research into high-energy nuclear physics?"

Long Lin was flabbergasted by the knowledge Zhou An revealed. It was evident that Zhou An was well aware of the Long clan's capabilities, and even the secret weapon he was planning on using if things turned dire.

"Listen up. From today onwards, Zhang Lie will be designated a top-priority target for military protection. If you dare target him again—"

"Top-priority target? What? On what grounds?!" Long Lin stared at Zhou An in shock.

"On what grounds? Because he's the one who discovered the existence of limit fragments, because he's the one whom the military is putting in charge of its soldiers' training regimen for their foundational breakthrough!" Zhou An responded.

Indeed, he was very impressed by Zhang Lie, who had devised the 'rite of shame' that all recruits now succumbed to in order to experience their foundational breakthrough. As expected, it produced significant results, but he had also become the nightmare of many a new recruit.

Zhou An continued, "This is the Long clan's last chance. If you try something like this again, you'll be destroyed before you know it—and as a reminder, don't try to get around this restriction. Are we clear?"

Long Lin's head drooped; he was well aware that the Long clan's supposed revenge would now become little more than a joke.

Chapter 206: Backing Down

Indeed, the Long clan wasn't the only clan to suffer in this manner. In Ning, the Wang clan was likewise surrounded by elites from the Blackwind Fort; in fact, because Zhang Lie and his dojo were both situated in Ning, there was a stronger military presence near the Wang clan.

Almost all the Wang assets were seized by the military in the blink of an eye. At the top floor of the Tianlin condominium in Ning, Wang Han was bowing to a black-clothed young man sitting in front of him. The man was Lin Yue, the team leader of one of the Blackwind Fort's field-operation teams, as well as a trusted aide to Su Feng.

"Team Leader Lin, may I ask what you're doing here?" Wang Han asked politely, realizing the delicacy of his situation.

"Clan Head Wang, are you sure you don't know why I'm here today?"

"No, Team Leader Lin, please explain yourself!"

"You don't know about the assassination attempt on Dojo Leader Zhang? According to verified sources, these assassins were sent by at least three factions. Do you claim to be innocent of this charge, Clan Head Wang?"

"A false accusation, Team Leader Lin! The Wang clan took no part in this! Surely you can't place the blame on the Wang clan out of mere conjecture alone?"

Lin Yue laughed. "Is that so?"

"I, Wang Han, swear on my cultivation and honor that the Wang clan truly wasn't involved! To be honest, the Wang clan did have a feud with Zhang Lie, but ever since Zhang Lie successfully founded his dojo and became the champion of the Void Cup, most of the Wang elders were unwilling to go against him any longer. Given his importance in discovering the existence of limit fragments, many in the clan support developing a friendlier relationship with him instead. A week ago, our clan halted all our plans against Zhang Lie and the Zenith Dojo," Wang Han admitted somewhat sorrowfully.

He had been invited—and had wanted!—to participate in the assassination attempt, but the clan had banded in vehement disagreement, forcing him to drop some of his unhatched plans against Zhang Lie. Although he was still upset, he was now immeasurably grateful to those elders who had objected and saved the Wang clan from deep trouble.

"Very well. Let this serve as a warning of what would happen if you chose to go against Zhang Lie, then," Lin Yue replied.

"Team Leader Lin, does that mean that Zhang Lie's being backed by the military now?"

"Don't try to pry for information. All I can tell you is to drop whatever feud the Wang clan has against him. He's not an existence the Wang clan can afford to offend—not even ten Wang clans! Believe me, this is for your own good!"

"Yes, Team Leader Lin, I understand!"

Lin Yue nodded, then turned to leave. "This meeting was a secret. I trust you won't publicize it," he added, walking out of the condominium.

Wang Han exhaled. The sooner he could let his enmity go, the better.

The Qin and Li clans, which harbored a deeper grudge against Zhang Lie, took the news rather badly. In the Li manor, the Li clan head sat with three black-clothed military officials, the atmosphere so tense it was almost palpable.

"What do you mean? Does the military intend to step into Li clan matters?" Clan Head Li pressed.

"To restrict, not to interfere," one of the military officials clarified. "If the Li clan persists in trying to interfere with Zhang Lie, it shall be destroyed. This is your final warning, Clan Head Li."

"Destroyed! Why?! Is a single first-realm hunter like Zhang Lie worth so much that you'd destroy the honored Li clan over it?" the Li clan head retorted.

"Justice? Clan Head Li, do you really wish to speak of justice? Your clan's initial disagreement with Zhang Lie grew out of your avarice—whence the justice? The Li clan's past accolades were a testament to your ancestors' skill and character, not the basis by which you can get away with bullying others! Indeed, if not for those accolades, we wouldn't be here today—the Li clan would simply have been annihilated from a distance. Come to your senses, Clan Head Li!"

"Very well. I understand. The Li clan will accede to the military's demands," Clan Head Li replied, taking a deep breath. Really, what other choice did he have? Once the military stepped in, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The major clans knew the military's might best; they might have been able to get away with bullying smaller clans or individual hunters, but against the military...

Affairs played out in much the same manner in the Qin clan. In a single night, Zhang Lie's enmity with many of the major clans of China was wiped clean.

Indeed, they couldn't even dare plot and scheme against Zhang Lie secretly. The military was sure to continue surveillance on them, and if they were to discover anything, their clans would be destroyed in an instant. It seemed as though the military had truly become Zhang Lie's backer, and the gulf between them and Zhang Lie was widening day by day.

Once everything was settled, in one of Odinstadt's inns, Yan Long and Su Feng again met up for drinks. They groused and grumbled at the hunter for whom they had done so much, who had spent the entire day and night cultivating in preparation for the tournament, and had no idea what had happened in his name.

Chapter 207: England's Three Wastrels

Zhang Lie was wholly unaware of what Su Feng and Yan Long were doing on his behalf, but even if he did, he wouldn't be terribly concerned one way or another. The Zhang Lie of the present had nothing to fear from these major clans; it was far more important for him to assimilate his peak gene fragments and consolidate his own power.

The Void Cup wasn't a major event in the grand scheme of things, not compared to the disaster-grade lifeform that would soon appear.

The evolution of his framework had given him an additional elemental attunement, but [The Boundless Blade] wouldn't be able to seamlessly incorporate all three elements properly. The battle against the peak-grade moonlight wyrm had already been tough and drawn out, and he would need to find something better against the disaster-grade lifeform to come.

Fortunately, [Ninecarp Transformation] came with an auxiliary technique, [Ninesoul Dragonblade]. Studying this technique required that the framework be evolved twice, and Zhang Lie just barely met this requirement. At his stage, however, he would only be able to launch the first of nine strikes in the sword art, and even this first strike would be difficult enough.

The requirement for the first strike was to consolidate the first three forms of the Ninecarp Transformation into a draconic form. Zhang Lie had been repeatedly trying to synthesize the forms, but his attempts had always ended in failure.

Fortunately, according to his past life's memories, the appearance of the disaster-grade lifeform wouldn't be for another two months after the Void Cup, so he still had some time to work on amassing power.

The next day, even before dawn, crowds had already gathered by the center of Odinstadt, where a magnificent arena had been built. Many hunters had arrived early in order to see the world's best at work, and the officials in charge of the tournament were already present and making their final inspection of the arena.

At 7:30 AM, the host of the worldwide stage, the mayor of Odinstadt, Ivan Hill, arrived at the scene with three assistants, and the worldwide stage of the Void Cup was about to begin in earnest.

As the first rays of light shone into Team Zenith's suite, loud knocks came from the door.

"Kids, it's time to get up! Don't be late for the opening ceremony!" Su Feng yelled, waking all the hunters within.

"The competitors are required to be present during the opening ceremony. You're all representing China, so I expect the best from all of you. Assemble in the lobby within five minutes!" Yan Long added.

By the time they assembled at the lobby, everyone else was already present. The He and Qian competitors had been disqualified from the worldwide stage because of what they had done within the national treasury, leaving China with only eight competitors to its name: Zhang Lie, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Li Feng, Zhou Ying, Sun Xiaowu, Chu Feng, and Yun Bing.

They left the hotel by a military hovercar already waiting for them outside, and traveling to the arena at the heart of Odinstadt took only a two or three minutes' drive.

Once they arrived, Yan Long, in his capacity as an assistant manager for the tournament, headed over to discuss matters with the mayor of Odinstadt, leaving Su Feng to lead the Chinese delegation to the preparatory area.

The opening ceremony would begin at 8 AM. Because this was the worldwide stage, each country's competitors would all appear on stage, one country at a time, bearing their national flag.

"There's no need to worry. You're just going to be parading across the stage—just act natural!"

"Commander Su, I wasn't nervous before, but now you're making me feel quite anxious," Chu Feng joked.

"Oh please, I hardly doubt someone like you will have any trouble here. If I recall correctly, you were present five years ago when your sister took part in the worldwide stage, so you already have some experience with this!" Su Feng seemed to be very familiar with Chu Feng, and he didn't believe his words.

On the other hand, he eyed the members of Team Zenith encouragingly.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it. It's normal to feel anxious the first time around," Zhang Lie added.

His tone seemed casual, but he too was also somewhat nervous. After all, even though he was certain he would dominate over the other competitors given his strength, it was his first time participating in an international event in both his lives. As the heart of Team Zenith, however, he couldn't act nervous in front of the other hunters.

Music began to blare, and the first representatives from Denmark took the stage. Ten youthful hunters, under the eyes of tens of thousands of spectators, marched across the stage.

"Scholes!"

"Fromm!"

Those spectators from Denmark shouted their names out with all their might, causing the crowds to erupt in chatter. Their names echoed throughout the stage, shocking the competitors who waited backstage.

There were only a hundred and one countries strong enough to participate in the worldwide stage, and Denmark was one of the ten strongest among them. As the country whose participants were first in line, they generated considerable buzz.

A few other countries' teams then followed to rather middling applause and noise, until England's team showed up to tremendous roars of approval, with more noise than any other country that had gone before it. Clearly, the English team was a fan favorite for winning the tournament.

Amidst the cacophonous cheering, the handsome Farrell, Fred, and Richard walked across stage in their signature red armor, confident and casually arrogant.

They waved at the crowd, summoning bout after bout of cheering.

Chapter 208: Enemies at Every Corner

After the three hunters from England came another few countries' representatives, but none garnered such applause from the crowd until the seventeenth country to show up, Norway, captained by Charles Murphy.

The entire crowd surged in uproarious cheer, so loud that the hunters backstage were all vibrating. Over half the crowd was from Norway, explaining the intensity of the cheering. After all, they were all in Norway, and Norway's competitors would have the upper hand in their own land. As a result, many hunters viewed Norway as the favorite to win the championship.

Charles Murphy was dressed in pure white, a flag draped over his shoulders, his face filled with confidence. His teammates all seemed to puff up upon feeling the crowd's attention.

"So that's our main competitor, is he?" Chu Feng murmured, competitive intent rising in his tone.

"I heard he's long since capped out his gene fragments and has been waiting in the first realm for over a year specifically for the Void Cup. I'm sure he's well prepared for it, so be careful if you do meet him," Su Feng reminded him.

"Ha—so what? Does he have any limit fragments?" Chu Feng retorted. Indeed, the most that regular hunters could do in the first realm was to cap out their superior gene fragments, but he, who had consumed Potion #1, now had 160 basic gene fragments, a wide gulf that no other competitor could overcome.

Although Charles Murphy might somehow have been able to obtain limit fragments of his own, he certainly wouldn't be able to discover Potion #1 within such a short period of time.

"Are you certain? There's been a recent research paper regarding these limit fragments from northern Europe, and it seems as though they may have hit on a method. Whatever the case may be, don't let your guard down. Our goal is to have everyone advance to the final, galaxywide stage—don't let them beat you in the individual rounds," Su Feng warned again.

The worldwide stage consisted of both individual and team-based rounds: the participating hunters would represent both themselves and their countries. As long as they were strong enough, every member from a given country were eligible to advance.

"With Zhang Lie and Team Zenith around, do you think we'll have anything to fear?" Chu Feng chuckled.

Su Feng turned to Zhang Lie, a confident expression on his face.

The crowd's cheering never stopped after the Norwegian team passed through, but no other team managed to rouse them to as loud an extent, not until Zhang Lie stepped forward with Team Zenith.

"Everyone, next up, one of the favorites to win the worldwide stage of the Void Cup this year, the Chinese representatives! They're led by the famed hunter everyone's heard so much about recently—the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie! Behind him is his team, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Sun Xiaowu, Zhou Ying, Li Feng; along with scions from two of China's major clans, Chu Feng and Yun Bing!"

The announcers heaped countless praises on Zhang Lie as he walked past the stage, but the hunters gathered around the stage already knew all about him. Even before the announcers pointed to him, cheers and shrill screams were already spreading throughout the crowd.

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

Wave after wave of screams erupted, so loud they drowned out even the announcers. The entire stage seemed like a volcano about to erupt.

Zhang Lie had anticipated the possibility of having overseas friends, but he didn't expect such a grand reception. After all, most hunters would only cheer for representatives from their own country, never someone else's.

In truth, Zhang Lie had overlooked just how shocking his performance during the Kez invasion was, as well as the ramifications of his announcement of the existence of limit fragments. Although foreign media had played his achievements down, hunters worldwide could understand and appreciate what he had done.

The audience's overwhelming support caused the members of Team Zenith to get nervous, but they seemed to get used to the commotion rapidly, smiling and waving as they walked across the stage. Their names were shouted long after they returned backstage, and the members of Team Zenith, Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, Li Feng, Sun Xiaowu, and Zhou Ying, were now known worldwide.

Their heroic act of charging into a sea of Kez to save their captain had also been televised, but back then, they were nothing more than just a few blurry figures in a sea of Kez. Now, however, was their chance to shine, their faces and appearance made known to one and all.

Long after the Chinese delegation left the stage, the crowd remained in a frenzy, causing the representatives of the countries immediately following China to feel rather awkward. After all, the crowd was still chanting the names of the hunters of Team Zenith while they were on stage...

Each country's team took no more than a minute to walk across the stage, and the opening ceremony finished within two hours. Next would be the individual preliminaries, in which those competitors trying to aim for the top would have to obtain as many points as they could.

There would be six one-on-one matches in all, with the winner gaining five points for every win, and the loser losing five. Each additional win in a row would grant one additional point over the last; for instance, a fourth consecutive win would grant the winner eight ($= 5 + 3$) points.

The artificial intelligence assigning the matches would avoid pitting competitors from the same region against one another, and regardless of whether they won or lost, each competitor would fight in six matches, with a maximum of 45 points to be gained.

In the first round, none of the Chinese competitors met top competitors from other countries; most of their opponents hadn't even experienced a foundational breakthrough. Compared to Zhang Lie and the others, they were a sorry sight to behold, and were quickly dispatched without much effort.

However, the crowds enjoyed watching such a dominating match, and much of their attention was focused on the Chinese team's individual successes. That necessarily meant that some of the weaker

challengers received less attention; some of the smaller matches were watched by no one but the families of the competitors themselves, causing the competitors to feel somewhat bitter toward Team Zenith.

After the end of the first match, there was a five-minute break before the second match, allowing injured competitors the opportunity to receive emergency treatment or to forfeit the next match preemptively.

Except for particularly strong competitors like Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith, the others were relatively well-matched, and quite a few competitors did decide to forfeit the next match so as to preserve the points that they had gained.

Of course, Zhang Lie and the others would fight till the bitter end. In the second match, they finally found decent opponents. Zhang Lie was against England's Fred, whereas Sun Mengmeng was against England's Farrell.

The other hunters also faced stronger opponents than before; after all, the weaker ones were those who preferentially chose to forfeit after winning their first matches. Chu Feng was unlucky enough to face Charles Murphy, whereas Yun Bing faced the team leader from a rather strong delegation of hunters.

The five minutes passed quickly, and the competitors for the second round stepped into a column of light and were teleported to their respective stages. Fred appeared before him, dressed in garish red armor, with a cocky smile on his face. "So you're Zhang Lie, the hunter everyone's been praising?"

Chapter 209: The Undefeated Zhang Lie

"I'm just an ordinary hunter, nothing more— at least, nothing compared to your being one of the three wastrels of England!"

"Hoh? Well, it's no issue—I'll break your undefeated streak today, right here, right now!"

He immediately circulated his genetic energy as thunder crackled all around him. With a flick of his wrist, a rapier appeared in his hand, and his burgeoning aura swelled once more. As he activated a few more soulshards, moth wings sprouted from his back. A layer of black and white crystalline armor covered his body, studded with sharp spikes.

The crackling thunder felt more like something a second-realm hunter would possess; Fred had broken past the constraints of the first realm.

"Haha, do you see that? That's the true strength of Fred, royal knight of England! His aura's comparable to Zhang Lie's, isn't it?"

"You must be joking—he's far weaker!"

"Right, Zhang Lie was already stronger even during the Kez invasion than he is now, so the discrepancy could only have increased!"

Despite the heated shouts happening in the stands, the arena was surprisingly calm. Zhang Lie stood calmly facing Fred, not even circulating his genetic energy, let alone activating any soulshards.

If any other hunter were on stage, the crowd would think that that hunter had been scared stiff.

In truth, Fred was more scared of Zhang Lie than Zhang Lie of him. The more relaxed Zhang Lie was, the more wary he became; he didn't even have the courage to attack.

"What's the matter? Launch an attack already!" Zhang Lie called out.

"If you insist—take this: [Thunderflash Blade]!" Fred thrust forward with his rapier, seemingly teleporting to Zhang Lie's front in the blink of an eye, a blow that Zhang Lie countered with just one finger.

His finger struck the tip of the rapier with no visible genetic energy fluctuation or technique activation. The next moment, as the crowd watched on in shock, Fred's soulshards—his rapier, crystalline armor, and moth wings—exploded and vanished into the ether.

Spraying out a mouthful of blood, Fred thumped against the wall of the arena. The sound of a pin being dropped could have been heard in the resulting silence, and the image of Zhang Lie countering Fred's most dangerous blow with nothing more than a finger was imprinted indelibly on everyone's minds.

The silence persisted for a few more moments before the crowd erupted in shock and surprise.

Fred was one of the three strongest hunters of England, and yet Zhang Lie had burst him with a finger as though he were just popping a bubble!

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

A chant began to circulate among the crowd: it hadn't even been a minute since the match started, and it was already over.

"No, that's impossible! How could you be so strong?! You're cheating, aren't you? You have to be! Did you consume some restricted potion?!" After a momentary daze, Fred rushed up to Zhang Lie and began howling as though he were a wounded beast, unable to believe that his strongest attack had been unable to overcome a mere finger.

His organs had suffered significant internal injury, and he wouldn't be able to recover in time within five minutes, implying that his status as a competitor was over; he wouldn't be able to acquire enough points to move on to the galactic stage.

He simply couldn't conceive of a hunter with such strength as to dominate him entirely; after all, he was already at the limits of the first realm, with a successful foundational breakthrough, and his soulshards were highly compatible with his framework. Under this set of conditions, how could the disparity between him and Zhang Lie be so wide? He was still a first-realm hunter, wasn't he?

Fred's analysis would have worked for any ordinary first-realm hunter, but was Zhang Lie ordinary? Of course not!

Zhang Lie's only response was a smirk. After the battle, he returned backstage to the competitors' waiting rooms, while Fred was dragged off by the robotic guards. Zhang Lie's victory quickly spread across the entire arena, and just about everyone heard about his dominating victory instantly.

They knew that Zhang Lie was a strong competitor, but not how strong he was. His opponent was Fred, famed member of the English royal knights—but Zhang Lie had dispatched him in mere seconds, without any techniques at all!

Among the tournament hosts, the only one who remained unperturbed by the news was Yan Long, something that those around him noticed. General Hill smiled as he congratulated him. "Official Yan, it looks as though China has really given birth to an incredible existence."

Yan Long laughed. "Yes, he's not bad, isn't he?"

"Not bad? Isn't Zhang Lie ridiculously strong for a first-realm hunter?" General Hill pressed.

"Indeed, there are material limitations in the dimensional world, so even the strongest hunters are restricted in such a fashion. But hasn't Zhang Lie surpassed this limit by a little too much? Is the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie really a twenty-year-old first-realm hunter? Or, more specifically, is he really exhibiting his own strength?" England's Colonel Carrey added, his words becoming more and more pointed.

Yan Long slammed a fist on the meeting table. "Colonel Carrey, what do you mean? Every competitor must be tested by the artificial intelligence in the dimensional world to gain the qualifications to compete. Are you suggesting that you have a means by which you can obfuscate the results of this scan?"

Carrey frowned. "Regardless, Zhang Lie's strength is ridiculous! Is he really a first-realm hunter?"

Yan Long laughed. "Colonel Carrey, there's no restriction on how strong a first-realm hunter can be, is there? On what grounds do you judge Zhang Lie ineligible to compete? Because he's stronger than you expected?"

Yan Long's fiery gaze swept over the hosts from the other countries. China was one of the three countries that first entered the dimensional world, and it was certainly one of the strongest countries of the modern day.

The other hosts withered at Yan Long's words. It was true that Zhang Lie was overwhelmingly strong, but the most impartial judge of a hunter's eligibility, the artificial intelligence of the dimensional world, had ruled him an admissible competitor. What could they do?

Before the other hosts could come to terms with Zhang Lie's dominance, news of other competitors reached their ears.

On arena #39, Sun Mengmeng was glancing at Farrell listlessly, the fluctuations of his genetic energy so weak that Sun Mengmeng really had no interest in fighting him.

Farrell gritted his teeth. To him, her ennui was disdainful and humiliating— after all, he was a member of the English royal knights! Nevertheless, he graced her with a splendid smile. "You're the most graceful Eastern woman I've seen, so I'll give you a chance to admit defeat. Otherwise, it would prick my heart to wound you!"

Sun Mengmeng frowned. Her opponent was nothing more than a weakling, and even worse, a childish, naive, and arrogant one.

Chapter 210: A Country's Dominance

Sun Mengmeng frowned.

"Are you finished? If so, fight me! Our captain has commanded us to be as low-profile as possible, so I hope you'll cooperate and make some splashy moves. Don't worry, my archery's extremely

precise, and I'll make sure you'll slump over without even realizing it," Sun Mengmeng promised, glancing at her opponent as though he were a clown.

"You—I see that Team Zenith's as arrogant as expected! Why, I—" Genetic energy circulated through Farrell's body, but he was interrupted by an even more terrifying burst of genetic energy. A ball of purple flame flew toward him, and that was the last thing he saw.

With a gigantic explosion, Farrell fell to the ground like an ancient tree that had just been struck by lightning.

"Thank you for your cooperation. I told you you'd keel over without feeling anything, didn't I? Have a good rest!"

The spectators watching the match were deadly silent. Without feeling anything? Farrell's nerves had all been burned away—there wasn't anything that he could feel!

Almost none of the spectators had expected that Farrell would lose so quickly; after all, he was the strongest of England's three wastrels, and one of the top contenders for the championship of the Void Cup. However, Sun Mengmeng had defeated him with what seemed like nothing more than a casual blow!

The match finished so quickly that much of the crowd was still stupefied, and Sun Mengmeng lost all hope of this being a low-profile match. Well, she didn't think she was to blame—Farrell was simply so annoying that she had used a bit more force than she had intended to.

Without glancing back at him, she left the stage the moment her victory was announced.

Unlike Fred, Farrell didn't doubt Sun Mengmeng's strength, because he had sensed the fluctuations in her genetic energy momentarily before she struck. It was because of this that Farrell was clearly aware of the disparity in strength between them; he couldn't even imagine just how strong she had to be to produce such a terrifying aura.

Another reason was that his mouth and throat were too burned to allow him to speak.

After the match, the spectators again erupted in discussion. The overwhelming strength that Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng had displayed left many competitors uneasy; no one wanted to be cannon fodder, after all, but it was as though a team of giants had snuck into their midst, so strong that there was no way the competitors could overwhelm them.

Following Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng's matches, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, Zhou Ying, and Li Feng all won their second match as well. Although Zhang Lie had emphasized the importance of keeping a low profile, no matter how they tried to downplay their strength and skill, the sharp-eyed spectators easily unveiled the truth.

A strange atmosphere descended on the crowd, while the various hosts, who were already prejudiced against Zhang Lie, seemed about to explode.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the fight between Chu Feng and Charles Murphy. Two figures were clashing against each other at extreme speed, one with a pair of wings on his back and one longsword in each hand. The other hunter wore a suit of black armor, with a serrated polearm behind him.

The fight seemed to be at a stalemate.

The hunter with wings, with wind-attuned genetic energy whirling around him, was none other than Chu Feng. A broad smile was plastered on his face; it seemed to have been quite some time before he let loose.

The hunter in black was Charles Murphy, with sweat on his forehead and a grimace by his lips. At the start of the match, he had expected that this would be an easy victory for him; before the match began, he had consumed a potion that allowed him to temporarily exceed the basic gene fragment capacity, and he was now hovering around the equivalent of a hundred and thirty basic gene fragments.

However, despite consuming this expensive potion, Chu Feng was nevertheless slowly taking the upper hand.

"It's been a while since I've had such an invigorating fight—I have to admit that you're a strong hunter," Chu Feng exclaimed. "If I'm not mistaken, you must have broken through the basic gene capacity somehow!"

Chu Feng praised Charles Murphy's skills, but this sort of praise felt like a backhanded compliment to him.

"As expected—the Chinese hunters do have some method of breaking through the basic gene capacity!" Charles Murphy retorted.

"Haha, you're a smart cookie, aren't you? It's a shame that you've had the misfortune to encounter us in the second match. Admit defeat! Given your current strength, it's impossible for you to defeat me."

"Isn't it too early to be speaking of victory? Take this—[Through the Clouds]!" Charles Murphy did not surrender. Frightening fire-attuned genetic energy gathered around him, forming into a gigantic red polearm that chopped downward with stupendous force.

"Not bad! [Tempest Dance]!" Chu Feng swung both his blades in an elaborate twirl, sending blades of genetic energy flying all around him.

As the two attacks met, smoke filled the arena, obscuring the audience's sight of the match.

Moments later, as the excess energy dissipated, Charles Murphy began to cough. "With your strength... you must have over fifty basic limit fragments, don't you? I've lost. Thank you for going easy on me," he murmured, exasperation laced into his tone.

His attack had been weaker than Chu Feng's, and if his opponent wanted to wound or kill him, he certainly had the opportunity to do so. He was embarrassed and ashamed to have lost, but what could he do?

"It's only a friendly spar, after all—there's no enmity between us." Chu Feng dropped down to the ground and slowly walked off the arena to a breathtaking round of applause.

After the match, the hosts of the tournament finally realized why Zhang Lie and the other Chinese competitors were so strong—it was all because of these damned limit fragments! From their

perspective, it was evident that Zhang Lie had a far greater mastery of these limit fragments than they did, and he had clearly made some important discovery that hadn't been publicized.

None of the other countries' hosts could sit still; if they fell behind, they would surely lose out!

Zhang Lie's restriction on selling white-grub cores to foreign parties had already made them rather displeased, so they were certainly going to take advantage of this opportunity to exert pressure on China.

General Hill glanced at Yan Long with displeasure. "General Yan Long, isn't China's attitude regarding these limit fragments rather distasteful?"

"Yes, it's all too unfair for us other countries!" Colonel Carrey immediately added.

"And here I was wondering why the Chinese competitors seemed so strong! We have to report this to the world federation immediately!"

"Exactly. This technology must be spread worldwide to benefit mankind as a whole!"

"Right—such an important technological and scientific advancement can't remain in the hands of a sole hunter or country. The future of mankind is at stake!"

"General Yan Long, we hope you'll be understanding regarding this affair!"

The hosts all crowded around Yan Long, but he didn't back down.

"Is that so? Zhang Lie himself developed this theory and technique on his own—why should he be obligated to share? What right do you have to co-opt his work for your own advancement? Not even China has done so! Has England shared the fruits of its gene-splicing technology? I think not!

"I think I've made matters clear, haven't I? You should be glad that Zhang Lie has released anything about these limit fragments at all— aren't you ashamed to be trying to get more than you deserve?"

In truth, Yan Long was equally astounded by Zhang Lie's progress: before this match, he hadn't realized just how advanced Zhang Lie's research had become. Of course, even if he was upset that Zhang Lie hadn't yet shared the information with him, he would still stand up for him against the predatory inclinations of other countries.