

# Ultragene Warlord

## Chapter 26: Foolproof Plan

Because Zhang Lie and Zhang Hanxiang arrived at the inspection bureau early, there were relatively few hunters present, and he was able to get tested quickly.

The inspection consisted of two stages: first, constitution, and second, mental acuity. The constitution test was itself divided into two smaller parts. The first was a test of strength, and the second a test of speed. Of course, neither test allowed the use of genetic energy.

"Good luck, Brother!" Outside the testing area, Hanxiang was pumping her fists, causing Zhang Lie to smile.

The testing apparatus wasn't all too complicated: it was just a sandbag with a few extra gimmicks.

"No. 4, Li Feng, first attempt!"

"Strength: 4.5, C-grade. Pass!"

"No. 5, Song Jia, third attempt!"

"Strength: 3.3, D-grade. Fail!"

The synthetic voice of the supervising robot caused some to erupt in joy, and others in tears.

The world government had decided to quantify a hunter's strength in order to better categorize them. Those hunters who had capped their mutated gene capacity would need a strength value of 4.0 to pass. A 4.0 indicated that a hunter had about three to four times the strength of a regular human. Failing to get a 4.0 or higher meant that those hunters were unable to make full use of their own strength.

After waiting for a few minutes, Zhang Lie's name was finally called, and he walked forward to an unoccupied sandbag.

"No. 9, Zhang Lie, first attempt!"

Zhang Lie stepped forward, pretending to charge up his strength. Only when his face was red from holding his breath in did he step forward and punch the sandbag with one heavy blow.

"Strength: 4.2, C-grade. You still have two more attempts to try to improve your score. Do you wish to continue?"

"No, just passing is enough for me!"

Zhang Lie happily took the certification card that the robotic attendant handed over, then walked back to where his sister was seated.

Just as with the test of strength, Zhang Lie managed a borderline pass for the test of speed and mental acuity. In little more than ten minutes, Zhang Lie had obtained a silver first-class identification card, as well as a silver-gray subsidiary card for Hanxiang.

Looking at these two cards, Zhang Lie and Zhang Hanxiang both began to smile.

Hanxiang gasped. "Brother, with this card, can I attend Holy Glory Academy now?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "Of course! In fact, I was planning on bringing you there to enroll today. What do you think?"

"Today?"

"Have you forgotten? Holy Glory Academy is the best of the schools in the region, and they have an open admission policy even in the middle of a semester!"

"But isn't there an exorbitant fee if you do that...?"

"Don't worry, I can handle the expenses. With me around, you just have to focus on your studies!"

"Brother, thank you!"

"We're family, aren't we? Let's go."

The two of them headed right for the school district.

Just as they did so, Wang Bin arrived at the Zhang house. Of course, by the time he got there, there was no one inside. His delay was understandable: he had little experience in the commoners' districts, and he didn't realize the extent to which the morning rush would clog up all traffic.

After arriving, he received a message from the clan stating that their target had been sighted at the inspection bureau.

However, he wasn't told to give chase; others had already been dispatched to that location, and he was to head back to the manor instead.

However, those subordinates dispatched to the inspection bureau also failed to find their target, and were unable to retrieve anything but some footage of Zhang Lie's inspection exam.

As he glanced at that footage, at how Zhang Lie was barely able to meet the target with a huge expenditure of effort, Wang Han turned to Wang Jianxin skeptically.

"Brother, are you certain a kid like this had something to do with the entire affair?"

Wang Han wasn't the only one with suspicions: everyone who had seen the footage felt the same way. After all, what had happened that night at the venombane glade was a shocking feat of cunning, certainly not something an ordinary hunter would be able to come up with.

"Don't be tricked by his appearance, Wang Han! He's a shrewd fellow, and I bet he's faking his performance!"

Given what had happened with the rental agreement, Wang Jianxin thought that he had a good grasp of what Zhang Lie was like, but no one else thought similarly.

"It's not a matter of whether we believe it, certainly, but whether the Blacksteel hunters and the six clans will. Even if we made someone like him reveal the truth, would anyone even believe it?"

Wang Jianxin shook his head. "Believe me, as long as we can control this lad, all our problems will be resolved. "Where is he now?"

Wang Han's face darkened. "On campus grounds!"

"Didn't I tell you? He's a sneaky bastard! Damn it, I bet he's sent his sister to one of the academies so we can't get ahold of her!" Wang Jianxin had discovered Zhang Lie's plan.

"Not only his sister—if I'm not wrong, he'll find a teleportation device to enter the dimensional world directly from the academy. And once he's inside, as long as he stays within the settlement, we won't be able to do anything to him." Wang Han's face was icy.

"Brother, we have to think of some other strategy. We don't have any more time to waste on this kid!"

Indeed, the most pressing issue was time. The longer this problem dragged out, the longer the six clans would continue clamping down on their businesses, and the more severely their finances would be disrupted.

Zhang Lie had managed to turtle himself up so tightly that, within the short term, no one from the Wang clan would be able to do anything about him.

The Holy Glory Academy had a somewhat Western name, but the construction and style of the buildings was all perfectly oriental. The city of Ning lay at the heart of China, and the weight of that culture would not be so easily displaced. Although the academy did hire foreign professors, it was still largely in line with traditional Chinese ideals.

Given how much money Zhang Lie was waving around to expedite the process, it was no surprise that Zhang Hanxiang's enrollment proceeded as smoothly as it did. In no more than half an hour, they were done with all the paperwork.

After considering the issue of Zhang Hanxiang's safety, Zhang Lie decided to spend a veritable fortune—a million dollars a month—to rent the highest-class robot companion for his sister. Zhang Hanxiang was his only sibling, and her disability could well make her a target. He didn't want her to have to suffer any harassment on his behalf.

"Brother, did something happen to you inside the dimensional world?" Seeing Zhang Lie's behavior, even the innocent Zhang Hanxiang seemed to notice that something was amiss.

Zhang Lie laughed lightly. "A small problem, but don't worry, I'm alright now. I'm just afraid some people might try to get at me through you. But since you're on campus grounds now, and with this robotic companion for protection, I believe you're safe from any potential danger.

"That being said, Hanxiang, make sure you notify me if anything—anything at all—were to happen! Keep this close to you at all times. If you encounter any sort of danger, press it and I'll be notified immediately."

Zhang Lie handed her what looked like a black button. Zhang Hanxiang seemed a little perturbed, but she immediately kept the button without asking any questions. After all, her brother was the only person she could rely on, as well as the person to whom she was closest.

This black button, deceptively small and simple as it was, was actually a device that was able to bypass the technological restriction of the dimensional world and transmit signals from Earth. Zhang Lie had spent a whopping half a million points on it, and it was a device that no ordinary hunter would be able to afford.

"I understand, Brother. I'll be safe within the campus, and with all these safeguards, I don't have to worry about anything at all. Brother, you're the one who has to be more careful—I wouldn't be able to stand losing you."

Zhang Lie laughed. "Don't worry about me, Hanxiang. I don't have to fear my enemies—they should fear me!"

After touring the campus grounds with Hanxiang, and after introducing himself to her professors, Zhang Lie waved goodbye to his sister. As Wang Han had anticipated, he found a teleportation apparatus and headed straight back to the dimensional world.

He returned to his room in the Blackgold Inn and immediately began to browse the forum to understand what had transpired since his departure. Of course, the only thing of note was still the battle at the venombane glade.

The forum was filled with rumors and speculation about what had happened there. Of course, it was difficult to discern between actual information and hearsay, or, worse, fake news.

However, even though most people weren't aware of the events that had taken place at the glade, the aftermath was clearly known to all. Zhou Qian, head of the Zhou corporation, had perished. Qin Xiao had lost an arm. Yun Bing, Chu Feng, and many other hunters had suffered serious injuries.

Such casualties had undoubtedly sparked interest into the details of what had happened in the glade.

"If you all want to know the truth so badly, then I have no choice but to oblige!"

Soon after, the article?Showdown at the Venombane Glade (specifics included)?appeared on the forum. It spread like wildfire.

Zhang Lie had repeated his past strategy for dealing with Wang Xiaohua. In this post, from the perspective of a bystander, he exhaustively described the events that had taken place in the glade: how Qin Xiao had lost his arm; who had actually pushed Zhou Qian out of the tunnel, causing him to die from the moonlight wyrm's attack; who had ultimately ended up killing the superior-grade scorpion; and even how the moonlight wyrm had been lured out.

And this time, over 90% of what he had written was even the honest truth!

Of course, the author was again anonymous.

## **Chapter 27: Technique Auction**

As Zhang Lie anticipated, his article rapidly set the hunters of the Blacksteel settlement abuzz.

Several of the leaders of the expedition, like Yun Bing and Chu Feng, had even replied confirming the accuracy of the article. After all, what it described was essentially identical to what they had experienced. In fact, some parts of it went into even more detail than even they were aware of. The moment they read through the article, they were certain that the anonymous author had been at the scene during that fateful night.

Most importantly, it had detailed how Qin Xiao had pushed Zhou Qian out of the cave to save his own life, so Yun Bing and Chu Feng would naturally support the article and spread it on their own.

The six clans began hunting for this mysterious author, but to no avail.

Every hunter in the settlement was guaranteed their privacy by the Blacksteel settlement's artificial intelligence. Without any authorization, it was impossible for anyone to break apart a hunter's anonymity. It was for this reason that Zhang Lie had dared to reveal such crucial information. He would be able to maintain his own anonymity while drawing out his enemies.

After satisfying himself, he began to browse the trading post again.

Zhang Lie believed that the Qin and Wang clans would have quite a lot of issues to contend with in the future. They wouldn't be able to spare the time or attention to deal with a nobody like him.

And as for him, well, he was going to keep amassing his fortune. Most of the things that he had listed on the trading post had already sold. The soulshards owned by Qin Xiaotian and his team were grabbed almost as soon as they were listed.

After all, the dimensional world was quite unlike reality. Except in the settlements, individual power dominated over everything. Even if Qin Xiao's own soulshards were somehow stolen and listed on the marketplace, some enterprising hunters would still buy them all.

As a result, Zhang Lie earned another pile of points, though it paled in comparison to what he had obtained from betting on himself.

What had caught his attention was a reply he had received on his request searching for water-attuned techniques. The reply came from a user with the alias Daffodil. She intimated that she had multiple water-attuned techniques, all of surpassingly high quality, but was afraid that Zhang Lie didn't have enough points for them.

Her words would likely have stopped the Zhang Lie of a few days ago from enquiring further. After all, how could he have afforded those techniques? But now, he was filthy rich.

He immediately replied, "Show me what you've got! Rather than worrying about whether or not I can afford it, you should be worried about whether your techniques are high-quality enough to be worth my attention."

To his surprise, she replied instantly. "Excellent timing! I'm auctioning the techniques off right now."

This reply immediately enticed Zhang Lie: any techniques that were put up for auction were generally high quality. Inferior goods wouldn't be worth the fee that the marketplace would take.

Zhang Lie accessed the auction following her instructions, entering a virtual space with a raised circular stage and seats all around that stage.

A woman, whom Zhang Lie assumed was this Daffodil, stood on stage in a pale white dress, gracefully showing off her goods. Surrounding the stage were the virtual avatars of countless buyers.

Up on stage, beside the woman, a robot was demonstrating a water-attuned polearm technique. In a clear, crisp voice, she explained the technique that the robot was using.

"[Seacrest Blade], a high-grade technique buoyed by the force of the sea. Its patterns are as erratic and unpredictable as ocean waves, sure to confound your opponent. This water-attuned technique would be a valuable addition to any hunter's repertoire, and it has a starting bid of 7,000 points. Might anyone here be interested?"

"10,000 points!"

"12,000!"

"I bid 15,000!"

Before Zhang Lie could even react, the price had doubled to 15,000 points, leaving him quite surprised.

However, given that price, most hunters had sat back down again, unwilling to bid further. Even a particularly good high-grade technique was only worth 10,000 points at best.

From Zhang Lie's perspective, while the waves that the technique generated were eye-catching, the actual bladework itself didn't seem like anything special. Furthermore, as a sword user, he had no interest in it.

Sensing the lack of continued interest, the woman rapped her knuckles against the table. "[Seacrest Blade], sold for 15,000 points! Next up, one of the centerpieces of this auction, the pinnacle-grade water-attuned technique, [Fists of the Silent Sea], a fist-based technique with immutable force!"

This time, the woman only provided a concise explanation before motioning to her robot.

The robot struck with one fist, sending ripples of genetic energy through the air. It was a gentle movement, like the caress of wind over the water's surface, but with an undeterrable strength that could still even the roiling waves of the sea.

A gentleness that belied its strength, a strength that could not be overcome. Dominating, overwhelming—it certainly deserved its classification as a pinnacle-grade technique.

This technique was undoubtedly superior to even most pinnacle-grade techniques.

He wanted it.

"The starting bid for this technique will be 50,000 points!"

The moment Daffodil announced the price, a red-clothed man sitting near the front immediately raised his hand and shouted, "55,000!"

"Are you broke, to only raise the bid by 5,000? I'll bid 70,000 points!" a man taunted from a sectioned-off area of the virtual hall, likely restricted to VIPs.

"Only 70,000? Song Yi, it looks like you're running out of points! This technique's compatible with my sister's framework, and I'll bid 100,000 points!" Another voice spoke up, from a man dressed in blue not too far away.

"100,000 points for a pinnacle-grade technique is a bargain! I bid 120,000 points!"

The man in blue scoffed. "If you want a bidding war, I'm happy to accompany you. 150,000 points!"

He was starting to smile amidst the other party's silence when Zhang Lie stood up. "300,000 points!"

## **Chapter 28: Penniless Again**

The gathered crowd had all gone silent.

300,000 points? Double the last bid? What kind of rich asshole was this? No matter how many points he had, who would be so wasteful as to do something like this?!

They all turned toward Zhang Lie, but unfortunately, all they could see was a black cloak.

Even the loudmouthed VIPs had gone silent. Pinnacle-grade techniques tended to go for 200,000 points or so, and the fact that this hunter was bidding 300,000 points meant that this was a technique that he sorely needed.



They had no intention to compete with him: after all, there were more techniques they could bid for instead.

The host, Daffodil, waited for a few moments, surveying the crowd, before rapping her knuckles on the table again. "300,000 points from the honored guest in black! The [Fists of the Silent Sea] will go to you!"

He swiped his point card and inputted the ID of the teleportation apparatus in his room. The purchase arrived not fifteen seconds later. It was divided into two parts, a manual detailing the technique and a holographic recording of a robot using the technique.

After he confirmed receipt of the item, the points were transferred to Daffodil.

The auction was still in progress, but Zhang Lie wasn't too interested in the remaining items up for bidding. However, just as he was about to leave, he found a few herbs that he was interested in, as well as another advanced water-attuned technique.

In particular, the eye-of-night flower was yet another main ingredient for Potion #2. It was generally only available from the second realm onwards, so Zhang Lie was very surprised to see it on auction.

With these discoveries, Zhang Lie certainly had to stay for the remainder of the auction.

Since pillmaking wasn't yet a mature field, these herbs weren't worth very much, and Zhang Lie managed to obtain the eye-of-night at a shockingly cheap price of 10,000 points.

Zhang Lie sat through the rest of the auction in boredom. After an entire hour, it was finally time for that genetic technique that he had been eyeing to come up for auction.

Daffodil's face turned serious. "Finally, our last and most valuable item for today: [The Boundless Blade]."

On stage, a worn, ancient manual appeared in front of the hunters' eyes.

"[The Boundless Blade], a mythic-grade sword technique: starting bid, 150,000 points."

"A mythic-grade technique?! Are you joking?" Zhang Lie was also somewhat skeptical, but someone else spoke up before he could.

A mythic-grade technique could easily become the signature technique of a dojo. For example, the premier dojo of Ning, the Blizzard Dojo, had been named after its signature mythic-grade technique, [Blizzard's Eye]. Zhang Lie hadn't expected that someone would be willing to trade a mythic-grade technique for points, at least not in the first realm.

Daffodil didn't seem too bothered. Instead, she motioned to the robot beside her, which headed to center stage. The robot was so advanced that, from its outer appearance alone, it looked no different from a regular human.

It placed one hand on the hilt of his sword, then froze at the precise moment of activation of the technique. Just this simple action was enough to reveal the technique's majesty: behind the robot flared the backdrop of a vast ocean, seeming to endow the robot with its strength.

This was undoubtedly a mythic-grade technique, and even one that was water-attuned! He had to obtain this technique by any means!

"Does anyone still doubt the authenticity of this technique?" Daffodil asked. "This holographic display simulates the technique as a novice would activate it, and more specialized use of the technique is certainly possible with further study."

From the crowd, a hunter piped up, "Isn't it daylight robbery to try to sell a mythic-grade technique for 1.5 million? This is a technique, not a framework! I'll pay 1.2 million at most—"

"If you don't have points, screw off and stop embarrassing yourself! I'll bid 1.6 million!"

"You think you can get a mythic-grade technique with just 1.6 million points? I'll bid 1.8 million! I'm Sun Mu from the Greenforest settlement—do you know who I am? Don't you dare try to outbid me!"

"What Greenforest settlement? What Sun clan? Why should I care who you are? This is an anonymous auction! How do you expect to take revenge on me when you don't even know my identity? I, a roadside weed, will bid two million points!"

Indeed, it wasn't a smart move for hunters to reveal their identity in such auctions. Not only did their name not mean anything, they were easily targeted by the rest of the anonymous crowd.

"You dare?! Reveal your identity, and I'll—"

"Are you an idiot? ?Of course I'm not telling you that! Now, if you're not going to keep bidding, why don't you shut up?"

Sun Mu was so enraged he could hardly speak.

"You'd better not let me find out who you are, you bastard! I'll bid 2.5 million!"

"Ha! 2.6 million!"

The hunter seemed more invested in enraging Sun Mu than winning the auction.

Sun Mu clearly didn't expect the other hunter to keep outbidding him. 2.5 million was as high as he could go, and all he could do was stare at the offending party in resentful anger. 2.6 million was already a high price for such a technique, especially given the relatively nameless auction.

There were perhaps a few rich hunters scattered throughout the attendees, but no one present was spectacularly rich. Even those who had sufficiently many points to bid had to think carefully about whether it was worth it.

"Three million!"

Just as the crowd thought that the nameless bidder was about to obtain the water-attuned technique for 2.6 million, the blue-clad hunter sitting in the first row, who had initially claimed to want to buy a technique for his sister, made a new bid.

Increasing the bid by 400,000 at this juncture was a ploy to deter others from bidding, but it also showed how invested he was in it.

Three million points was worth 300 million dollars on Earth. Given how impactful genetic techniques were, however, 300 million dollars wasn't too extreme a price to pay for additional power. Even a billion dollars wouldn't be too pricey for a mythic-grade technique of particular compatibility.

However, the problem was that no hunter could be certain that any given technique would be so compatible with their framework. Furthermore, water-attuned frameworks were a relative rarity, so there were few hunters for whom it would be useful in the first place.

A hush descended on the crowd: the bidding seemed to have come to a close.

Just then, as everyone thought that the auction was over, Zhang Lie raised his hand. "Four million points!"

Everyone turned to look at him, but all they saw was a hooded robe.

The blue-clad man scowled, mumbling, "Is there a need to act so mysteriously? What an annoyance!"

Zhang Lie smiled and bowed in his direction.

Four million points—an increment of a million over the last bid—was about as high as the price of this technique could feasibly go. Other potential bidders had given up at three million, and a bid of four million was sufficient to silence them.

Even Daffodil only waited for a few seconds of silence from the crowd before rapping her knuckles on the table again. "The winning bid is four million points! [The Boundless Blade] goes to the man in black!"

Zhang Lie couldn't help but smile. After all, four million points was as high as he could go. If someone were to continue bidding, Zhang Lie would have been able to match that bid, but he would have to mortgage some of his fire-attuned techniques to do so.

He sighed as he swiped the four million points on his card away—he had acquired such wealth just a few days ago, and here he was spending it all already. Zhang Lie was again all but penniless.

But it was a worthwhile investment, after all, and he was eagerly anticipating [The Boundless Blade]. Just as before, the technique arrived in his room within half a minute.

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After the auction was over, Zhang Lie waited by his seat until the other hunters left. Naturally, Daffodil took notice of him. Once everyone else was gone, she closed the virtual auction hall and set up a personalized meeting room instead.

"Congratulations on becoming the thirtieth million-class customer of the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion! May I help you with anything?"

Zhang Lie could hear faint notes of happiness in her voice from the magnitude of her sales today.

"I do have two questions. First, could you tell me about the origin of this technique? I would hate to have to hide it from the public eye after learning it! Second, does your establishment also offer acquisition-related services?"

Upon hearing Zhang Lie's two questions, Daffodil smiled. "I can assure you that this technique was acquired through a reputable source. No one—neither in the dimensional world nor in reality—will give you any trouble with regards to this technique. In fact, it was a recent find by one of our employees, and it's never been revealed to the public before."

Zhang Lie immediately relaxed.

"As for your second question, given your status as an honored million-class customer here with us at the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion, your needs are our needs. We will do everything we can to satisfy your requests."

Zhang Lie had to admit that Daffodil was very skilled at customer service.

"In that case, I have to praise your dedication to your customers."

He visualized a list of herbal ingredients that he needed for one potion or another, actualized it in the virtual space, and then handed it to Daffodil. The list detailed the quantity and purchase price that Zhang Lie was willing to accept for each ingredient.

Daffodil scanned the list, then bowed in Zhang Lie's direction. "I've received your request, and will contact you as soon as I acquire the listed ingredients. Might I ask how I should address you, honored customer?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "You can call me Peppercorn!"

"Very good, Mr. Peppercorn. On behalf of the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion, I thank you for your support, and I wish you luck with mastering your new techniques."

After the exchange, Zhang Lie left the virtual space.

## **Chapter 29: Tragic Ending**

In truth, Zhang Lie didn't regret his purchases at all. He would always be able to amass more points, and he had all sorts of resources with which to do so. Furthermore, a compatible framework or technique would boost his personal strength by several times, and Zhang Lie had found himself enthralled by both techniques.

He hurriedly flipped the manuals open and began to study the techniques in earnest.

Even small inns boasted rooms with environment-modification capabilities, let alone a VIP suite in the best inn in the Blacksteel settlement.

Over the next three days, Zhang Lie dedicated his entire attention to learning the two techniques. He was as dedicated as a high-school student cramming for the gaokao.

And while he might have been able to focus on his techniques in peace, the six clans of the Blacksteel settlement and the Wang clan could not.

The Wang clan had tried all sorts of tactics to vindicate themselves, but Wang Xiaohua's sudden disappearance meant that it was all but impossible for them to do so. After all, Zhang Lie's cunning trap had doomed them to ruin the moment Wang Xiaohua returned to the Blacksteel settlement with him.

After five days, not only did they fail to clear their name, they had even given the six clans the mistaken interpretation that the Wang clan was planning another attack against them. As a result, they imposed even harsher sanctions against the Wang clan.

The Wang clan's financial losses had, by that point, broken past tens of billions of dollars.

Not only that, the supervisory position on the interstellar hub situated on the planet Nolan, which the Wang clan had been eyeing, was suddenly filled by another candidate on the strongest recommendation from the six clans.

This wasn't something money alone could resolve: the Wang clan had been planning to fill this position with a trusted clan member for three whole years, but right as they were about to succeed, the six clans had ruined their plan!

The Wang clan had no choice but to concede the matter. In the end, Wang Jianxin stepped forward and bore full responsibility for what had happened, and he willingly accepted expulsion to the planet Chaos.

Chaos was where criminals were sent to bear their sentences, with a harsh environment and even harsher inhabitants. Most sent there perished, and none had a chance of returning to Earth ever again.

Furthermore, the Wang clan compensated and apologized to the six clans individually, temporarily stabilizing the situation.

That Wang Jianxin had taken full responsibility meant that the Wang clan was now enemies with the Qin and Zhou clans. Even though the two clans had stopped retaliating at the Wang clan for this supposed crime, there would be no goodwill between them were their hunters to meet in the dimensional world or on Earth.

This unexpected disaster had ruined any hope of the Wang clan expanding its influence further in the short term—and the instigator of this entire affair was just a nameless hunter called Zhang Lie!

No matter how furious they were, there was simply nothing that they could do against Zhang Lie at the moment. And not only were they unable to take revenge on this damned cockroach, they even had to bear the full brunt of the retaliation.

Of course, the Wang clan wasn't the only victim of this affair. The Qin clan was suffering just as much; in fact, they would incur even harsher sanctions and retaliation.

After all, the Wang clan wasn't directly responsible for murdering anyone. It was thus able to settle matters with monetary compensation, with a sincere apology, and with voluntary expulsion from the 'culprit', but the Qin clan had no such recourse.

Because of Zhang Lie's anonymous article, Qin Xiao had become the prime suspect for the murder of Zhou Qian. Yun Bing and Chu Feng had both testified to their innocence, and the Zhou clan had learned the entire truth.

In that sort of situation, if not for Qin Xiao's selfishness, Zhou Qian wouldn't have died, and he wouldn't have needed to die. As a result, Qin Xiao, along with the entire Qin clan, became a target of loathing.

Since the Qin clan wasn't willing to hand over Qin Xiao, the five clans—the Yun and Chu, along with the three great corporations—launched a punitive attack against the Qin clan.

More precisely, they began targeting hunters from the Qin clan in the dimensional world. In just two days, half of the Qin scions in the Blacksteel settlement were wounded or even dead, and the Qin clan lost much of its influence.

As for Qin Xiao, he had cloistered himself within the main household, not even daring to step outside.

Even so, the five clans' retaliation wasn't over.

The three corporations aggressively began to take over the markets in which the Qin clan operated, as though they were planning to crush the Qin clan into oblivion.

And while the Yun and Chu clans might have turned a blind eye, Qin Xiao's attempt to implicate Yun Bing and Chu Feng had severely offended both clans. As a result, they too began to pressure the Qin clan.

Faced with an assault on five fronts, the head of the Qin clan began to panic. As the head, he couldn't sacrifice the entire clan's wellbeing just for his son's life.

On the top floor of a certain skyscraper in the city of Liao, the elders and heads of each branch of the Qin clan sat in urgent deliberation.

"Head, you have to make a move! If not, the Qin clan will perish!"

Qin Zongming's face was stormy. "A move? What move should I make? Shall I sacrifice my son to quell their anger? Who's to say that they'll calm down just because they have my son? And even if they do, will we even have any pride left over? How can we maintain control of Liao if we're willing to roll over on the other five clans' command?"

Qin Zongming's words caused an elder seated to his left to start laughing. "In that case, Head, shall we expend all our resources and fight to the death with these five clans? The Zhou clan has good reason to suspect Qin Xiao as the culprit of Zhou Qian's murder, and we can't shield him forever!

"Now that the five clans are cooperating to crush us, Head, there's no chance that we'll be able to fight back. Give up on protecting your son! Reputation this, reputation that—what reputation can we maintain when our clan's being smothered to death?!"

Qin Zongming had no refutation for the accusations being leveled at him. The elder wasn't wrong: if the clan were to fall, no amount of reputation would do them any good.



However, Qin Xiao was his only son! If he were to hand him to the five clans, wouldn't it be equivalent to sentencing him to death? How could he bear to do that to his only son? But if he didn't, the Qin clan would be destroyed...

He might be willing to accept such an outcome, but the rest of the clan certainly could not.

Another elder spoke up. "Head, you need to be decisive! The Yun and Chu clans alone would be enough to destroy us, but they're even working in tandem with the three corporations! As the head of the clan, are you really going to ruin us all just for your son?!"

"We've already demonstrated our resilience by protecting Qin Xiao as long as we did, but to shield him further would be the greatest of follies! Head, your decision now will alter our clan's fate! I implore you, think of the big picture!"

### **Chapter 30: Cast Adrift**

"Don't force me to make a decision now! Let's wait a little while longer." Qin Zongming was forced to make a bitter choice: one option led to grief, and the other to sorrow. How was he to choose between son and clan? How?

"Head, time's the one thing we lack most! Please make a decision immediately!"

"Your waiting now could well lead the Qin family into ruin!"

Qin Zongming's response clearly wasn't what the elders wanted to hear, and they began to pressure him again. Everyone gathered at the meeting looked toward him, and Qin Zongming could sense the resolve in their eyes.

If he weren't able to resolve this matter immediately, it looked as though his time as clan head would be up. He didn't care whether or not he was the clan head, but if he stepped down, Qin Xiao would be in even more perilous a state.

His replacement would surely send Qin Xiao trussed up for slaughter.

"Alright, I've made up my mind! My only son, Qin Xiao, has committed a terrible sin. For this crime, I hereby declare that he shall be stripped of all duties and obligations to the clan of Qin and expelled from the clan. His life and death shall no longer be the clan's concern!"

Qin Zongming's face flushed red upon making this declaration, red with anger, red with shame. After all, removing the clan's protection from him would undoubtedly send him out of the frying pan and into the fire. But what else could he do? There was at least still a slim chance of survival if he were expelled, and no chance at all if he remained within the clan.



All he could hope for now was that Qin Xiao was wily enough to escape with his life amidst this disaster.

"Head, if you do this—"

"I am the family head, and I've made up my mind!" Qin Zongming roared. Despite his compromise, the elders of the Qin family still weren't fully satisfied. However, Qin Zongming still held the authority of the clan head, and he interrupted the elder before he could finish speaking.

"This punishment, as well as some monetary compensation, will be sufficient to repair our relationship with the Yun and Chu families. The three corporations don't have much power or authority of their own, and now that they've tasted a few benefits at our expense, they should know better than to push this matter further.

"My expelling Qin Xiao from our clan allows them to target Qin Xiao at will: the fault was his, not our clan's! If they want revenge, they should seek it out from him.

"Furthermore, from now on, I expect all of you to enforce surveillance on the Wang family. The reason for our losses is all because of that wench from the Wang family, and we'll settle this debt sooner or later!"

Qin Zongming's words thundered through the conference room. No one dared speak up against him now.

"In that case, since there aren't any further comments, the matter is settled! Spread the news that Qin Xiao fled to avoid punishment from the clan, and that he was expelled as a result. This meeting is over!"

Qin Zongming was the first to walk out of the conference room.

In the Renji Hospital in Liao, Qin Xiao, who was resting in a ward, suddenly received a message from his wristwatch.

"Flee!" As Qin Xiao opened it, a familiar voice entered his ears.

The next moment, Qin Xiao received the news that his point cards had been frozen, and that he had been expelled from the Qin clan. In a matter of moments, Qin Xiao had nothing to his name!

It was only then that Qin Xiao began to treat this matter seriously.

Expulsion from the Qin clan? How could this be? He was the only son of Qin Zongming, the clan head! How would his father bear to expel him from the clan? Who was going to take over the leadership of the Qin family now that he was gone?

That audio message instructing him to flee sounded like his father...

He replayed the message. There could be no doubt: the message really was from Qin Zongming! That message had been sent from an anonymous sender, which meant that his father couldn't contact him openly.

Qin Xiao got up and drew the curtains in his suite to see several vehicles owned by the three corporations heading toward the hospital.

He had no choice but to confront the likely truth. Although he had heard a few rumors during his stay at the hospital, he'd believed that his father would have been able to protect him. But five days later, he'd found himself unceremoniously kicked out of the clan.

He was certain that his father was under tremendous pressure to do so, but he was still quite aggrieved—not toward his father, of course, but the clan elders. His reputation in the Blacksteel settlement for the last two years had brought a great many benefits for his clan, but the moment something like this happened, those elders had discarded him immediately!

But no matter how he felt about the clan, he had no choice but to flee, dragging his bandaged, recently operated-on hand behind him.

Qin Xiao wasn't a fool. He knew that the blame for Zhou Qian's death could be placed squarely on him. And he knew what the consequences would be if he were to be caught by the three corporations after the Qin clan's protection was revoked.

With his disappearance, the affair of the venombane glade drew to a close.

All six families of the Blacksteel settlement had found themselves wearied—if not worse—by the whole mess. Even the Yun and Chu families, which had done the best among the six, were getting tired of sending all their hunters out to fight.

However, they had gained quite a fair bit of profit from their efforts, both on Earth and in the dimensional world, and they couldn't much blame Zhang Lie for treating them as pawns in his game. As for the three great corporations, with the notable exception of the Zhou family, they had all made some profit as well.

However, the Qin family had lost much of its reputation and prestige in the Blacksteel settlement, and it seemed as though the six great families would soon become five.

Of course, the one true winner was Zhang Lie.

He had crippled both the Wang and Qin families in one devastating blow. Qin Xiaotian was dead, Wang Jianxin had been sent to Chaos, and Wang Xiaohua and Qin Xiao were left to fend for themselves against those hunting them down. He had soured the

relationships between the families, and in doing so, had even extricated himself from any blame.

In Zhang Lie's suite in the Blackgold Inn, a light clap from Zhang Lie's palm, sending ripples of genetic energy out from the point of impact, caused a crack in a massive steel shield. As the ripples grew more intense, the crack propagated, and the steel soon fell apart into a heap of scrap metal within his virtual training environment.

Given Zhang Lie's past experience with genetic techniques, he had achieved some success with the pinnacle-grade [Fists of the Silent Sea] in five exhausting days of effort. As he had anticipated, this technique was particularly compatible with him, and Zhang Lie couldn't have been more pleased with his purchase.

Next, he summoned Venombane and began to practice [The Boundless Blade].

Zhang Lie had been a swordmaster in his past life, and as a sword technique, [The Boundless Blade] should have been easier for him to pick up. The challenge of that technique, and what gave it its mythic-grade designation, was authority.

A hundred masters of [The Boundless Blade] would generate a hundred variants of the technique. Even if the bladework were essentially identical, each master would invoke the authority of the boundless ocean in a different manner, and this difference would subtly affect the technique.

It was this feature of mythic-grade techniques that made them so challenging to learn.

Zhang Lie had spent much of the last five days dedicated to this problem. With his past life and present dedication, with his large supply and masterful control of genetic energy, on the fifth day, Zhang Lie had managed to assimilate his unusual genetic core with the technique, coming up with a version of the technique that was uniquely his.

His version boasted a gigantic fish swimming in the ocean of genetic energy that served as the technique's backdrop. The ocean, which had felt somewhat lifeless during the robotic demonstration at the auction, seemed to have gained a measure of subtlety and mystery upon the fish's inclusion.

Zhang Lie charged up a blow, then released that energy with a light swing of his shortsword. As the blade struck its target, the fish leapt up from behind him, bringing the ocean's boundless strength to bear.

The force of the technique leveled a small hill into flat terrain.

Zhang Lie exhaled deeply, then left the virtual environment, a hint of exhaustion in his features. The strength of [The Boundless Blade] left nothing to be desired, but it also drained him of much of his energy. He would have to save it for a killing blow; his stamina simply couldn't keep up with using it as a regular attack for the moment.

Thus ended Zhang Lie's practice regimen. Both the [Fists of the Silent Sea] and [The Boundless Blade] were multi-target techniques, and Zhang Lie had certainly managed to shore up his deficiencies.

Furthermore, his ceaseless practice and increase to his gene fragments had caused his [Ninecarp Transformation] to enter late first-stage. His supply of genetic energy had increased yet again, and the pale pink carp in his genetic core was now so detailed that it looked to be alive.

Zhang Lie's stats had also undergone a massive transformation.

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ninecarp Transformation, First Form: Carp

Techniques: Rippling Walk (novice), Three-Wave Crescendo (novice), Calm Waters (novice), Fists of the Silent Sea (novice), The Boundless Blade (novice)

Genes: Basic, 140; Mutated, 100; Superior, 19

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Galewolf (mutated), Blood Ant (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (superior)

He possessed two particularly strong superior-grade soulshards and an assortment of genetic techniques, the lowest of which was high-grade. The difference between the Zhang Lie of a few months hence and the Zhang Lie of the present was as heaven and earth.

Given just his gene fragments, soulshards, and techniques, he would have been 53rd on the gene leaderboard despite having no recorded fights to his name—and his growth-type framework was still only equivalent to a mortal-grade one at present.

Of course, Zhang Lie didn't care about this ranking. He had no intention of publicizing his strength, and indeed he had removed himself from the leaderboard months ago. Otherwise, news of his sudden growth would likely have spread throughout the settlement.

After packing everything up, Zhang Lie was finally ready to head out of the settlement once again. His next goal was to hunt down more superior-grade lifeforms, as well as to gather the remaining required ingredients for his Potion #2.