

U. Warlord 111

Chapter 111: The Time is Right

Wang Feng nodded gravely. After all the elders had cast their vote, the final tally ended up as a 7-6 win in favor of the clan head Wang Han, a narrow victory.

"Very well. The day that brat's dojo opens up, we'll send him a big present."

Wang Han couldn't hide his enmity toward Zhang Lie even if he wanted to. It was natural, after all: the Wang clan had dominated over Ning for decades, and their greatest loss in recent memory could be attributed to a hunter who was barely of age!

"Elder Wang Feng, under these circumstances, I hope you'll keep the Wang clan's greater good in mind!" Wang Han turned and glanced at Wang Feng, his gaze filled with hostility.

Wang Feng sighed. "Head, you don't have to worry. From now on, I don't intend to oversee clan affairs at all!"

As the other elders stared in shock, Wang Feng stood up and left the meeting room. Two other elders immediately excused themselves and followed behind him, but Wang Han didn't mind, and he made no effort to stop them. They were loyal allies of Wang Feng, and even if they had stayed, they would hardly have contributed much to the following discussion.

A similar scene was playing out in the Qin clan's meeting room, in which the video of a hunter fighting alone amidst a swarm of bugs was prominently displayed. His gaze was calm and collected, as though he intended to forge a path through the sea of bugs with his might alone.

The hunters of the Qin clan were watching the video with serious expressions on their faces; the clan head Qin Zongming was sullen and brooding.

As the three-star scarab fell to the earth like a meteor and the video ended, a pregnant silence filled the room. Qin Zongming licked his rather parched lips, a hint of a quaver in his voice. "What are your thoughts, Elders?"

Zhang Lie, with his newfound status as a 'galaxy fighter' and 'dragonsoul warrior', would undoubtedly have an illustrious future. These were good tidings for the Yun and Chu clans, to whom Zhang Lie was close, but what about the Qin clan? To Qin Zongming, Zhang Lie was like a bomb that could well explode in his face.

If the Qin clan were to let him grow, they would surely perish.

"To think that someone like him has managed such an impressive feat despite his initial poor reputation! Head, I suggest reparations in order to ameliorate the relationship between the Qin clan and Zhang Lie," the Qin clan's third elder, Qin Li, ventured.

His proposal was logical: after all, Zhang Lie's two titles was a gulf that would shield him from all attacks by the Qin clan, whose status had dropped dramatically since the events of the venombane glade. If they were to expend all their resources in an attempt to kill Zhang Lie, it was still possible that they would succeed, but it would surely be a pyrrhic victory.

After all, the affair with Qin Xiaotian had been more or less resolved, and he had been punished for his transgression. If the Qin clan was willing to lose a little reputation, it wasn't impossible for them to salvage their relationship with Zhang Lie.

Qin Zongming narrowed his eyes. As his fingers rapped out a rhythm on the conference table, a sudden pressure descended on the room. He appeared to be calm, but the cold aura emanating from him betrayed his thoughts. Not only had his only son lost an arm because of Zhang Lie, he had even been expelled from the clan!

Whenever Qin Zongming thought of how he had to live like a gutter rat out in the dimensional world, his mind seethed with rage. Despite the trouble that Zhang Lie had caused for the Qin clan, these elders were thinking of starting afresh, just like that!

"You must be joking," Qin Zongming replied. "Will the proud Qin clan lower its head to someone who came from the slums of Ning? Do none of you remember that he was the sole cause of our recent tribulation?"

Do none of you realize what bowing down to him would do to our reputation?" Qin Zongming slammed a palm on the table, his features contorted with rage. Such was his strength that the table splintered and cracked where his palm landed, causing the elders to react with consternation and shock.

"I agree with the clan head. The enmity between the Qin clan and Zhang Lie is one of blood, and can only be repaid by blood. Zhang Lie will never be more vulnerable than he is now, not when he hasn't yet grown into his strength," reiterated the Qin clan's first elder, Qin Feng.

"In that case, Head, how do you intend on dealing with Zhang Lie? Let us assume that you were able to kill Zhang Lie. How will the Qin clan absolve itself of suspicion and blame? The enmity between the Qin clan and Zhang Lie is well known in Ning. If Zhang Lie dies, we shall become the prime suspect!" Qin Li called out.

Many of the elders nodded in agreement.

In the past, Zhang Lie would have been trivial to deal with, but now that he was the center of attention, it would be extremely difficult for the Qin clan to lay a hand on him.

"So? He's a promising hunter, that's all. As long as we make appropriate reparations, neither the federal nor Chinese governments will hold us accountable for long." A malevolent smile caused Qin Zongming's lips to quirk up.

Qin Li sighed. Qin Zongming seemed to be set on his ways, but he knew how illogical the decision would be for the future of the Qin clan.

"That said, we should avoid suspicion where we can. I've heard that this brat's currently making plans for constructing a dojo, and we could do worse than to prepare him a lavish gift." Qin Zongming glanced up at the image of Zhang Lie displayed prominently on the screen, his eyes darkening.

At the same time, within a forest located somewhere in the dimensional world, a black-robed hunter was slaughtering every lifeform he could see. With every kill, his ferocious expression grew even darker.

"How could you have gotten this far? You're just some brat from the slums! How could you have become so strong? How could you have become so popular? I swear I'll kill you! I swear it!"

As he yelled, Qin Xiao's hatchet struck lifeform after lifeform. The sensation of blood splattering on his body gave him an unusual sense of exhilaration; he imagined that every blow was landing on Zhang Lie's body.

Suddenly, his transceiver beeped. Qin Xiao frowned as the device clicked into action.

"Your opportunity's here. Are you ready?" Qin Zongming's face and voice appeared through the screen.

"One chance will be all I need!" Qin Xiao replied, his voice filled with hatred.

"You'll get your chance soon enough, but you had better be prepared." Seeing Qin Xiao's appearance now, Qin Zongming was certain that taking revenge on Zhang Lie was the right choice.

"Of course." Qin Xiao's breathing turned heavy.

As a lifeform pounced toward Qin Xiao, he split it in two with his hatchet without even looking back, spilling blood and innards all over the forest floor.

"Zhang Lie, let's see how long your fame will last!"

Qin Xiao licked at a drop of blood by the corner of his mouth as he steadily walked toward the Blacksteel settlement.

Zhang Lie, blissfully unaware of the forces that were converging on him, was still recuperating in bed. Although his constitution was significantly enhanced by his limit fragments and eternal spring cocoon soulshard, the extent of his injuries meant that he would need to rest for another day or two.

However, he had gained far more than he had lost during the fight. As a result of his life-or-death struggle, his latent talent had been drawn out, and he found combining the use of his soulshards and techniques to be far easier than it had been before.

This... could form the basis of a new training regimen, Zhang Lie thought.

"Brother!" Just as he was tabulating his rewards from the battle, a voice rang out from the distance. Before Zhang Lie could raise his head, a warm body pressed against his lap.

Zhang Lie felt Zhang Hanxiang's familiar warmth. He was gratified by her attention, but also at a loss in terms of how to explain what he had experienced in the footage she had undoubtedly seen.

"Brother, I don't want to stay in school any longer. Can we just stay at our old place and return to our lives from half a year ago?" Zhang Hanxiang asked, her voice quavering. Zhang Lie felt a damp patch on his shoulder.

Zhang Lie caressed her hand, unable to say anything. Of course, it would be impossible for him to return to his old life now. The only route left to him was becoming stronger and stronger, until he could protect his sister and himself from any trouble that might come his way. Only then could they experience true peace.

He clenched his fists. "Don't worry, Hanxiang. I'm actually very strong, and this was just an accident!"

For the sake of his sister, he had to grow stronger, even stronger!

Chapter 112: Hellish Training

Zhang Lie's patient reassurances finally allowed Zhang Hanxiang to relax.

"Brother, your injuries..." She wiped away the tears on her cheeks.

The reason she had rushed over in such a hurry was because she believed that Zhang Lie was heavily wounded, but was pretending to be fine because she was present.

However, despite how frightening Zhang Lie's wounds looked, they were just a few bruises and blood clots, and a medical professional would hardly have suspected that he had just fought a bitter life-or-death battle not two days prior.

"I'll be back to normal in a few days, don't you worry." Zhang Lie scratched the back of his head, with the sheepish look of a child being scolded.

It took quite a bit of prodding before Zhang Hanxiang was convinced that her brother was alright, and only then did she return to campus.

The situation in the capital was somewhat precarious, and three of the major clans viewed him as an eyesore. It would be dangerous for Zhang Hanxiang to be out in the open, and having her return to the safety of the campus grounds was undoubtedly the best option.

Zhang Lie specially dispatched Zhou Ying to guard her from afar to make sure that she was able to return safely.

After Zhang Hanxiang left, Zhang Lie spent the next day resting. By the morning, he was once again hale and hearty, and he marvelled at how much his limit fragments had improved his constitution.

"As expected of our captain—you look as good as new despite that terrifying fight after just three days!" Li Feng glanced enviously at Zhang Lie, who had already changed out of his hospital gown and was walking around with a straight back and rosy cheeks.

"No hunter who could fight a three-star scarab on his own would be ordinary," Zhou Ying commented idly. Indeed, Zhang Lie's regenerative abilities far outmatched those of his peers.

"Once you obtain more superior gene fragments, you'll be just like me." Zhang Lie smiled at his team, showing teeth.

Li Feng and the others made wearied expressions. To them, Zhang Lie was a combat genius, and they wouldn't be able to catch up no matter how hard they tried. What they didn't know was how much effort Zhang Lie had put in to get to where he was today, nor how many life-or-death situations he had managed to overcome.

"Difficult, perhaps, but doable. Don't forget, the Void Cup's almost about to begin! Once all of you are out of the hospital, we'll return to the dimensional world immediately, and I'll put all of you through some hellish training," Zhang Lie continued.

The training regimen that he had devised after undergoing a life-or-death struggle would be perfect for Sun Mengmeng and the others.

Upon sensing his devious gaze, Sun Mengmeng and the others shuddered. This 'hellish training' sounded like something they wouldn't want to participate in.

"Let's head back to Ning." Zhang Lie looked into the distance.

"Were you scared when you stood in front of the three-star black-tipped scarab?"

"It's an honor to meet you, galaxy fighter! You're a hero to all of China!"

"Given the interest that the federal and Chinese governments have shown in you, do you have any intention of joining the military?"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, I love you! I want to have your babies!"

Zhang Lie's eyes widened fractionally at the large crowd that awaited him outside the hospital. The other hunters of Team Zenith were likewise amazed. It had been a few days since Zhang Lie's fight and resulting rise to fame, but his popularity hadn't diminished at all. Instead, it seemed to be rising even more rapidly.

Li Feng and Sun Xiaowu took the opportunity to get acquainted with a few of Zhang Lie's female fans. Zhang Lie sighed, found a gap in the crowd, and rushed out of the throng of people awaiting him.

However, what he experienced outside the hospital was only the beginning of what was to be a long and harrowing journey. He had anticipated being able to return to Ning within half an hour at the most, but it took him all the way till midnight to do so.

"Captain, aren't you a bit too famous?" Sun Mengmeng sat down in a huff, her back drenched with sweat. Their return to Ning reminded her of how crowded tourist destinations became during the holiday season.

"Alright, rest well today, and we'll start our training tomorrow."

Sun Mengmeng and the others nodded firmly, their spirits rising: this would be a rare opportunity to grow stronger! They each returned to their houses to rest.

The next day, they appeared in front of Zhang Lie brimming with excitement and vitality, well prepared for the hellish training that Zhang Lie had brought up on multiple occasions. They were both curious and worried: the training they had undergone with Zhang Lie had already been quite rigorous, but if Zhang Lie was terming this training 'hellish', then...

Once everyone was present, Zhang Lie brought them all to a training ground within the dimensional world.

Gusts of wind blew by their faces as the members of Team Zenith stood at attention. It should have been refreshing, but they were feeling more and more anxious.

"For this training, you'll each be challenging superior-grade lifeforms on your own. Once we warm up here, we'll be heading toward the Desert of Silence."

The hunters gaped.

The Desert of Silence was one of the most frightening regions in the first realm of the dimensional world, and even those hunters who had already capped their gene capacities would have doubts

about braving the desert, because the lifeforms there were far more ferocious and prone to sneak attacks than those in other areas.

Furthermore, the desert was home to quite a large number of superior-grade lifeforms, and hunters who entered the desert could easily become the hunted after a moment of incaution.

Wasn't it a little too devilish of Zhang Lie to bring them there for training purposes?

Zhang Lie knew that he had chosen appropriately the moment he saw the shock and fear on the gathered hunters' faces. Only in such life-threatening situations would they be able to harness their true potential and latent talent, unlocking the full benefit of their limit fragments.

Of course, he had no intention of letting anyone die. He intended on selecting appropriate targets that would challenge each member but that they would be able to defeat. After all, there was no point in training against lifeforms that were far too strong for them.

"Are you afraid? If you are, you can choose not to participate."

The hunters' fear rapidly diminished after hearing these words.

Zhang Lie's gaze was calm and confident, and scenes from his fight against the three-star scarab flashed through their minds.

"Only by looking death in the eye, by overcoming your own fear, can you become strong," Zhang Lie intoned.

As the members of Team Zenith internalized these words, their nascent fear gave rise to resolution.

"We're not afraid!" they chorused as one, their fighting spirits roused to soaring heights.

Chapter 113: Diamonds Under Pressure

Zhang Lie nodded. If the hunters of Team Zenith had grown fearful upon just hearing the name of the Desert of Silence, there would be no point venturing there.

"Next, your warm-up exercise: attack me with all you've got, and don't hold back."

Sun Mengmeng and the others hesitated for a moment. They had all grown significantly during that battle, and their latent ability had been dragged out by the fight they had suffered through.

Would Zhang Lie be able to fend off all of them at once? They really didn't want to take the risk of harming Zhang Lie, who had given them so much, even if the chances of that happening were minute.

"Don't worry about me—the ones you should be worrying about are yourselves." Zhang Lie's lips quirked into a smile.

With that thought, Sun Mengmeng and the others gave up their reservations. Zhang Lie was their captain, and he'd never done anything he wasn't certain about. Sun Mengmeng smiled, and the other members took a deep breath. They circulated their genetic energy and got into battle stances.

"Remember, don't hold back!" Zhang Lie instructed. Otherwise, there would be no purpose to this warm-up.

Sun Mengmeng and the others nodded firmly.

Sun Mengmeng aimed her bow in Zhang Lie's direction. As she circulated genetic energy through her body, the arrow began burning with flames, so hot even the air seemed to distort around it. The flames gradually grew purple, as was characteristic of her framework, [Black Sun].

Zhang Lie's eyes narrowed. Based on the aura that Sun Mengmeng was giving off, she seemed to have taken a great stride forward. The sound of wind broke Zhang Lie out of his reverie. As Sun Mengmeng released her bowstring, purple flames shot toward his face.

A purple crescent moon appeared out of nowhere, causing the flames on the arrow to flare up and adding to the spatial distortion effect of the arrow.

"Stacking fire-based effects, huh!" Zhang Lie smiled. Just as the arrow was about to hit him, he activated his galewolf soulshard. Zhang Lie's figure blurred, and he dodged the incoming attack as agilely as a snake, too quickly for Sun Mengmeng and the others to follow.

After evading the blow, Zhang Lie dashed straight toward Sun Mengmeng, Venombane glinting with purple light. Sun Mengmeng felt a grave pressure descend on her, as well as the chilling touch of death.

It was then that she understood just how frightening Zhang Lie's true abilities were. As Zhang Lie dashed forward, Sun Mengmeng retreated back. None of the others had trained their footwork as much as he had, so the distance between them was only narrowing.

If Sun Mengmeng were alone, this would have been sufficient to spell her doom, but she had the rest of Team Zenith with her.

The reason that Zhang Lie had chosen this as their warm-up exercise was to let them experience the chill of death, as well as to improve the teamwork between every member of the party. After the Kez invasion, their skills had all grown by leaps and bounds, and this would be an opportunity to hone them as a team.

Whether or not they succeeded would depend on them and them alone.

In a matter of moments, Zhang Lie had already drawn close to Sun Mengmeng, and Venombane thrust straight toward her head.

Sun Mengmeng's face turned pale. If she didn't defend against this blow, she would die. Zhang Lie's killing intent caused her heart to palpitate and her breathing to stutter. This was the first time she had truly felt the fear of death.

"Are you still hesitating? Do you really want to die?" Zhang Lie hollered at her.

Sun Mengmeng jolted up, a burst of purple flames emerging from underneath her feet. She quickly darted away from Zhang Lie's sword.

"[Flameburst Step]? Not bad!" Zhang Lie stomped on the ground with one foot, causing ripples to emerge with him at the epicenter. When it struck the other members of Team Zenith, they found themselves temporarily stuck.

After his use of [Mirrored Refraction], Sun Mengmeng was in critical danger. If none of her teammates came to help her out, it would be near-impossible for her to avoid the next blow.

To his left, Zhang Lie could feel a water-attuned fist technique heading his way: Yang Ze had used [Fists of the Silent Sea]. Help was finally on its way.

Zhang Lie punched back with the same technique, shattering Yang Ze's attack.

Yang Ze was flung up into the air and landed on the ground with a huge thud. He certainly wasn't going to overcome Zhang Lie with one of Zhang Lie's best techniques, but Zhang Lie had made sure to demonstrate a variation that incorporated principles Yang Ze was still weak in.

Even as he picked himself up, Yang Ze's eyes were gleaming, clearly having intuited something from the blow.

"Is this all you've got? Do you really want to watch Sun Mengmeng die?"

No one else had stepped forward after Yang Ze. Zhang Lie turned around and surveyed the other hunters, anger in his eyes. The other hunters reacted belatedly: Zhang Lie was right—if this were a true life-or-death situation, Sun Mengmeng would have died quite a few times by now.

Li Feng dashed forward with a shout, steps of light guiding his path, his longsword radiant and gleaming, his aura like that of a coiling dragon. Indeed, [Dragon's Triumph] wasn't a legendary-grade technique only in name. Li Feng hadn't trained with the technique for all that long, but he was already able to produce quite a shocking attack.

However, in the end, it seemed as though all that was just a facade. The attack looked imposing and intimidating, but it simply didn't threaten Zhang Lie. He countered Li Feng's strike with Venombane, causing an explosion of radiant light. Li Feng staggered back, but Zhang Lie stood unmoved.

"Now!"

Zhang Lie turned to see that the remaining hunters had surrounded him, blocking his escape path, and Sun Mengmeng had once again nocked an arrow to her bow.

It was now clear that Li Feng's attack was just a distraction.

"That's more like it!" Zhang Lie combined [Fists of the Silent Sea] with [Three-Wave Crescendo] with his left palm, then struck with [The Boundless Blade] from his right. He targeted the weak spots in the other hunters' formation, slicing through Sun Mengmeng's arrow with his sword, then forcing Yang Ze and Li Feng back with a fist and a leg.

Zhang Lie broke out of the seemingly hopeless situation with surprising ease, but just as he thought himself safe, vines suddenly emerged from the ground and wrapped around both his feet. At the same time, he felt a chill from his back.

Behind him raged wind and storm. A spear shot toward him, an attack he felt that he couldn't avoid. It had to be Fang Yi!

Zhang Lie didn't need to turn around to know who was behind him. From the strength of that attack, it seemed as though Fang Yi was staking everything on this attack. Ever since they had broken Sun Mengmeng free of his clutches, the hunters of Team Zenith had all been preparing for this single blow!

Chapter 114: Elemental Augmentation

It was a risky maneuver, but Zhang Lie quite liked their resolve and daring. Well, in that case, I'll have to be a little more serious. As he murmured to himself, he began circulating his genetic energy, causing Venombane to gleam.

While wind and storm surged behind him, Zhang Lie struck backwards with Venombane, blocking the tip of Fang Yi's spear with the blade of his sword. The seemingly ordinary blow was infused with [The Boundless Blade], sapping away much of Fang Yi's momentum.

However, Fang Yi only smiled. The next moment, Zhang Lie felt a wave of heat assailing his back. As Sun Mengmeng fired an arrow into the air, purple flames seemed to fall from the sky, morphing into hundreds of firebirds as they converged on Zhang Lie.

The combination of fire and wind caused the potency of Sun Mengmeng's attack to reach its maximum. The startling heat of the flames dyed the training ground in purple and red, and Zhang Lie's face shone with sweat.

He activated his galewolf soulshard, making him as fast as lightning, leaving behind a trail of shadows as he dashed away.

Sun Mengmeng stared in amazement. Despite the combination attack and the additional speed to her arrows from Fang Yi's wind and storm, her attacks still weren't able to land a hit on Zhang Lie.

However, Zhang Lie wasn't out of danger just yet. By dashing out of range of Sun Mengmeng's attacks, he was leaving himself open to another blow from Fang Yi, whose [Rondo of Wind and Storm] made him faster than even Sun Mengmeng's arrows.

He would have to block attacks from both fronts at once. As he circulated genetic energy through his body, Zhang Lie struck with [Fists of the Silent Sea] on his left, and [The Boundless Blade] on his right.

His attacks clashed with Fang Yi's, and explosions of genetic energy rocked the battlefield.

Zhang Lie was surprised by the strength of Fang Yi's attacks, which had been significantly enhanced by the purple flames from Sun Mengmeng's arrows.

For the first time, Zhang Lie took a step back.

"Quick! Use your strongest attacks!" Sun Mengmeng shouted, sensing Zhang Lie's temporary weakness.

The attacks that the rest of the team had been charging up now poured out of them in a flood.

Everyone remembered what Zhang Lie had said. They used the strongest attacks they could, pouring all their genetic energy into that one blow.

Yang Ze took half a step forward, launching his own [Mirrored Refraction] to pin Zhang Lie down, then following up with [The Boundless Blade]. Yang Ze's sword thrust forward, buoyed by the force of the boundless sea.

At the same time, Li Feng stepped forth with a loud yell. He activated [Arclight Dragon's Imprint], producing a flash of glowing light that lit up Yang Ze's body. Zhang Lie frowned: the mist trailing from Yang Ze's feet caused the light to refract, and his entire body seemed to become shrouded.

Countless images of Yang Ze appeared from within the mist, seeming to surround Zhang Lie.

"Excellent combination of light and water!" Zhang Lie praised. He stepped into the mist and darted here and there, trying to identify Yang Ze's true body.

"[Golden Divide]!" However, just as Zhang Lie stepped into the mist, a resplendent golden light shot toward him. Sun Xiaowu's attack forced him back.

Simultaneously, a jade-green spear thrust forward, accompanied by sharp, thorny vines.

Zhang Lie stepped back and used [Three-Wave Crescendo], smashing into Sun Xiaowu's attack and flinging him up into the air. Despite the successful counter, Zhang Lie knew that it was far from sufficient for damaging Sun Xiaowu under the effects of [Adamantine Aegis]. Defending against Sun Xiaowu's blow meant that he was entrapped by the sturdy, resilient vines, from which it would take him some time to break free.

"Sorry, Captain!" Amidst the fog, the hunters of Team Zenith called out in excitement. This was the best opportunity yet to strike at Zhang Lie! Once again, the hunters readied their best attacks.

"Well? Don't hold back!" Zhang Lie smiled faintly, black mist surging forth from him.

Sun Mengmeng's hair fluttered amidst wind and storm. She, Fang Yi, and the others stared at their target with serious expressions, as though this really were a fight to the death.

"Charge!" Fang Yi strode forward. Once again, he attacked with [Heaven's Judgment], and the lightning crackling on his spear took on a purple tinge from Sun Mengmeng's flames.

His spear was quickly followed by Sun Mengmeng's [Baptism of Hellfire], a fire- and dark-attuned attack that complemented Fang Yi's spear strike well.

From within the mist, Yang Ze released yet another [Mirrored Refraction], making it so dense that Zhang Lie was unable to sense even the other hunters arrayed around him.

Zhou Ying and Sun Xiaowu's targeted harassment blocked any possible retaliation from Zhang Lie as Yang Ze and Fang Yi attacked.

"Not too shabby." Zhang Lie could sense just how much effort the hunters had put into their teamwork.

As he circulated genetic energy through his body, Zhang Lie suddenly lifted up Venombane and cut through the vines surrounding him. He leapt up into the air, shouting, "[The Boundless Blade: Judgment]!"

As he cleaved downward, Venombane released a blinding flash of darkness, then smashed toward the dissipating mist.

Fang Yi was the first to be struck by the attack. As the floor of the training ground cracked under its force, Fang Yi's face paled as he was flung away.

His first blow having landed, Zhang Lie turned in mid-air, sending a [Fists of the Silent Sea] in the direction of Sun Xiaowu and Zhou Ying, who were now visible without the cover of fog. Neither of them were able to react to his attack in time, and both were knocked away as well.

Yang Ze and Li Feng attempted to help the others, but Zhang Lie landed on the floor and immediately activated [Mirrored Refraction], freezing the two of them in place.

Zhang Lie struck them squarely on the chest with a fist and a palm, knocking both of them away as they grunted in pain.

Chapter 115: Desert of Silence

Zhang Lie reined in his genetic energy, surveying the training ground. The members of Team Zenith lay strewn on the ground, their harsh panting indicative of their weakness. How had Zhang Lie come away unscathed from all their attacks? How had he repulsed them all so easily?

In truth, it hadn't been easy. If Zhang Lie hadn't been decisive enough about which attacks to counter and which to absorb, or if he had been just half a beat slower, he could certainly have been defeated. Indeed, he too was panting lightly.

It was only his prodigious combat experience and familiarity with his teammates that he had emerged victorious.

"As expected of our captain! To have won so easily despite us trying our very best," Sun Mengmeng groaned. The other hunters of Team Zenith also seemed a little dismal: they had thought that they would be able to defeat Zhang Lie at least once if they all worked together, but...

"No, you're wrong. I didn't win as easily as you all think I did. I just have more combat experience," Zhang Lie clarified. One wrong move could have spelled disaster.

Of course, Zhang Lie wouldn't use his most potent abilities on his teammates; otherwise, this fight couldn't be considered a warm-up anymore.

"Really?" Sun Mengmeng's eyes gleamed. Zhang Lie was acknowledging all of them!

"Yes. You've all grown far stronger than before."

Li Feng, Yang Ze, and the others whooped in joy. While Fang Yi had a faint smile on his face, he seemed to be deep in thought. As someone who had become a renowned hunter in Zhang Lie's past life, Fang Yi had likely gained some insight from the fight.

"Right, one more thing. Yang Ze, you seemed to have had a revelation about [Fists of the Silent Sea] during the middle of the fight. Focusing on that revelation right then and there made you useless to your teammates, so don't repeat that error in an actual battle."

If he hadn't held back, he could have killed Sun Mengmeng right then and there, destroying the team's offensive core.

"Yes, Captain!" Yang Ze nodded, the event weighing heavily on his mind.

By constantly reviewing their battles together and working on their teamwork, the members of Team Zenith would develop into far better hunters.

"Freshen up a little. We'll be heading to the Desert of Silence tomorrow."

Zhang Lie's gaze swept over the gathered crowd. After the fight against Zhang Lie, the mention of the Desert of Silence drew not fear, but eagerness and excitement, from the hunters.

Zhang Lie nodded. They would need this sort of willpower in order to look death calmly in the eyes in the Desert of Silence.

After a day's rest, their journey began.

The Desert of Silence was quite some distance from the Blacksteel settlement. As Zhang Lie and his team headed north, they encountered a few relatively strong lifeforms along the way, which Sun Mengmeng and the others dealt with with ease.

After an hour-long run, the change in their surroundings became obvious. The greenery had slowly ebbed and faded away, the air was dry and arid, and several of the stones around them had even cracked from prolonged exposure to the climate.

Zhang Lie stopped by a weathered stone marker on which the words 'Desert of Silence' were written. Perhaps because of its age, the words were fading and rather difficult to make out.

"Is this the boundary of the Desert of Silence?" Sun Mengmeng glanced to her front. The skies were darkening, and a small stone path was snaking forward into the gloom. By either side of the path lay dry, crumpled leaves.

Bones were strewn along the path, and the smell of rot and decay wafted up from below. There were a few small plants growing here and there, but in strangely unsettling colors.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. The Desert of Silence was well known to be a deathzone in the first realm of the dimensional world, because the density and strength of superior-grade lifeforms within were far greater than in other regions.

"Captain, when are we heading in?" Sun Mengmeng asked quietly, breaking off Zhang Lie's train of thought.

"We'll enter now. Remain alert, or you'll die," Zhang Lie said coolly, leading the way.

Sun Mengmeng and the others followed swiftly behind him. Upon passing the stone post, they could feel gusts of hot air blowing in their direction, penetrating their armor and abrading their skin.

"Isn't this place strange? The temperature and humidity changes abruptly once we pass this boundary!" Fang Yi cried out.

"That's what's unusual about this place—despite the inhospitable environmental factors, there are still countless superior-grade lifeforms who've chosen to make this place their home. Follow me. We'll start investigating from the outer perimeter." Zhang Lie glanced back at his teammates, only to find them staring all around with serious expressions on their faces.

He led the team onward down the cobbled path. The temperature grew warmer the further they walked, and everyone's foreheads rapidly began to bead with sweat.

Before them lay a barren desert.

As hot gusts of wind blew, yellow sand drifted into the air, forming a haze that obscured the horizon. They could, however, still make out various sand dunes that rose up into the distance, and they could hear the howls of mysterious lifeforms carried by the wind.

Waves of killing intent swept toward Team Zenith.

"Is this what the Desert of Silence is like?" Sun Xiaowu was the youngest hunter in the team, and the surroundings had the greatest impact on him.

"We're still far from the depths. You'll see what the desert's truly like later on." They were still walking along the perimeter, and he wanted them to acclimate before bringing them deeper into the desert.

They could see traces of superior-grade lifeforms all around them. Because so many lifeforms inhabited the desert, the weaker ones were pushed to the outskirts, whereas the stronger ones would stay in the interior. The weaker lifeforms would have to hunt down even weaker prey, or be consumed by the howling winds and yellow sand.

Team Zenith would start from the outskirts and work their way inward, deep into the desert.

Chapter 116: Beetle of the Sands

The winds seemed to be even more intense around the outskirts of the desert. Within half an hour, grit and sand had made their way into every hunter's hair and skin, and it was difficult for them to even open their eyes when a strong wind blew.

What sort of lifeforms could live in such a hostile environment?

"Captain, why haven't we encountered any superior-grade lifeforms yet?" Sun Xiaowu was slowly relaxing after realizing that the Desert of Silence wasn't as dangerous as it seemed.

After all, they had walked quite some distance through the desert, but they hadn't encountered even a little bug.

"Oh, you'll get your fill of them soon enough." Zhang Lie laughed.

"Don't worry, Captain, I won't be afraid!" Sun Xiaowu patted his chest as he walked onward with confidence. He didn't look carefully at his surroundings as he ventured forward.

With the sand and grit affecting their vision, it would be easy for them to miss something even if they were paying careful attention, let alone if their behavior were like Sun Xiaowu's.

"There's no danger here at all! Is this really the Desert of Silence?" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed.

Behind him, a gust of wind and sand shot toward Sun Xiaowu, closing the distance so quickly that the others barely had any time to react.

"Be careful!" Sun Mengmeng shouted. Instinctively, she circulated her genetic energy and thrust forward with her sword, purple flames shooting out in the direction of her thrust, courtesy of [Black Sun].

It was only then that Sun Xiaowu noticed what was coming for him. Squawking, he darted aside.

The gust of wind and sand dissipated after being struck by Sun Mengmeng's blow, revealing a black insect-type lifeform. As it realized that its cover had been blown, it burrowed deep into the sand. Moments later, no trace of the sneak attack remained.

Sun Xiaowu stared at the place where the bug had vanished in shock. If he hadn't darted away, or if Sun Mengmeng hadn't reacted in time, he could well have been injured or dead by now.

"Do you still think you're safe?" Zhang Lie cocked an eyebrow at Sun Xiaowu, who shuddered and took a step back.

Carelessness could be life-threatening under such situations. Zhang Lie had discovered this insect quite a while beforehand, and he had deliberately allowed the situation to happen to shock Sun Xiaowu into paying attention.

Sun Xiaowu was so shocked from the ordeal that his face turned pale.

"Captain, this insect seems to be a superior-grade lifeform, the beetle of the sands," Sun Mengmeng stated. Her earlier attack was at about two-thirds of her maximum strength, but it had only managed to remove the protective barrier of sand surrounding it.

Zhang Lie nodded. The beetle of the sands had extremely tough chitin. It lived in deserts and was able to control the sand in the environment both for attack and defense, but the trickiest part of dealing with these beetles was their stealth.

The desert sands were the perfect environment for these beetles. When they burrowed underground, they were exceedingly difficult to sense, allowing them to give their unsuspecting target a lethal blow from any direction and angle.

The members of Team Zenith arranged themselves in a large circle, so as to sense everything around them. Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes as he surveyed the sands, channeling genetic energy to boost his senses. He noticed a sudden movement by a patch of yellow sand, but he said nothing out loud. Instead, he simply continued tracking the beetle's movements.

"Captain, this isn't an easy lifeform to deal with," Fang Yi murmured. It was a superior-grade lifeform with an overwhelming environmental advantage, and its stealth was undeniably effective.

"If you guys can't even deal with the superior-grade lifeforms on the outskirts of the Desert of Silence, then there's no need for any of you to participate in the Void Cup," Zhang Lie replied. It was only under such circumstances that they could hone their abilities to the utmost.

The superior-grade beetle of the sands wasn't going to go easy on them like he did, and every member of Team Zenith knew that. Each of its blows could well be lethal, and the hunters would have to keep that in mind.

Zhang Lie didn't plan on stepping forward until it was absolutely necessary.

A massive gust of wind flung a pile of sand into the air toward the hunters of Team Zenith. Each grain of sand was as sharp as a shard of glass, and it was obvious that they would have to defend themselves against the attack.

Sun Mengmeng activated [Black Sun]. Purple flames ringed them all, and the heat of the flames seemed to distort even the air.

The longsword clutched in her hands erupted in purple flame.

"[Baptism of Hellfire]," Sun Mengmeng shouted. She swung her blade downwards, releasing a spike of genetic energy at the sand.

Fang Yi supported her attack with a gale of wind, causing the flames of her attack to flare. The grains of sand in the air fell to the ground even as the purple flames continued shooting forth. Zhang

Lie could see just how developed Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's teamwork was, as well as their innate ability to coordinate to an impressive extent.

At the same time, Yang Ze and Li Feng worked together to fill the region around them with a light mist, forming a mirage to confuse the beetle of the sands.

His teammates' coordination was beyond his expectations, at least when it came to setting up a proper defense. How was their offense?

The world seemed to tilt as the sand beneath their feet collapsed, causing Sun Mengmeng and the others to stumble.

Zhang Lie frowned: the beetle of the sands seemed to be rampaging.

The sand suddenly coalesced into a pair of huge claws. Despite the mist obscuring the beetle's vision, the wide-ranged attack would hit them all no matter how they tried to evade it.

Zhang Lie still had no intention of stepping forward. This was the first trial that they had faced upon coming to the Desert of Silence, and Zhang Lie wasn't going to deprive them of such a useful opportunity to learn.

Furthermore, the beetle of the sands had already exposed its greatest weakness. Whether or not they would win would depend on how quickly they could spot that weakness.

As the sand beneath their feet began to shift once more, the claw enveloped them in its shadow.

Chapter 117: Against a Common Foe

Zhang Lie instinctively stepped forward before stopping short once more. Their excursion to the Desert of Silence was meant as a training exercise, and there would be no point to it if he were to step in now. Furthermore, this was a relatively easy lifeform to defeat by the outskirts of the desert. If they weren't able to defeat it, then how would they be able to proceed deeper into the desert?

Zhang Lie steeled his heart and stood in place.

The beetle's claw swiped downward, raising such a storm of wind and sand that it was difficult for the hunters to keep their eyes open.

Fang Yi raised his spear to the skies. Activating [Rondo of Wind and Storm] with a shout, electric currents spiked up and down his body, and a bolt of lightning flew out of his spear.

"Sun Mengmeng, I need your help!" As expected of someone who became a prominent hunter in Zhang Lie's past life, Fang Yi responded quickly and decisively in the face of danger.

Sun Mengmeng nodded. Fang Yi concentrated all his attention on the spear in his hands; as genetic energy surged out of his body, he suddenly thrust his spear upwards. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and snakes of lightning sparked from the tip of his spear, glinting with the effect of [Heaven's Judgment].

Sun Mengmeng followed up with [Baptism of Hellfire]. Purple flames shot toward the beetle's claw, instantly vaporizing any grains of sand they touched along the way. As the flames made their way past Fang Yi's spear, they burned even more brightly and shot forward even more rapidly.

Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had used all their strength for this one blow: the beetle's claw seemed like a devastating attack, one that they couldn't take lightly.

Zhang Lie, watching the scene from behind them, inclined his head. Given how quickly Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had been able to launch their combination attack, as well as how remarkable their improvement had been, it seemed as though they were really quite compatible with each other.

As lightning, fire, and wind smashed against the beetle's claw, it cracked and split apart, raining sand down all the combatants below.

An unusual insect's cry came from underground, and the grains of sand that had made up the claw suddenly started to condense. The cracks in the claw were filling up, and the beetle seemed able to hold its own against even Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi's combination attack.

Sun Mengmeng frowned, but she believed that Fang Yi would be able to overcome this obstacle.

"[Heaven's Judgment: Tribulation of Lightning]!" Fang Yi shouted. His eyes opened wide, pupils glowing with yellow light. His spear, once again sparking with energy, thrust toward the heart of the claw.

As though it had been struck by lightning, the grains of sand that made up the claw exploded and slowly drifted back down to the desert.

Zhang Lie exhaled. In the end, Fang Yi had managed to defend against the beetle's attack, but the beetle itself was still underground. The hunters of Team Zenith would need to find its body before they could truly end the battle.

How would they proceed?

Following Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi's example, the other hunters of Team Zenith also paired up and got into position. They were carefully scrutinizing their surroundings. Yang Ze's body glowed with energy, and Sun Xiaowu and Zhou Ying were glancing all around them.

Under such circumstances, Zhou Ying's elemental attunement would be somewhat restricted, and she wouldn't be able to make use of its full power.

Li Feng wouldn't be able to find the beetle on his own, and his light attunement wouldn't be able to do much damage. Instead, he chose to shore up his reserves of genetic energy to support another attacker, a reasonable choice.

Yang Ze seemed as though he were about to make a move, but why would he do so out here in the desert, where the heat and dryness would both counteract his elemental attunement?

It seemed as though he had uncovered the beetle's crucial weakness. Just as he was unsuited for the desert, so was the beetle of the sands unsuited for him. His water-attuned genetic energy could be condensed into a fair amount of water and fed into the sands. This would result in the formation of a layer of mud, far thicker in consistency and therefore harder to control than individual grains of sand. Furthermore, escaping from the mud would likewise be a challenging task.

To Zhang Lie, it was apparent that his teammates had gotten a grasp of the situation in front of them, and that they knew exactly what their role in the group was. This alone represented significant growth: after all, they weren't having a mock battle at a training ground, but were instead

engaged in a life-or-death battle in the Desert of Silence itself. They would need to bear responsibility for their own lives, as well as those of their teammates.

With a dull thud, Yang Ze pounded the ground, using [Fists of the Silent Sea] to send waves of water seeping into the sands. An outsider might have thought that Yang Ze was just practicing a technique, but his repeated applications of [Fists of the Silent Sea] had succeeded in concentrating water-attuned genetic energy in the air and sand around him, causing the grains of sand to stick together as a result of the sudden moisture.

The dry sand began to shift and swirl, and the sudden change caused the beetle of the sands, mired deep underground within a protective shell of sand, to twitch in discomfort.

Zhou Ying's eyes sparkled. She wouldn't have been able to do anything in the dry desert, but now that Yang Ze had created a patch of moisture, things were different.

"[Storm of Leaves]!" Zhou Ying buried her hands amidst the mud as her body shone green. Vines and tendrils dug into the sand, trying to find where the beetle of the sands was hiding. "It's here!"

As the beetle screeched from underground, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng, who had since charged up their respective techniques, struck at once. [Baptism of Hellfire] and [Heaven's Judgment] sank into the sands right where Zhou Ying pointed.

The screech turned shrill. The combined force of Sun Mengmeng's purple flames and Fang Yi's lightning caused an underground eruption, and a mud-colored beetle flew out from a cloud of sand, dyed in bright green blood.

"Not bad! It's very impressive what you all have managed to do against this superior-grade lifeform on your own," Zhang Lie commented.

The beetle had been wrapped up in Zhou Ying's vines, causing it to take the full brunt of Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's blows. Its chitin was charred black and smoking, and it had clearly taken significant damage from the combination of attacks.

The beetle screeched again, waving its eight legs as it madly tried to dig its way out of the mud.

Of course, the hunters present wouldn't let it escape. The moment it jumped up, they swiped their weapons at it. How could they let a superior-grade lifeform escape so easily? Not only would it provide needed superior gene fragments, soulshards from such lifeforms would form the basis of their future growth.

Chapter 118: Stirring Up Trouble

Struck by blade after blade, the pitiful beetle of the sands finally died with a wail. Its eight legs trembled, then stilled. As a gust of wind blew by, yellow sand covered up its body.

[You participated in the successful kill of a superior-grade beetle of the sands. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade beetle of the sands, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

Unfortunately, this particular beetle didn't drop a soulshard. Fang Yi shook his head in exasperation. Despite all their hard work, they had only managed to obtain a few superior gene fragments, but even the fragments alone were a big prize.

Zhang Lie tutted at their disappointment. "Don't forget what the purpose of all this training is. You all still need to fill up your superior gene capacity, and you can acquire soulshards at any time afterwards!"

The others nodded, stored the beetle's body, and headed deeper into the desert. The further in they went, the stronger the lifeforms they encountered became. Some were even stronger than the beetle of the sands, but Zhang Lie didn't have to step in even once.

Although it looked as though the battles were getting more trying, the other members of Team Zenith succeeded at every challenge thrown at them and won victory after victory.

As they passed by a small oasis, Zhang Lie called for a halt.

"What's the matter, Captain?" Sun Mengmeng asked. Her white armor had turned black with stains and soot, and she looked a little worse for wear.

The other hunters of Team Zenith were in similar straits.

"This is as far as I'm going to go. It's time to head back," Zhang Lie informed them, stretching.

"We're stopping here? Aren't we only past the outer perimeter?" Sun Xiaowu asked. He didn't want to leave just yet—he'd acquired quite a lot of superior gene fragments in just a short while!

"I'm going to head back on my own. Once you guys don't feel like you can go any further, I'll come back and bring you back out. Don't get too close to the center," Zhang Lie cautioned.

Sun Mengmeng was about to say something when Zhang Lie's body suddenly flared with genetic energy, and he vanished into thin air.

Had he left just like that? Sun Mengmeng's face spasmed.

"Are we... alone now?" Yang Ze wondered.

"Don't you know what our captain's intentions are?" Sun Mengmeng sucked in a deep breath.

"Even in our previous encounters with superior-grade lifeforms, the fact that he was at our backs gave us significant confidence, and if nothing else, we could rely on him to clean up our mess. But now that he's gone, we have to be able to rely on ourselves," Fang Yi explained. He walked past the others and continued steadfastly onward.

The other hunters all calmed down, then followed suit. It was time for them to fight on their own.

Zhang Lie walked out of the desert humming to himself. After examining his teammates' skills for himself, he was confident that they wouldn't be in danger unless they were to wander into the heart of the desert. Furthermore, what would be the point of the training if he were present for all of it?

"I hate sand," he grouched to himself. There were countless grains on his clothes and rubbing against his skin, and quite a few had fallen into the sole of his shoes.

A hot bath sounded particularly refreshing at the moment. He shook his head, frowning at the grains of sand the motion dislodged, and hurried back to the Blacksteel settlement, making a beeline for the Blacksteel Inn.

After a long, steaming bath, Zhang Lie sat cross-legged on his mattress as he began reflecting on [Eclipse].

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

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

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 100

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

Zhang Lie's current stats were unrivaled by any hunter, past or present, in the first realm of the dimensional world.

His study of [Eclipse] proceeded surprisingly fruitfully, because he had unwittingly activated [Eclipse] during the Kez invasion. The life-or-death struggle had markedly enhanced his understanding of both [Eclipse] and the serpent form of [Ninecarp Transformation], and it might even be possible for him to break through with both techniques before the Void Cup.

Suddenly, Zhang Lie's transceiver beeped. The call was from Lawyer Zhang Hong. If she were calling, then there had to be an issue with the dojo. Zhang Lie accepted the call with a frown.

Zhang Hong's face stared at him. "Mr. Zhang, there have been some problems with the acquisition of land for the dojo. I'm afraid I'll have to speak with you in person about these issues," Zhang Hong reported seriously, her face grim.

Zhang Lie nodded, then arranged to meet with her immediately. Once the call ended, he rushed back to the real world, and then headed to Zhang Hong's office.

"What's the problem?" Zhang Lie asked.

"Everything had been going smoothly until we were told that the dojo leader's qualifications could not be ascertained."

Zhang Lie frowned. There had been a surprising amount of red tape associated with constructing a dojo, but Zhang Hong had dealt with all of it admirably.

The fact that there was only a problem with the dojo leader was quite curious. This particular piece of paperwork required demonstrable skill or experience from the intended dojo leader, so as to prevent charlatans from starting up their own dojo.

Given Zhang Lie's performance during the Kez invasion, this paperwork should have been trivial, and he had anticipated acquiring the land rights to be more problematic. How had the opposite happened?

"How could this be? Don't they know I'm the intended dojo leader?"

"The process had been going well, but after the government official in charge of the paperwork left to take a call, his attitude underwent a significant reversal, and he refused to grant the required certification," Zhang Hong reported.

It was obvious that someone was intending on preventing Zhang Lie from constructing his dojo.

Chapter 119: Tell Me More

There were quite a few people who could affect government proceedings with just a single call, but those who would be targeting Zhang Lie at this critical juncture could only be the Wang, Qin, or Li clans.

"What do you propose, Lawyer Zhang?" Zhang Lie didn't seem particularly concerned. The reason that Zhang Hong had asked to meet up for a face-to-face discussion likely wasn't just to report this failure.

"Mr. Zhang, that person's attitude was unusual enough that I'm afraid my team won't be able to deal with the situation alone, so..." Zhang Hong paused as she turned to Zhang Lie. The fact that she had to rely on his assistance, despite his handing everything over to her, meant that she had failed in her duties. On the other hand, if Zhang Lie didn't step forward himself...

Zhang Lie nodded. "Don't worry. I'll handle the certification myself. Thanks for your help, Lawyer Zhang."

Contacting Zhang Lie had been Zhang Hong's last resort, and she was thankful that he had been so understanding.

Zhang Lie headed straight toward the branch of the dojo consortium in Ning.

The dojo consortium was responsible for all dojo-related affairs on Earth, and all those who wanted to establish a new dojo would have to have their qualifications tested and paperwork handled at one of their branches worldwide.

The pale blue building that was the Ning branch had an unusual ball-like shape. Before the front doors were two armored soldiers. As Zhang Lie strode forward, the two soldiers stared at him, and by the time he reached the doors, they had both rushed forward.

Zhang Lie frowned. Were they going to attack him before he could even enter the building?

Just as Zhang Lie prepared to circulate genetic energy to counter the two soldiers' attacks, one of them stepped forward, his body trembling slightly out of excitement.

"May I ask if you're the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie?"

"Er—yes, I am," Zhang Lie responded.

"Wonderful! It's truly honor to see you in person. May I get your autograph?" He turned and elbowed his companion. "I told you that was him! I sensed him from a distance!"

Both soldiers began laughing out of excitement, reminding Zhang Lie of how famous he had become.

After signing an autograph for the two soldiers, he entered the building, causing yet another commotion at the front desk as he inquired about the certification process for a dojo leader.

The receptionist pointed Zhang Lie to a door hidden by a secluded alcove, and Zhang Lie was about to walk in when he heard voices from within.

"Don't worry, that lad won't have a chance to open his dojo!"

"Yes, there's no way he'll be able to obtain the certification with me around."

"Perhaps another day? I'm going to be rather busy lately with work. Yes. Yes? I'll gratefully accept, then," a greasy, unctuous voice came from behind the door. Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. There was indeed a problem, and the source of it was right here.

Once everything had settled down inside, he knocked on the door.

"Enter." The man within seemed a little irritated to have been disturbed.

As Zhang Lie entered the room, he saw a bald figure arranging a few documents on his desk. The man continued sorting through his documents even as he heard Zhang Lie approach. Without looking up at him, he asked, "Are you here for certification? Come back tomorrow, my work day's almost over!"

"Almost over? Isn't it only 3:30 PM?"

The man shot Zhang Lie an annoyed glance. Seeing that Zhang Lie was a young lad, his distaste only grew.

"You really don't know how things work around here, do you? Who's the representative in charge of your dojo? Go back and tell him to come back next month!"

"You'll have me wait a whole month just because of something I said? I'd consider that an abuse of power, Official Yang. I'm the representative for my dojo, and I'm here to be certified as a dojo leader." Zhang Lie sat down in the chair before the other man's table.

Only then did the official focus his full attention on the arrogant upstart who had dared offend him. His eyes widened. This—this was the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!

As expected, he was brash and arrogant, and he still expected to be able to found a dojo despite all the enemies he had made.

"As I've said, it's time for me to get off work. Return tomorrow!" Official Yang made to leave.

"I'll repeat myself: I'm here for the dojo leader's certification. From your expression, it looks like you've recognized me, haven't you? With my newfound popularity, I wonder if I could make you famous by lodging a complaint against you?"

Zhang Lie was still smiling pleasantly, but his words were as sharp as his blade.

Silence descended on the room until Official Yang broke it with a laugh. "I do have some recollection of your intention of founding a dojo, and I believe I've met with your lawyer, but there's simply no way you'll be able to obtain your certification. Stop wasting your time."

He seemed unperturbed by Zhang Lie's threat, and his beady eyes glanced disdainfully at Zhang Lie.

"Is that so?"

"Of course! In Ning, I have complete authority over this certification." Do you think I'd ever let someone from the slums start a dojo here?

"Let me guess who your backer is, then. The Li clan? The Qin clan? Or perhaps... the Wang clan?"

Zhang Lie pinned Official Yang down with a piercing glance. Although he wasn't circulating his genetic energy, his killing intent was sufficient to make Official Yang jumpy and anxious. Furthermore, when Zhang Lie brought up the Wang clan, he had swallowed slightly, and his pupils suddenly contracted.

It was clear just who was responsible for this annoyance.

"I don't understand what you're talking about. The reason you won't ever get the certification is because you're unqualified!" Official Yang shouted.

Zhang Lie smiled with his teeth. "Is that so? Please, tell me more."

Chapter 120: The Dojo Consortium

"Of course. Your accomplishments are impressive, but rules are rules. There are two main reasons you won't pass the dojo leader certification, age and strength. According to official guidance, you must be over 25 years of age to become a dojo leader, and as a dojo leader, you must be at least a second-realm hunter."

Official Yang played his trump card after realizing just how difficult Zhang Lie seemed to be to deal with.

Zhang Lie frowned. He didn't think the official would lie to him about such matters, so these were likely basic requirements that he did have to meet. He had neglected to confirm this information for himself; after all, in the past, he certainly hadn't done anything of the sort, and he didn't realize just how difficult it would be to start a dojo on his own.

That said, there were surely exceptions to the rules, and if he really couldn't skirt past them, he would simply use his newfound popularity to try to sway the authorities!

"Are these all necessary requirements?" Zhang Lie pressed.

"Not quite!" Official Yang's beady eyes made Zhang Lie want to slap his face, but his response was just what Zhang Lie was hoping to hear. The official seemed to be waiting for him to inquire further, as though he had prepared a trap for Zhang Lie to jump into.

Zhang Lie smiled. "What are the exceptions?"

"Your age can likely be dealt with given your current status and medals, but the more important requirement is that of strength. The exception to the strength requirement is a special examination." Official Yang smiled.

"Indeed?" Zhang Lie mirrored his smile, understanding what would come next.

"Exactly. As long as you pass this examination, you'll be able to obtain the required certification."

So this was the trap. If he didn't intend to take the examination, he would surely be unable to found his dojo. On the other hand, if he accepted blindly, he could well be putting himself in grave danger.

"Will you accept? My understanding is that the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie fears nothing," Official Yang murmured slyly.

This was Zhang Lie's only route forward.

"There's no need to incite me. I accept. Let the Wang clan find me a decent opponent," Zhang Lie replied resolutely.

"Very well, very well. As expected of a folk hero! Come back here tomorrow, and I'll bring you to the testing ground myself."

The moment the door shut behind him, Official Yang made a call.

"Yes, he's accepted the examination.

"What?! No, certainly not!

"No, well—if I agree to this, you'll have to guarantee that the dojo consortium will suffer no recrimination for his death!

"Very well. He'll come back for the examination tomorrow."

Zhang Lie returned to his house in the slums. Since he was going to take the examination tomorrow, rather than return to the dimensional world, he decided to cultivate back on Earth. After all, he would be up against the most challenging opponent the Wang clan could find on such short notice.

As rays of daylight pierced his window, Zhang Lie's eyes opened wide, and he retracted the black genetic energy that suffused and enveloped his body. After a night of cultivation, he was at his prime. Furthermore, after having meditated on [Eclipse] a few more days, he had gotten quite comfortable with its use.

Shall I be the hunted, or the hunter? Zhang Lie strode toward the Ning branch of the dojo consortium, a baseball cap on his head. Having learned from his previous experience, he tried to take a circuitous path that wasn't densely populated. He had no intention of being at the center of attention, so it was far more relaxing for him to travel via these relatively deserted side paths.

Under the morning light, the pale blue building seemed to glow softly. Zhang Lie sucked in a breath and walked into the building while a figure stared coldly at him from near the roof.

"Have you finished the preparations? He arrived far sooner than I expected." The figure turned to the old man beside him.

"Two hunters from the second realm, their gene capacities capped. And to guarantee success, I've even prepared something good for the two of them." The old man began to cackle, exposing his grimy, black teeth.

"In that case, I'll be heading back first." The figure seemed a little disgusted by the old man, and he vanished into thin air like a shadow.

Zhang Lie headed straight toward Official Yang's office. His door was wide open, and he glanced at Zhang Lie the moment he entered.

"Oh? I'm surprised you came so early. I've just arrived at work myself!" His eyes were gleaming with anticipation, as though he were already imagining Zhang Lie's tragic downfall.

"Isn't it best to get things over with?" Zhang Lie replied confidently.

"Well, follow me." Coughing a few times, Official Yang brought Zhang Lie deep into the building.

After they passed by a few corridors, their surroundings darkened, and he directed Zhang Lie toward a teleportation array. As Zhang Lie stepped toward the array, he felt a spatial distortion tugging him forward. Everything turned black; by the time he regained his senses, he found himself in a spacious room, with a long tunnel wide enough only for a single person to walk through.

"The examination will begin the moment you enter. I'll await you out here, and if you give up in the middle, you can call out loudly to summon help," Official Yang continued.

Zhang Lie glanced at the dark tunnel ahead, which seemed like the maw of a giant beast. As he strode forward, the light around him became dim, and he could feel gusts of cold wind peppering him from the front.

"You'd better not die inside, or I wouldn't know how to explain it to my superiors!" Official Yang called out from behind.