

U. Warlord 121

Chapter 121: Walking into a Trap

As he walked through the tunnel, Zhang Lie felt as though his whole body had been engulfed by the darkness, so all-encompassing that he couldn't even see his fingers when he stretched his hand out.

A whirring noise came from underground, perhaps from some sort of robot, followed by a series of crisp popping sounds. The tunnel lit up with bright flares of white light.

Zhang Lie frowned. He was still within the tunnel. Surrounding him were what seemed to be a variety of statues, which seemed to come alive when the light shone on them. A path, illuminated by the lighting, snaked forward deeper into the tunnel.

Knowing that the Wang clan was targeting him, Zhang Lie had no choice but to give this examination his full attention.

As he walked to the end of the tunnel and found a set of robotic doors barring his way, he knew that the examination was about to begin.

"The test of strength shall now begin," a cold, robotic voice intoned, before the center of the doors shone with red light. The doors opened, releasing a cloud of white smoke.

Zhang Lie discovered that the testing ground was a gladiator pit. The floor was paved with inscribed stone, specifically designed to be resilient against damage. Four tunnels were evenly spaced around the circular arena. Zhang Lie glanced into each of the dark tunnels, seemingly able to hear a faint rustling sound from inside.

"The test shall now commence."

The doors to the pit began to close, and the glaring white light dimmed. Thick mist sprayed out of small holes in the walls of the arena, making Zhang Lie feel as though he were about to face a dangerous foe indeed.

As the mist filled the entire arena, a dark shadow emerged from one tunnel. As he felt a gust of wind heading his way, Zhang Lie instinctively began to circulate his genetic energy, activating [Mirrored Refraction] as he did so.

The ground shone with refracted light, and the black shadow easily penetrated Zhang Lie's chest. However, there was no blood to be seen. Zhang Lie's image dissolved into light and shadow.

By that time, Zhang Lie had snuck up to the shadow's back and was observing it carefully. It wasn't particularly large in size, and it stood on four unusually thick legs. All in all, it seemed much like an adult pit bull.

Its body was covered with black armor, and each of its joints glowed with electricity—a robotic hound. Zhang Lie marvelled that this examination was to be carried out with robotic lifeforms.

Just as he was contemplating what to do next, dazzling light shone from within one of the tunnels as a pack of robotic hounds flew toward Zhang Lie. In mid-air, as their bodies crackled with electricity, they dashed forward far faster than before, pouncing straight toward Zhang Lie's throat.

They opened their jaws wide to reveal sharp, spiked teeth, far stronger than even Zhang Lie's reinforced body could withstand.

These robotic hounds were based on woofbugs, and were apparently able to display varying levels of strength depending on the quality of their construction. The ones that Zhang Lie were facing seemed to be at the peak of the first realm.

Zhang Lie used [Rippling Walk] to avoid the attack, then activated [Three-Wave Crescendo] against the closest hound.

It exploded almost as the attack struck it, but the remaining hounds swarmed him like a black tide. Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed. These robotic hounds were strong and agile, and would individually have been challenging even for a peak first realm hunter, but unfortunately for them, their opponent was Zhang Lie. He had stood against a veritable sea of woofdogs, let alone these inferior counterparts.

As he activated his galewolf soulshard, his speed rose tremendously, and he vanished from sight. The robotic hounds stood still, processing the battlefield around them in order to analyze and predict Zhang Lie's behavior and location.

As they locked onto Zhang Lie's position, their eyes gleamed, and Zhang Lie felt a tremor of unease. The robotic hounds opened their jaws wide, spraying out beams of fire in his direction. The beams were surprisingly rapid, and so hot that they distorted the air all around them.

His elemental attunement was water, and these beams wouldn't be too damaging to him, but something caught his attention the moment the hounds launched their attacks. The real danger wasn't these beams of fire, but rather what they were hiding.

As the beams of fire shot toward him, Zhang Lie waved Venombane, extinguishing the flames with his genetic energy. Smoke and steam filled the battlefield.

A chill shot down Zhang Lie's back as stealthed assailants, hiding in the darkness, finally revealed themselves. Before he could turn around, a huge wave of genetic energy slammed into him from the side. Blades of wind rent tears in his armor.

Zhang Lie frowned, activating [The Boundless Blade].

Countless hounds perished amidst the relentless tidal waves. At the same time, Zhang Lie activated his white-grub soulshard, condensing silver armor around him, just in time to face another bout of howling winds.

The wind blew with such speed that Zhang Lie felt as though he were about to be torn apart himself. Zhang Lie instantly deduced that this had to be a blow from a peak second-realm hunter.

So this is what the Wang clan planned. Zhang Lie smiled. As he had expected, the test of strength was governed by the dojo consortium, and while Official Yang might have been able to modify some parts of it, there was certainly a limit as to what he could accomplish.

For example, it was unlikely that Zhang Lie would face an opponent beyond the second realm. Against Zhang Lie, a second-realm hunter wasn't too difficult to defeat; after all, he had even killed a three-star black-tipped scarab on his own.

In other words, what he had to be wary of was his opponents' equipment and techniques, as well as the number of opponents he would have to face.

Indeed, there were at least two peak second-realm hunters.

From his other side, a row of bright flames made his face seem to glow red. A fireball shot toward Zhang Lie. Supported by the first hunter's wind, it grew larger and larger as it threatened to engulf him. The fireball and the gusts of wind combined into a frightening tornado, pulling Zhang Lie into its midst.

Chapter 122: Against Two Terrors

"He should be dead now, shouldn't he?"

Two figures watched the flaming tornado. It had sucked in even the robotic hounds that were cowering away. The combination of the two second-realm hunters' attacks produced flames that were hot enough to burn even their fire-resistant interior.

No matter how strong Zhang Lie was, he was little more than a first-realm hunter who had gotten a little lucky, and their combined efforts were surely enough to get rid of him.

"Of course he's dead! Liu Mo, don't you think the clan grossly overestimated his abilities? One of us would have been more than sufficient to deal with an insect like him." The second figure's fiery-red armor was particularly eye-catching.

Liu Mo, who had been hiding in one of the tunnels, stepped forward in a dark-green suit of armor. It did seem quite ridiculous to them that they, peak second-realm hunters, had been dispatched to slaughter someone still in the first realm.

"We may have taken things a bit too far, eh? Looks like there won't even be a corpse remaining," Liu Mo murmured disdainfully.

"What could we have done? He's simply too weak."

Suddenly, a change swept over the battlefield. From within the fiery tornado erupted a wave of water-attuned genetic energy. A river of blood poured out from within the tornado, sweeping quite a few smoking hound carcasses out with it.

Zhang Lie, having transformed into a forest wolfman, emerged from the bloody river with such power and authority that it stunned the hunter in red.

"Be careful!" Liu Mo cried out, jolting the other hunter into action. Explosions peppering his feet, he quickly escaped from the grasp of the river.

Red waves smashed against the floor of the testing ground, causing it to shudder. As the water splashed against the ground, corroding it and forming a hole burning with green smoke and filling the air with a noxious stench.

The hunter in red stared at the sight. If he had been struck by Zhang Lie's attack...

"He didn't die?!"

Zhang Lie, dyed in blood, his eyes glinting, his shortsword glowing a radiant purple, gave the two second-realm hunters a huge shock. Their sneak attack had been strong, but Zhang Lie had noticed them before they struck.

Almost as the fire-attuned hunter launched a fireball at him, he instinctively activated his superior-grade soulshards in succession, pushing his own combat power to the limit.

That bloody river was one of Zhang Lie's strongest attacks, which he had already shown off to devastating effect in the widely circulated fight against the three-star scarab: [The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe].

Not only had the two second-realm hunters failed in their sneak attack, it had barely harmed Zhang Lie. This wasn't a training battle; they had intended on killing him with that one blow.

"Oh? Perhaps this fight will be worth a little of my time, after all," Liu Mo called out. He didn't dare underestimate Zhang Lie any longer, but his words were as confident as ever. Beside him, his companion also seemed far more serious than before.

In truth, if Zhang Lie hadn't reacted so quickly, he would likely have become nothing but a pile of ash by now. Even he couldn't take it easy when facing two peak second-realm hunters. His eyes gleamed red as he stared at both of them. His constitution wouldn't be able to keep the effect of the blood ant soulshard up for long, and he would have to attack immediately. Otherwise, the moment the effect was over, he would be helpless.

But despite his urgency, he couldn't yet strike—he would need an opportunity. Activating his galewolf soulshard and [Mirrored Refraction] simultaneously, Zhang Lie seemed to vanish and reappear from sight in bursts, moving so quickly that neither of the hunters could pinpoint his location.

"He has at least three superior-grade soulshards active," Liu Mo murmured. "We'd better fight with our full strength."

The two hunters had their backs to each other, covering both of their weak spots.

Zhang Lie activated his superior-grade venombane scorpion soulshard, vanishing from sight entirely.

Liu Mo furrowed his brows. Hunters who had a potent stealth ability were extremely troublesome to deal with. Not only was Zhang Lie able to enter stealth at will, he could launch a potent, devastating attack near-instantly, and he would be a formidable threat.

The two of them glanced at their surroundings as they slowly turned. Genetic energy surged from their bodies. The moment they discovered Zhang Lie's location, they would attack instantly.

Zhang Lie had gained the advantage in this fight. While the boost from his blood ant soulshard was steadily ticking away, he continued inspecting the two hunters from the distance to determine their weak points. His strike would have to be lethal; he wouldn't have enough time to repeat this procedure again.

Silence filled the arena.

Suddenly, a drop of sweat dripped down from the fire-attuned hunter's forehead, causing him to blink. The moment he did so, an arc of blood speared toward him.

"Watch out!" Liu Mo shouted.

"[Wildfire Siege]!" The startled hunter activated a skill, blocking Zhang Lie's devastating blow and causing a huge explosion. He was experienced enough to use a field-based attack in order to guarantee that Zhang Lie would take some damage no matter from which direction he attacked, but the tradeoff would be weakness in a direct confrontation. The clash of the two attacks caused an explosion accompanied by a billowing cloud of steam, and the fire-attuned hunter stumbled back.

Taking his place, Liu Mo charged forward. "[Tiger's Howl]!"

Veins throbbed on Liu Mo's arm as it suddenly grew larger, clearly the effect of activating some impressive soulshard. Wind encircled him, and three tigers formed from these gusts of wind launched themselves toward Zhang Lie.

Based on the density of genetic energy gathered around Liu Mo, this was at least a legendary-grade technique, combined with a superior-grade soulshard.

Zhang Lie couldn't take this attack lightly. He took a deep breath and materialized a black serpent around himself. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

His eyes opened wide, as did the serpent's. As his water- and darkness-attuned genetic energy combined perfectly, the serpent shot toward the three tigers.

Chapter 123: The Final Blow

"Energy has exceeded maximum operating capacity!" a robotic voice sounded from above the gladiator pit, causing beams of red light to flare like spotlights over the arena.

As the serpent struck, distorting space, Liu Mo's eyes widened. The three tigers of wind that he had conjured up were crushed like papier mache under the serpent's advance, dissipating into gusts of wind in its wake.

The black serpent was releasing a torrent of genetic energy as it shot toward Liu Mo, its curved fangs, green pupils, and slit tongue making it look so realistic one could easily mistake it for a living creature. Liu Mo was frozen by the sight.

"Dodge!" his companion called out, and Liu Mo barely managed to avoid the attack at the very last moment, leaping up into the air like a willow leaf drifting in the wind.

The serpent crashed into the ground, sending rubble flying all around the point of impact. Where it landed, there was a smoking crater seething with black genetic energy. Sparks of electricity shot out from the crater, and the piercing alarm and red spotlights vanished in an instant.

Liu Mo, buffeted by the wind, was flung quite a distance away by the attack.

Zhang Lie frowned. Liu Mo wasn't a weak hunter by any means, and he had managed to reduce the damage taken from Zhang Lie's attack by using some combination of soulshard and technique.

As Liu Mo landed on the ground and glanced at the crater that the serpent's attack had left behind, he felt his heart begin to palpitate. The floor was specially reinforced against such attacks, and yet Zhang Lie's serpent had still managed to do so much damage to it.

Even he and his companion, working together, would have been hard-pressed to wreak such destruction. If he had been just a moment slower to react, he would surely have perished.

"There's something wrong with this kid," he whispered, his voice quavering.

"Yes, he's quite difficult to handle, isn't he? No wonder the two of us were dispatched! But attacks of this magnitude will surely place considerable strain on his body. He's still nothing more than a first-realm hunter, so I doubt his constitution and reserves will allow him to keep this up for much longer," the fire-attuned hunter analyzed slowly.

He walked forward, a radiant polearm in his hands.

Liu Mo reflected on his companion's words and did the same, striding up to him with a serrated longsword.

Fire and wind formed a barrier around them. Their genetic energy had mixed in perfect harmony, causing even Zhang Lie to goggle. The level of trust required for this sort of effect was akin to placing one's life in the other's hands.

A tiger of wind with wings of fire manifested in front of the duo.

The Wang clan had sent quite a challenge his way, and his reserves were indeed flagging. He would have to end the fight rapidly.

Zhang Lie raised his sword. He would win in one blow.

"Using this attack against a first-realm hunter? I can't believe we have to resort to this." Liu Mo raised his sword, his arm wreathed in wind.

"We have no other choice—he's too difficult to deal with otherwise!" His companion raised his polearm, aligning it with Liu Mo's sword, causing their respective genetic energies to meld together.

As both hunters thrust their weapons forward, the tiger launched its attack. A vortex of wind and flame was forming around the tiger, sucking up all the genetic energy that had been dissipated throughout the arena and causing the tiger to flare in brilliant light.

"I suppose we had better consume this as a precaution, too," Liu Mo's companion murmured, taking out a potion with an acrid, concentrated smell, so strong that Zhang Lie could smell it from quite a distance away.

If he weren't mistaken, this was a restricted potion that could temporarily raise a hunter's abilities.

Indeed, he could sense Liu Mo and his companion's auras surging by the moment, causing even Zhang Lie to feel short of breath.

"This is our strongest blow. If you can handle it, then we'll accept our defeat!"

Even before the tiger made a move, Zhang Lie was already starting to sweat. A pressure that he had yet to experience since the fight with the three-star scarab required his full concentration to handle. He took in a deep breath, and the genetic energy circulating through his body began to rampage.

This would be the final blow of the match.

Just as the two parties were about to confront each other, two middle-aged men in suits suddenly walked into the Ning branch of the dojo consortium, one of whom was wearing a curious pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

A long string of numbers and data scrolled down the glasses, but only its wearer was able to see it.

"You're certain that the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie came over here?"

"Of course. The person who gave me that information works right here in this building. Apparently, he's participating in some sort of test of strength."

"What? How are we going to find him, then?"

"Don't worry, Li. The person who sold me that information will lead us inside. We're sure to make the headlines tomorrow!"

"Excuse me, you're here to handle matters, aren't you?" a uniformed attendant whispered to Li, coughing as he did so.

"Yes, we are." Liu was rapidly motioning with his eyes, and Li quickly understood that this was the informant that Liu had been talking about.

"In that case, follow me—but remember, you can observe and inspect the scene, but you'd better not touch anything!" the informant warned.

Liu smiled and nodded as he stuffed a red card into the informant's hands, which the informant pocketed.

"You're the only people I'm letting in here. After all, this is a branch of the dojo consortium, and even the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie had to come here himself to take a test of strength!" As soon as their surroundings were cleared of people, the attendant patted his wallet and began to boast to Li, telling him that the only reason the two of them had been allowed in was because he was doing Liu a favor, that most of those hunters who worked in the building wouldn't have the required clearance to bring them inside.

Li rolled his eyes. More accurately, this informant was the only hunter working in the building who had been easy to bribe.

"Alright, we're here. The teleportation array is open—go do what you came here to do, and I'll bring you back out in half an hour."

Chapter 124: Tiger and Dragon

"Ah, you're sure that Zhang Lie's in here?" Liu asked the informant for confirmation.

"I told you he's in there, didn't I? Won't you find out if you head inside?" The informant waved his hands at them in annoyance, glancing around as if worried that someone would appear at any moment.

"Well? Let's go in. Regardless of whether Zhang Lie's inside, I'm sure we'll be able to write a sensational article." Li nudged the gold-rimmed glasses on his nose, tuning their senses to the maximum. Even if Zhang Lie weren't inside the array, he would be able to expose the internal structure of these buildings, as well as the nature of the arena in which tests of strength were conducted.

The two of them walked into the array and vanished with a puff of light.

At the same time, Zhang Lie's water- and dark-attuned genetic energies merged as one, forming a pillar of light. In his forest wolfman form, Zhang Lie's hackles rose, and the pillar of light was quickly dyed a lurid red. He clenched his fist, and the pillar of genetic energy, which seemed to have come alive, moved along with it.

A mysterious aura filled the room. Opposite Zhang Lie, the tiger's wind- and flame-attuned genetic energies seemed to turn faint, as if viewed through a pair of sunglasses. Ripples spread out with Zhang Lie at the epicenter, as if he were a disturbance that had fallen into a still pond.

The illusion of a night sky blanketed them all, filled with shining stars and a radiant moon.

Zhang Lie summoned his serpent around him even as he established [Eclipse]. The serpent soared toward the skies, then wrapped around the glowing moon.

Liu Mo and his companion felt themselves being weighted down, and their genetic energy began draining precipitously from their bodies. Facing such unusual circumstances, they didn't dare charge up their blow any longer. One waved his sword, and the other his polearm.

"[Flamewind Duet]!" The tiger roared, then shot forward at Zhang Lie, propelled by its flaming wings.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" At the same time, Zhang Lie released a breath and punched forward with his fist, sending a blood-red dragon surging toward the tiger.

As the two beasts formed of genetic energy clashed with each other, the floor of the arena crumbled.

Around the glowing moon, Zhang Lie's serpent screeched, and genetic energy dissipated even more quickly from the two hunters.

"Just what kind of crazy fellow is this?!" Liu Mo felt the last drops of genetic energy being wrung from his body, and he was unable to even maintain his armor from the dimensional world any longer.

His companion was about to say something when he coughed up a mouthful of fresh blood, his body in internal disarray due to the serpent's actions.

The blood-red dragon crushed the tiger, releasing the wind- and fire-attuned genetic energy that had made up the attack. A tsunami of energy wrecked the entire arena.

The two hunters opposite Zhang Lie stared at him in shock: despite having taken the restricted potion, their strongest blow had been decisively countered by Zhang Lie.

Not only that, the blood-red dragon was heading straight in their direction.

They tried to launch a counterattack, but all their genetic energy had been drained. In growing despair, they watched the dragon coming their way.

"Quick! We have to film this scene! Look at all the destruction in the arena! That's what you'd expect from peak second-realm hunters—that Zhang Lie's a crazy strong hunter!"

Li and Liu had made their way to the arena stands, and Li's face was tinted a fiery red from the light coming from the attacks below. Liu took out a portable recording device, which would capture the entire scene unfolding beneath them.

"Li, it looks like someone's going to die! Should we stop them?"

"You want to meddle in that?! If they're fighting to the death, it means that there's something fishy going on with this test—we'd better not get involved. What's more, do you think you can block that dragon's attack?"

Li rapped Liu on the head, who yelped in pain.

The dragon descended on the two hunters facing Zhang Lie. Immediately afterwards, Zhang Lie deactivated the forest wolfman and blood ant soulshards, exposing a gaunt, pale-white face to Liu's recording orb.

The aftereffects of Zhang Lie's blood ant soulshard were really quite severe. Zhang Lie chattered as pain wracked his body, waves of exhaustion turning his limbs to stone. He barely avoided collapsing on the spot, supported only by his willpower. Of course, the strength it provided was more than enough to make the aftereffects worth bearing.

"I'll make the Wang clan pay for what they tried today, I swear it," Zhang Lie gritted out. "Just you wait—after I found my dojo, the Wang clan will perish!"

He glanced at where the two hunters had been standing—the dragon's attack hadn't left even a trace of their corpses behind. The Wang clan had clearly been targeting his life, and perhaps they would have succeeded if not for his newfound popularity shielding him from any more obvious attacks.

It looked as though he would still have to be somewhat cautious in the future, but even so, despite what the Wang clan had attempted, the final victor was Zhang Lie. He took a few minutes to recover, then left the arena with a faint smile on his face.

Only then did Li and Liu, hiding in the stands, dare to relax.

"Li, just who is this Zhang Lie? His opponents were peak second-realm hunters, weren't they? How did he destroy them so utterly with just one blow? Isn't he from the slums of Ning? He has no clan or backer! How did he get so strong?!"

Li smiled. "We're not the ones who have to be concerned with all this. More importantly, did you capture the fight in its entirety?"

"Yes, I did! It's unfortunate that we were too late to record the entire fight, but—"

"No, that last confrontation's enough. We're sure to make the headlines tomorrow—let's go! One last piece of advice for you: those in our profession succeed because of our curiosity, but it's likewise our downfall. Curb your curiosity, or it'll lead you to your death."

Li was far more practiced and experienced in this field than Liu, and he was well aware of the hidden dangers that could surface if he weren't careful. He and Liu had both been present for the fight, and he didn't want to lose his life because of Liu's incaution.

Chapter 125: Passing the Trial

"Yes, Li, I understand! In that case, are we going to publicize this recording?" Liu swallowed a gulp of saliva, realizing the significance of the footage that he had captured.

Although he hadn't recorded the entire fight, the last blow was sufficiently shocking that the recording would nevertheless spread like wildfire. Furthermore, it had even recorded the techniques that Zhang Lie was using.

"No, wait. This recording is likely worth far more than we can imagine." Li touched the rim of his glasses. His expression was calm, but his trembling palms betrayed his excitement.

"In fact, don't tell anyone about the fact that we have this recording," Li warned Liu again, who hastily nodded.

Li forced himself to remain calm as he and Liu left the testing ground. The lights flickered out, and all that remained in the arena were sparks of electricity flashing in the darkness.

Back in the building, Official Yang was resting languidly in his office, sipping a warm cup of tea as he dreamt of Zhang Lie's downfall. He glanced at the time: it had been over two hours since Zhang Lie entered the testing ground, and his corpse was likely stiff by now.

Looks like it's about time to send a few cleaners in! "Go have someone clean up the testing ground," he instructed a subordinate.

"But, sir, no one's been inside."

"So? Do as I command!" As Official Yang raised his voice, that worker rushed off toward the arena.

Meanwhile, Official Yang packed his bags and prepared to leave work for the day.

"Oh? Are you leaving already, Official Yang?"

"Yes," Official Yang responded by reflex, not paying attention to just who was speaking to him. Where to go to relax after work? Decisions, decisions...

"In that case, what shall I do about my certification?"

Official Yang froze as the owner of that voice finally registered in his head. He glanced at the door, where Zhang Lie was standing with a half-smile on his face.

"You..." Official Yang stared at Zhang Lie in shock and horror, pointing at him and gaping but unable to force out another word.

"Sir, something's gone very wrong in the testing arena. The reinforced ground's been smashed to pieces, as though a frightening battle just took place!" His subordinate returned bearing even more shocking news.

Had Zhang Lie managed to defeat two peak second-realm hunters on his own? Two?! Not only that, Zhang Lie didn't even seem the worse for wear!

"Well, Official Yang? I'd like to discuss my certification with you."

Zhang Lie sat down in the chair opposite Official Yang's.

Sweat dripped down Official Yang's back and stained his shirt. All he wanted to do was escape from the frightening hunter in the same room as him, but, faced with Zhang Lie's cool stare, his legs seemed to turn to jelly.

"Hm?" When Official Yang didn't respond, Zhang Lie frowned and seemed to grow visibly displeased.

"I'll check on the testing arena later. Leave me alone for now." Official Yang dismissed his subordinate and drummed up the courage to sit down opposite Zhang Lie, forcing out a pained smile.

He knew that his position would be in danger now that Zhang Lie had passed the trial. Given Zhang Lie's current popularity and status, if Zhang Lie were to report this incident and spur an investigation against him, he could well spend the rest of his life in prison.

In fact, if Zhang Lie wanted to be even more vicious, Zhang Lie could even kill him on the spot. Given Zhang Lie's status as a galaxy fighter, it would be viewed as rightful retribution for the crime he had committed against Zhang Lie.

At the moment, he felt a deep well of hate toward the Wang clan, who had instigated him into carrying out this series of affairs.

"Mr. Zhang, you've successfully passed the trial, and will naturally be certified as a dojo leader. If you need the certification immediately, I'd be happy to assist you at once."

Official Yang couldn't care less about the Wang clan at that moment. All that was on his mind was satisfying the galaxy fighter in front of him and preserving his own life.

Zhang Lie didn't respond. He considered his fingers in silence, leading to an awkward pause in the conversation. The tension seemed to clench a fist around Official Yang's throat, making it difficult for him to breathe.

"Of course. I am, however, quite concerned about the rigor of the test. Who knew I would have to face peak second-realm hunters, and even two of them at that?" Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed.

Official Yang clutched his armrests, not knowing how to defend himself. After all, according to plan, Zhang Lie should have perished within the arena as an 'accident'. His loss would be mourned, but that would be it.

However, Zhang Lie had walked out of that trial alive. What was he to do?! He was a galaxy fighter, and Official Yang was nothing compared to that!

"You're a rather unfortunate scapegoat, aren't you? You might have managed to get a few things with your success, but if you were to fail—well, you'd lose your job, and perhaps even your life."

Zhang Lie rapped his knuckles against the table, and his words caused Official Yang's expression to grow more and more despondent.

"Was I taken advantage of?" Official Yang murmured to himself. "The Wang clan, no, the Wang family head himself contacted me..."

"Do you have a recording?" Zhang Lie smiled, as if praising him for his deduction.

"N-No!"

"A pity, then. Prepare a recording next time." With an ambiguous smile, Zhang Lie gave him a command, seemingly resigned to letting him live.

"Yes, yes, of course, Mr. Zhang! I'll definitely record our conversations in the future!" After all, this was the only reason he had been kept alive.

Zhang Lie beamed. "In that case, I'll await your good news. I hope you aren't foolish enough to try anything funny. Once you have the certification ready, send it over to my house. I'll have my lawyer, Zhang Hong, be ready to accept it. I'll be leaving much of the dojo's affairs in her care, so I hope you'll be friendly toward her, Official Yang."

Zhang Lie sauntered out of his office.

Only then did Official Yang, his forehead now beading with copious amounts of sweat, sink down into his chair, the fat on his face trembling because of his rage. The Wang clan had almost killed him!

At the same time, back in the Wang clan's meeting room, Wang Han was seated at the top of the table with a glower on his face, as the old man with blackened teeth lay prostrate on the ground, not daring to raise his head.

"Didn't you assure me that two peak second-realm hunters, along with a bottle of restricted potion, would be all you needed to take care of Zhang Lie?!"

As Wang Han's genetic energy surged, the wizened old man trembled in fear.

However, Wang Han was equally confused as to how the two peak second-realm hunters had failed. Surely there was no way Zhang Lie could overcome such overwhelming odds against him. What could have gone wrong with the plan?

Chapter 126: Prepared for Everything

"Head, if I've failed, then that must mean that Zhang Lie has quite a few tricks up his sleeve. Please, give me another chance. I swear I'll destroy him for the Wang clan!" the wizened old man shouted, seeing that Wang Han was deep in thought.

Wang Han frowned. "That reminds me. Apparently, this lad was among the hunters who entered the Eclipse Sage's ruins. Could he have obtained the Eclipse Sage's inheritance? In addition to his father's inheritance... yes, that must be how he became so difficult to deal with! We can't leave such a thorn by our sides."

Wang Han clenched his fist so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

The reason he had such killing intent against Zhang Lie wasn't only because of what he had done to the Wang clan, but also because of the opportunities and the resources that were available to him. If the Wang clan allowed him to grow unrestrained, he would surely ruin them all.

"Head, Zhang Lie's both a galaxy fighter and a dragonsoul warrior. It'll be extremely difficult to lay a hand on him, and we'll need a few helpers to be able to do so," the old man cautioned, sneaking a peek at Wang Han's face.

"Don't worry, we just need an opportunity to strike. As for helpers—well, we're not the only clan who wants to strike back at him. Get me a few more of those restricted potions, as strong as you can make them," Wang Han instructed. His smile was reminiscent of a snake's.

"Yes, Head!" The old man bowed, clambered up, and rushed off from the conference room.

"Zhang Lie, let's see just how tough you are!"

After dealing with the dojo leader certification, Zhang Lie immediately called Zhang Hong to inform her of the good news. Then, he rushed back into the dimensional world and toward the Desert of Silence.

A few drooping figures were splayed out by the exit to the desert. Their armor was caked in grime and sand, and exhaustion lined their features.

"I can't handle it any longer," Sun Xiaowu moaned.

Given the time difference between the real and dimensional worlds, Team Zenith had spent over ten days in the desert. They had killed, rested, and killed again. The Desert of Silence was equally dangerous at night as during the day, and they had to be alert at all times.

Several species of lifeforms in the desert were particularly active, and they had honed their senses to the point where even the slightest disturbance would wake them all.

However, their hellish training had rapidly increased their superior gene fragments and tempered their abilities and techniques, and they had all made huge gains from the excursion.

"When's the captain coming back to get us?" Yang Ze wheezed. As he fought with various superior-grade lifeforms, he had gained increased understanding of both [Fists of the Silent Sea] and [The Boundless Blade], and he wanted to demonstrate that newfound knowledge to Zhang Lie.

"It's been ten days since I felt the captain's aura. I think he's left the dimensional world entirely," Sun Mengmeng responded.

Just as they were talking among themselves, they suddenly heard the rustling of footsteps from the distance. The sound wasn't particularly loud and was partially camouflaged by the howling winds of the desert, so they would have had to be listening carefully to distinguish it.

Even so, every member of Team Zenith went on full alert, circulating their genetic energy and temporarily keeping their fatigue in abeyance.

"Not bad! You've all developed greatly in just ten days." Zhang Lie trudged through the sand toward them, having deliberately made some noise to test their instincts.

He had rushed straight to the Desert of Silence after his return.

He had been delayed in the real world for a day or so, and over ten days had passed in the dimensional world. He was fearful that some incident had befallen Team Zenith, but it looked as though they were all safe and sound.

"Captain!" Sun Mengmeng and the others cried out. After seeing his reliable figure walk closer, they were all finally able to relax.

"You've all gained quite a bit of experience, as well as some superior gene fragments, it seems."

"Of course! You don't know just what we've been through these past ten days," Fang Yi said, chuckling bitterly.

"Captain, you just left us there in the middle of the desert! Weren't you afraid that something would happen?" Sun Mengmeng pouted.

"Should I have been? The six of you are all armed to the teeth. What could have happened unless you wandered into the heart of the desert?"

"Don't mention it, Captain! We were wandering around the outer boundary when we saw an unusually strong superior-grade lifeform within, and we might have died if it noticed us!"

Everyone seemed relieved to be able to share their experiences with Zhang Lie, who was shocked to hear that, after his departure, Team Zenith had stayed along the outer perimeter before daring to venture closer to the heart of the desert.

They encountered quite a few stronger superior-grade lifeforms, but were able to hide or quickly defeat the ones they encountered. Although they found themselves in a few precarious situations, they had all made it out alive.

"Captain, just you wait! We'll teach that Qin Xiao a lesson on your behalf during the Void Cup!" Yang Ze rubbed his palms, cackling confidently.

"Right, Captain, did you return to the real world? What was so urgent?" Sun Mengmeng asked. Something big had to have come up if Zhang Lie was forced to remain there for a full day.

"It was just some urgent paperwork that I had to take care of for the dojo. Don't worry, I've handled it all already! For the next few days, take some time to digest what you've gained in the Desert of Silence. I'll need all your help once the dojo's ready to open."

Zhang Lie didn't bother informing them about the trial that he had to overcome for the dojo leader's certification.

"In that case, captain, does it mean that the dojo's almost ready?"

The hunters of Team Zenith were astounded by how quickly everything had fallen into place. After all, given the stringent requirements and proceedings for founding a dojo, it was shocking that Zhang Lie had managed it all within the course of a month.

"Almost. All of you had better train hard—as my first disciples, you can't embarrass me!"

"Yes, Captain!" the hunters chorused.

"Alright. Shall we head back to the Blacksteel settlement now?" Zhang Lie turned around and began walking away, motioning for his teammates to follow after him, the evening sun lengthening their shadows as they departed.

Chapter 127: Preparing a Gift

After finally returning to the Blacksteel Inn from the Desert of Silence, Sun Mengmeng and the others quickly fell asleep. Over ten days of high-intensity hunting had taken its toll, and they were tired beyond all measure.

Zhang Lie, on the other hand, was standing motionlessly in one of the training rooms in the inn, his white attire blending in perfectly with the white paneling of the room. With his aura curtailed, it was surprisingly difficult to spot him.

As his breathing became weaker and weaker, he seemed to become a cohesive whole with the training room itself. However, just as his breath was about to expire, he suddenly opened his eyes.

His water- and darkness-attuned genetic energy circulated around his body, and his serpent took form. Its pupils were a deep green, and its forked tongue a curious purple.

The well-lit training room began to darken, as though the serpent was absorbing all the light that impinged upon it. And as the light was about to be fully extinguished, a series of ripples spread out from Zhang Lie, blanketing the room in an illusion of a starry sky and a full, radiant moon.

The serpent soared toward the moon, wrapping itself around it, diffusing the light that reflected off its scales and seemingly solidifying the darkness around it.

A leaf fell into the room through a window. The moment it entered Zhang Lie's domain, it withered instantly, then vanished in a puff of smoke.

Zhang Lie breathed out and halted the circulation of his genetic energy. The starry sky vanished, as did the glowing moon and his illusory serpent.

He clenched his fist. Before the fight with the two peak second-realm hunters, he had only briefly grasped [Eclipse]'s auxiliary domain, but during the fight, when he had somehow managed to combine the effect of his framework and the technique, [Eclipse]'s strength and power of dissolution had all been magnified.

Unfortunately, the combination of both effects was a huge drain on his reserves. His framework was still relatively low-rank, and he would only be able to sustain this combination technique for a minute or so.

"I really do need to find a way to develop my framework quickly," Zhang Lie sighed to himself.

The opening of his dojo would be the culmination of a month of hard work. After what had happened to Wang Xiaohua and the incident at the venombane glade, Zhang Lie had established quite a few enemies, and he was certain they would try to stir something up then.

Back on Earth, in the slums of Ning, as the first rays of dawn shone on the bleak, gray buildings nearby, the residents of the slums were starting another dreary day.

However, today was more special than most: the whirrs and hums of all sorts of robots had roused the residents awake, and they were wondering what was causing the commotion. The buildings all around Zhang Lie's house were being torn down, and smoke and dust filled the air.

Such was the size of the destruction that the residents were all stunned by the sight.

"What's going on? Is the government going to be developing the slums?"

"What? Haven't you read the news? That house belongs to the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"What? That Zhang Lie, the one who's been in the news? He's from Ning, and he's even from the slums? Surely that can't be true!"

"You're really far behind the times, aren't you? It's perfectly true, and his background's already been vetted by all sorts of media sources! Furthermore, I even heard that he'll be building a dojo right here in the slums."

"A dojo? You're joking, aren't you? Isn't he only in his twenties? Is he qualified to start his own dojo?"

"Of course he is! You realize that he's a dragonsoul warrior and a galaxy fighter—with those two titles in hand, he can basically do what he wants!"

"Ah, in that case, what's going to happen to us?"

"Whatever's coming our way, I doubt it can make our lives worse."

The residents of the slums felt as though they were indelibly marked as lower-class citizens. Many of them dreamt of accomplishing great achievements and elevating their status, but their upbringing and environment deterred them from this lofty goal.

And yet, despite all odds, a youth who had to care for his disabled sister had done just that. His accomplishments at such a young age and without any semblance of an illustrious background to speak of shocked and caused envy in those around him.

"Heh, my daughter's just turned 19, and our house is right by Zhang Lie's..."

"Pshaw! You think your daughter'll stand a chance against those highbred women from the major clans?"

It seemed as though everyone around was discussing the construction happening around them.

News that Zhang Lie was constructing a dojo in the slums of Ning spread throughout China, and even the world federation. Quite a few curious people in or close to Ning even came to observe what was happening. If the dojo was receiving such publicity before it had even been completed, what would the opening day be like?

Of course, there were those who couldn't stand hearing about Zhang Lie's success.

Qin Zongming's face was seething with rage. As he smashed a fist down on a nearby table, it splintered and cracked. "He's starting a dojo, is he?!" Qin Zongming thundered.

The elders gathered around him knew what that implied.

In modern times, dojos were sources of strength, as well as one of the easiest means by which a faction could easily grow strong. Some of the more prestigious and established dojos boasted power comparable to a few ancient clans.

A fair number of disciples viewed their mentor as more important than their own clan, and even those that didn't would place mentor and clan on nearly equal footing.

Once Zhang Lie's dojo was open, he would quickly develop a mass of followers and grow significantly in strength. As long as he didn't die, countless hotblooded youths would flock to his dojo and form the basis and foundation of his power. And once he reached the apex of his growth, even without the protection of the federation and Chinese government, the Qin clan would be powerless against him.

"Head, don't worry: the dojo hasn't been constructed, and whether or not it'll ever be finished will depend on us major clans," the sixth elder, Qin Feng, advised. A few other elders immediately agreed with his viewpoint.

"A dojo requires considerable resources to found, and if it were to fail, then so would this poor lad's reputation!" Qin Zongming murmured to himself, the details of a devious plan swimming through his head. "Yes, you're quite right. In that case, the day of his dojo's opening, we'll send him a generous gift, won't we?"

Chapter 128: A Combination Present

After the discovery of the Eclipse Sage's ruins and subsequent Kez invasion, the name of the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie had become a fixture in the discussions and meetings of the five major clans of the capital. Now that news of Zhang Lie's dojo had spread, the major clans were starting to take action.

At the heart of the Chu clan, the elder Chu clan head, Chu Buyu, sat watching the footage of Zhang Lie's fight during the Kez invasion at the capital.

"He used to be last place on the gene leaderboard in the Blacksteel Settlement, you say? And now he's the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, whose name has spread far and wide across the continent."

Chu Buyu's eyes were filled with curiosity.

"His achievements are shocking indeed, but trying to found a dojo in Ning just based on his newfound fame is hardly a wise decision," the Chu clan's first elder, Chu He, commented.

Chu Buyu didn't respond. He turned toward the elders gathered in the room.

Zhang Lie held a rather curious position in the Chu clan: they had suffered because of his scheme at the venombane glade in the dimensional world, but they had also gained a considerable amount from working with him. After all, he had been the sole reason that the Chu scions had learned about the foundational breakthrough and gained an edge over those from the other clans.

"Head, Zhang Lie and I are on good terms, and I'm sure I don't have to expound on the benefits he's brought to the clan. His potential is nigh-unlimited, and if we support the founding of his dojo, I'm sure he'll be a strong ally in the future," Chu Feng persuaded.

"Right, he's really strong!" Chu Xun pumped a fist into the air.

"Young head, this affair could well affect all the major clans of the capital, and we can't jump to hasty conclusions just because of your claims," an elder spoke up against Chu Feng. "Not only has Zhang Lie offended the Li, Wang, and Qin clans, he even sowed enmity with the Zhou, He, and Qian clans over what happened in the Eclipse Sage's ruins. If we were to defend him now, we might well be targeted by all the clans opposed to him. This would severely impact our future growth and development! As a result, I propose that we attend Zhang Lie's ceremony, but do so as a neutral party."

As a neutral party? What a ridiculous notion! Chu Feng clenched his fists. It had taken him considerable effort to build up a relationship with Zhang Lie, so how could the clan break it off just like that?

"Head, Zhang Lie defeated a three-star black-tipped scarab alone, and he'll likely be groomed by both the world federation and Chinese government!" Chu Feng clearly wasn't about to give up just yet.

"In that case, if the world federation's guarding him, what need is there for the Chu clan?" another elder suggested. Most of the Chu elders observed the argument without participating in it; there were only a scant few elders siding with Chu Feng, but the final decision lay in Chu Buyu's hands.

"We'll end discussion on this matter now. There's no need for the Chu clan to get involved at the moment. Let us watch the spectacle unfold."

It was true that Zhang Lie had significant potential, but he would have to live for that potential to blossom. Otherwise, he would be nothing but a casualty in the path toward strength.

To Chu Buyu, it wasn't worth the gamble to simultaneously offend the Qin, Li, Wang, Zhou, He, and Qian clans for a supposed genius from the slums.

However, Zhang Lie's breakthroughs represented significant potential for investment, and Chu Buyu didn't want to sour relationships between them either. Waiting and remaining neutral would be the safest, most stable option.

Chu Feng was dismayed by Chu Buyu's decision, certain that the Chu clan was giving up on an irreplaceable resource by choosing not to side with Zhang Lie, but he had no means of countering Chu Buyu's decision.

The same scenario was occurring in the Yun clan, where Yun Bing was red-faced from arguing in favor of Zhang Lie. Her opinion was essentially identical to Chu Feng's, but no one of power in their clans had observed Zhang Lie for themselves.

"Dad, please reconsider!" Yun Bing pleaded.

"Young head, you must take the future of the clan more seriously! Do you intend for the Yun clan to go the way of the Qin? Zhang Lie's a target for many of the major clans of the capital and Ning, and the safest option is for us to remain neutral."

Many of the elders were against her, and no matter how much Yun Bing wracked her brain to defend Zhang Lie, she was bound to lose.

"Don't you know what Zhang Lie represents?" Yun Bing called out.

The elders departed without looking back at her.

"He's the future, the future of Earth, as well as the future of humanity!"

The relationship that Yun Bing and Chu Feng had barely managed to forge with Zhang Lie could well be dissolved in light of their clans' decisions today.

"Sister, there's no helping it. The elders won't listen to you; they haven't seen Zhang Lie for themselves! But don't you worry, regardless of what the clan does, I won't stand by while Zhang Lie needs my help!" Yun Meng stamped her feet as she glanced toward the door.

Yun Bing looked up. Yun Meng was right: even if the clan's position was to remain neutral, that didn't mean that she had to do the same!

The clan's decision was logical and understandable: Zhang Lie would be a valuable resource, but the risk that the clans had to undertake was far too large. Without having a better understanding of him, they wouldn't choose to take that risk.

In the Wang manor in Ning, three figures were seated by a large table, three steaming cups of tea placed in front of each of them—the heads of the Wang, Qin, and Li clans.

"For what purpose have you requested our presence, head of the Wang clan?" Qin Zongming spoke up, breaking the silence. He had been the first to receive Wang Han's invitation.

Although the three clans shared a common enemy, they had had friction with each other in the past, and it was still difficult for them to peaceably plot for Zhang Lie's downfall.

Qin Zongming had left quite a few guards outside the Wang manor, and the head of the Li clan, Li Mo, was likewise alert. He too had a few forces gathered outside the manor.

On the other hand, the Wang head had met them alone.

"Please, don't worry. The matters of the past were nothing more than a misunderstanding, and I intend to let bygones be bygones. I've invited both of you here for a pressing matter: the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie."

Wang Han took a sip of tea. Qin Zongming and Li Mo's expressions had soured the moment Zhang Lie's name was brought up, but they certainly seemed much less wary than before.

Sensing the shift in the mood, Wang Han quickly continued, "He's been recognized by both the world federation and the Chinese government, and we won't be able to strike back at him directly. We've all suffered at his hands, and none of us will rest easily while he still lives. Dealing with him is surely a top priority for all of us."

Qin Zongming agreed with Wang Han, but he had his own pawns in play.

Even if he were to seek out an ally, he didn't want to work with the Wang clan, because they hadn't been cleared of suspicion for involvement in the Qin clan's downfall.

"He is indeed a pressing concern, but I have no need of allies to defeat him. If there is nothing more, I shall bid you both farewell." The proud Qin Zongming rose up from his seat, intending to leave.

"Don't look down on that lad. I sent two peak second-realm hunters against him, both having ingested a restricted potion in advance, and there wasn't even a trace of their corpses left behind," Wang Han said, causing Qin Zongming to freeze.

Chapter 129: Completion of the Dojo

Wang Han's words rattled around Qin Zongming's brain, though he didn't let any of that emotion show on his face. He knew full well what Wang Han's words meant: Zhang Lie's strength was far greater than it appeared at first glance.

"Wang Han, you're not joking, are you?" Qin Zongming sat back down.

"Joking? Do you think I look like I'm joking? What's more, a three-star scarab is on the level of a peak second-realm hunter, isn't it?" Wang Han shook his head ruefully. If he were joking, why would he have sent for Li Mo and Qin Zongming?

"A troublesome affair indeed," Li Mo murmured, his brows furrowing. As the Li clan head, he knew that there was no reason for Wang Han to joke around. And while Qin Zongming shared the same sentiment deep down, he simply couldn't digest this reality.

"Furthermore, the two peak second-realm hunters I sent out were a coordinated pair, and strong even among peak second-realm hunters," Wang Han added. The table fell silent as Qin Zongming and Li Mo digested Wang Han's shocking information.

After all, if Zhang Lie really were that strong, then they surely had to get rid of him as soon as possible. Even if they had to suffer a blow to their reputation, getting rid of Zhang Lie was now of paramount importance.

"I'm sure he must be a significant burden to both of you as well. If you don't take him down, will you really be able to rest in peace?" Wang Han continued. If not for Zhang Lie's stunning growth, nor the protection afforded him by the two titles he had recently received, he would hardly have convened this meeting with the Li and Qin heads.

Qin Zongming raised an eyebrow. At this point, it was obvious what Wang Han was proposing: a coalition of the three clans, working together to get rid of Zhang Lie! It was honestly ludicrous that they had to devote such resources for a single first-realm hunter.

"Please, consider my proposal. If he wins the Void Cup, or if he ascends to the second realm, then..."

Wang Han allowed the two other clan heads to fill in the details on their own.

Qin Zongming's frown marred his face. The enmity between the Qin clan and Zhang Lie grew deep: if not for Zhang Lie, Qin Xiao wouldn't have been expelled from the clan, and the Qin clan wouldn't have suffered such retaliation from the other major clans of the Blacksteel settlement.

Zhang Lie had gone from the bottom of the gene leaderboard to Dragonwolf in just a few months, and his growth rate was incredible. If he were to extrapolate Zhang Lie's growth for another few months...

Qin Zongming's back turned cold. Wang Han wouldn't have called them over if he had no other choice, and Qin Zongming now understood why.

"But if we want to deal with that fellow, we'll have to go against the world federation and Chinese government. What do you propose?" Li Mo brought up the most pressing concern to him; it was out of fear of those two entities that the Li clan hadn't yet moved against Zhang Lie.

"It's true that we can't strike at him directly, but if we do it indirectly?" Wang Han replied, having anticipated the question.

Just like Li Mo, Qin Zongming also frowned. They had entertained such a suggestion before, but Zhang Lie was sly and difficult to get ahold of. He spent much of his time in the dimensional world, and was otherwise difficult to track down.

"His dojo's about to open, yes? The dojo consortium establishes that the dojo leader can be challenged up to three times on the opening day, and if something were to happen then, surely there's no one else to blame but the dojo leader himself. Even if there really were an investigation, do you think the government would crack down on all three of our clans just for a lone hunter who hasn't grown to his full potential?" Wang Han began, the tendrils of a plan forming in his mind.

Qin Zongming and Li Mo's eyes gleamed.

"An interesting point of attack," Qin Zongming mused, the corners of his lips curling up.

Wang Han smiled thinly.

"In that case, it's settled."

"Farewell!"

Qin Zongming and Li Mo stood up. They hadn't worked out an exhaustive plan of attack yet, but the matter was otherwise settled.

The final preparations for the founding of Zhang Lie's dojo represented the calm before the storm. Both in the dimensional world and in the real world, Zhang Lie encountered almost no problems at all, and his dojo steadily took shape.

However, Zhang Hong, who had recently been promoted to legal consultant for the Zenith Dojo, felt a curious sense of unease.

Although Zhang Lie had informed her that his dojo leader's certification would be ready for her shortly, she was still a little concerned because of the extremely negative reception she had received when she approached the Ning branch of the dojo consortium.

Just then, a hovercar landed outside her office. Official Yang stepped out, confirmed that this was where Zhang Hong worked, and hurried inside with a document in his hands. After taking a deep breath, he knocked on her door.

That knock startled Zhang Hong out of her thoughts.

"Please come in."

She shook her head and put on a professional smile.

"It's good to see you, Lawyer Zhang." As Official Yang walked in with a smile, Zhang Hong gasped. The day she had gone to the Ning branch of the dojo consortium to deal with paperwork, he had been so arrogant that it had left a lasting impression on her.

"Official Yang? Please, have a seat." Although she was confused by the sudden shift in his attitude, Zhang Hong still gave him a professional greeting, and she had her assistant prepare some tea for him.

Official Yang sank down onto her sofa, a smile still plastered on his face, seeming a little reserved all of a sudden. "I'm here to bring you Mr. Zhang Lie's dojo leader certification. The process was a little complicated, so it took longer than I'd have liked."

He carefully placed a document on the tea table, along with a microchip and a sheaf of papers.

"Indeed, the dojo consortium's paperwork is quite complicated." Zhang Hong's eyes widened. As she flipped through the documents, she found that all the paperwork had already been completed for her.

Everything was ready! She expected that running around to get all the miscellaneous signatures required would be a rather arduous process, but Official Yang had saved her all that trouble. The Zenith Dojo, which Zhang Lie was intending to construct, was now recognized by both the world federation and the Chinese government.

"Official Yang, thank you, I can't thank you enough!" Zhang Hong was elated by the sudden reversal in his behavior.

"No, it's no problem at all. Now that this matter's been resolved, please inform Mr. Zhang that I've handled the matter satisfactorily, and I hope he'll be able to forgive me this once." Official Yang licked his parched lips as he awaited Zhang Hong's response.

Just what had Zhang Lie done to cause such a dramatic shift in Official Yang's personality?

"Yes, Official Yang, of course I'll do that."

"In that case, I'll have to thank you in advance, Lawyer Zhang." Official Yang breathed out in relief. He prayed that Zhang Lie would let him go now that he had gotten the certification he wanted. "I'll be off now."

Official Yang inclined his head to her as he headed outside her office.

Zhang Hong's assistant came back into the room with tea just in time to see Official Yang leave, and was so surprised by his deference that she almost dropped her tea.

Once he was out of the office, she immediately turned to Zhang Hong. "What's going on, Miss Zhang? Why are the people from the dojo consortium treating you so respectfully?"

"Ha, it's respect toward Mr. Zhang, not me!"

Zhang Hong thought back to Zhang Lie's youthful appearance. She really was quite curious how he had managed to go so far in so short a period of time—it seemed like yesterday that he had barely managed to afford the house he was living in.

She was blessed to have met someone like him before his prime.

Subsequently, she contacted Zhang Lie to inform him of the good news. "Mr. Zhang, the dojo leader's certification is ready, and the construction of the dojo is itself finishing up. We'll be ready for the grand opening in at most a week!"

"That quickly? It looks like Official Yang works pretty quickly when he's motivated to." He cut the connection, smirking. As he stretched, he breathed out. Now that the dojo's opening day was imminent, he would have to temporarily pause his training.

After washing up, he headed toward where the other members of Team Zenith were training.

Zhang Lie was rather surprised that his teammates were so insistent on training; he had expected that they would take some time off after their grueling experience in the Desert of Silence, but they had all continued their training regimens the same way he did.

The encounters they had overcome within the Desert of Silence and during the Kez invasion had made them well aware of how weak they were in the grand scheme of things, and how much hard work still lay ahead of them.

"Captain!" The moment Yang Ze, sweating profusely, noticed his appearance, he immediately restrained his aura.

Within the Desert of Silence, he had gained a deeper understanding of [Fists of the Silent Sea]. That, combined with the countless demonstrations Zhang Lie had shown him, had led to an evolution in his application of the technique, and he even seemed to be able to replicate the variants that Zhang Lie had shown off in the footage of his fight during the Kez invasion.

"Alright, everyone, prepare to return to Earth!" Zhang Lie called out.

Was the dojo finally finished? The hunters' eyes gleamed.

As they left the teleportation array and saw the completed form of the Zenith Dojo for the first time, Sun Xiaowu and the others let out a surprised gasp.

Black steel walls and a gateway arch constructed in the style of yore heralded an expansive dojo that dwarfed the buildings around it. By the entrance, on a slab of gleaming stone, were engraved the words 'Zenith Dojo'.

Chapter 130: An Audience with Su Feng

If not for these words—Dojo Zenith—the hunters of Team Zenith might have thought that they had mistakenly teleported somewhere else.

"Welcome back, Mr. Zhang!" The moment they stepped out of the portal, Zhang Hong welcomed them with a beaming smile. She held a pile of documents in her hands, most of which had something to do with the dojo.

Zhang Lie looked them over while his teammates began exploring the interior of the dojo. It was extremely large, and adorned in rather austere shades of gray.

"Thank you for your help and time, Ms. Zhang. These documents look good to me." Zhang Lie returned the documents to her.

"Oh, no, I haven't done much at all! In the end, you still had to step in..." Zhang Hong tucked an errant curl of hair behind her ear, her lips raised in a rather embarrassed smile.

"No, don't say that. What happened with Official Yang was an exception, and you've done a superlative job overall," Zhang Lie affirmed. "I intend to have the dojo open sometime this month, and I'll let you know the date once I decide on it."

"Yes, Mr. Zhang!" Zhang Hong nodded, then turned to leave.

"Captain, the dojo's all ready, isn't it? What are you waiting for?" Sun Xiaowu asked, after Zhang Hong left.

The other hunters of Team Zenith all looked toward him. They understood very well what a dojo represented on Earth.

"I'm just giving a certain few people some time to prepare a gift for me," Zhang Lie explained vaguely, his eyes gleaming.

The Wang clan had already tried to get rid of him during the dojo leader's trial of strength, and he was certain that they, along with the Li and Qin clans, would surely strike again now that news of the imminent founding of his dojo was spreading far and wide.

They might be wary of him because of the titles and honors he had received, but the day of the dojo's opening ceremony would be an exception: it would be perfectly reasonable for them to challenge him then.

"I'll leave all of you to keep an eye on the dojo for a moment. There's something I need to handle elsewhere," Zhang Lie suddenly said, then headed out of the dojo.

He had almost walked out toward the entrance when he found it crowded by a throng of people. All manner of fans from Ning and even farther away were trying to catch Zhang Lie's attention and hollering about the requirements to become one of Zhang Lie's disciples.

He turned around once again and headed toward a back door.

"Does our newest dojo leader need to escape out of his own dojo?"

The moment he stepped outside, he heard a short burst of laughter: it was Chu Feng. Beside him, Yun Bing inclined her head toward Zhang Lie.

"Ah, Young Master Chu! What brings you here today?"

"You know how much attention your dojo's been drawing from all around the country, don't you?" Chu Feng asked, dropping the pleasantries.

Zhang Lie frowned. He knew that his enemies were sure to take action, but judging from Chu Feng's behavior, their plans would be more annoying to handle than he had initially assumed. Indeed, he hadn't expected that Chu Feng would reach out to him so quickly to make him aware of the news.

"Let them come. Without a storm, whence the rainbow?" Zhang Lie replied calmly.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing were rather shocked by Zhang Lie's indifference. After all, as members of major clans themselves, they knew how difficult it would be to handle the onslaught from the Wang, Li, and Qin clans, even for a genius like Zhang Lie. A clan had a wealth of resources that an ordinary hunter could only dream of.

Given Chu Feng's understanding of Zhang Lie, Chu Feng was certain that he wouldn't behave in this manner if he weren't completely confident of his success. He looked Zhang Lie over again, wondering just what shocking secrets a hunter like him could be hiding.

"Be careful, Zhang Lie. It's not just the Qin, Wang, and Li clans who are after you," Yun Bing advised, her face serious.

"Not just three? Well, no matter. I'll handle them all in one fell swoop." Zhang Lie was confident that he would have been able to handle even a joint assault from the Qin, Wang, and Li clans, but if more were to join in, he might need to make a few more preparations.

He simply hadn't expected that the three clans would be able to work together to defeat him in light of their enmity with each other.

"Thank you for the information, Miss Yun, Young Master Chu."

"Be careful, Zhang Lie. We're on Earth, not the dimensional world!" Chu Feng warned him again, but Zhang Lie continued to smile.

"Yes, I understand. I'm about to head out now, but you're welcome to take a tour around the dojo. I'll treat you both to a drink when I return."

Chu Feng and Yun Bing glanced at each other, then nodded and entered the dojo together, glancing around curiously as they did so.

"Is he really not worried about the clans' revenge?" Chu Feng murmured.

"There's no reason for us to worry. We've brought him the information, and I'm sure he'll be able to handle it on its own," Yun Bing assured him, her voice surprisingly confident.

"You think so? Well, I suppose I'm a little excited for what'll happen during the opening ceremony now." Chu Feng's own achievements paled when compared to someone like Zhang Lie.

"Let's head inside and see just what this dojo's like," Yun Bing suggested. "Honestly, I can't believe our clans aren't going to support him."

Yun Bing sighed, shaking her head. She and Chu Feng were the only ones in their clans who really knew what Zhang Lie was like, as well as what their clans were losing out on by not making him an ally.

Zhang Lie was making his way toward the outskirts of Ning. In about half an hour, relying on his past life's memory, he arrived at a fort that was half-shrouded by mountains. The exterior of the fort was painted pitch-black. There were a number of hidden sentries watching the vicinity, as well as countless miniature spider-like surveillance robots.

The Blackwind Fort was an existence not known to many, and its soldiers would only emerge when Ning was under threat. Naturally, most ordinary citizens weren't allowed near the area.

"This region is occupied by the military. Do not draw near!" Quite a few miniature robots had gathered by Zhang Lie and alerted the patrolling soldiers nearby, two of whom rushed toward Zhang Lie with formidable auras around themselves.

Zhang Lie had been wearing a mask in order to avoid attracting attention, and neither of these sentries recognized him.

After seeing the sentries approach, he raised his palms and took a few steps back, but showed no sign of departing.

Who is this guy? The two sentries frowned. "Access to this area is prohibited to ordinary citizens. Leave at once!"

Zhang Lie glanced at the fort. He wouldn't leave; this was his intended destination, after all. If he successfully founded his dojo in Ning, it would be the nexus of his power. The Qin, Li, and Wang clans would certainly do all they could to prevent him from doing so.

Considering how impactful the opening of his dojo could be, the other clans might even resort to underhanded tactics and give up on their reputation in order to secure his downfall.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing's arrival at the dojo that day had essentially told Zhang Lie what the stance of the Chu and Yun clans was, and he would have to make a few more preparations of his own.

"I'm here to see Commander-in-Chief Su Feng," Zhang Lie told the sentries, who turned to each other in surprise. Su Feng was the highest-ranking soldier in the entire Blackwind Fort. Was he someone an ordinary civilian could meet at will?

"Don't be ridiculous. If you're going to continue wasting our time..." One of the sentries cocked a pistol, prepared to point it at him following his next transgression.

Zhang Lie raised an eyebrow as he removed the mask on his face.

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie?!"

"Can I meet Commander-in-Chief Su Feng now?" Zhang Lie pressed.

The two sentries glanced at each other again. Zhang Lie's name was well-known in Ning, but even he wouldn't be able to meet with Su Feng on account of his status alone.

"Don't worry. Just report that I have an urgent matter that requires his attention immediately."

Zhang Lie's act of heroism had made him extremely popular among the civilians, and especially the soldiers in Ning. His indomitable stature and penetrating gaze shook the hearts of all who had seen the footage of his fight. The sentries couldn't take his sudden appearance at the Blackwind Fort lightly.

"Please give us a moment. We'll report to our commander immediately." One of the two sentries rushed toward the fort. The other asked, "Dragonwolf, may I ask you a question?"

Zhang Lie nodded, and the soldier continued, "Were you really not frightened of facing a three-star black-tipped scarab as a first-realm hunter?"

The youthful sentry's somewhat naive question made Zhang Lie smile. "Fortune favors the bold, after all. I knew I had to act; I didn't have time to be frightened."