

U. Warlord 131

Chapter 131: The Blackwind Fort

Zhang Lie had only won against the three-star scarab because of a large number of compounding factors: his numerous superior-grade soulshards, limit fragments, and rare techniques being the most important.

However, acquiring even one, let alone all, of these factors would be challenging to an ordinary hunter, and he certainly couldn't reveal any of them hastily, so all he could say was something vaguely inspiring.

"Is that so? You're really courageous— if I were to charge in like that, I'm sure I'd have lost my life." This particular sentry seemed rather talkative, perhaps because he was interested in meeting Zhang Lie, and the two of them struck up a conversation.

At the same time, deep within the Blackwind Fort, a middle-aged man was staring at a screen with a serious expression on his face, on which the footage of the Kez invasion was being shown.

Although it had already been a few days since the invasion and the citizens of the capital were slowly returning to their old routines, this matter was still of paramount importance for the Chinese military.

Why had the Kez suddenly invaded the capital? Did they have a special strategy planned? Or was it a coincidence, a mistake? The military would have to study this event in great detail to avoid having it happen again.

However, just as he was preparing to analyze the footage again, a soldier rushed into the room. "Commander-in-Chief, Dragonwolf Zhang Lie's requesting an audience with you!"

"Zhang Lie?"

What a curious coincidence that a hero of the invasion would want to speak with him right this moment.

"Yes, Commander-in-Chief!"

Su Feng frowned. "Did he explain why?"

"No, Commander! He only mentioned that it was an urgent affair."

"Have him wait for me at the training ground."

"Yes, Commander!"

Since the Kez invasion, Zhang Lie's name had spread far and wide, and even someone like Su Feng was interested in how Zhang Lie would grow in the future. Zhang Lie had no background to speak of, and he was only in the first realm of the dimensional world, and these factors made his accomplishments even more impressive.

Most importantly, Zhang Lie had shown a soldier's temperament during his fight against the three-star scarab.

"Hand me Zhang Lie's dossier." Su Feng had an inkling as to the purpose of Zhang Lie's visit.

Not too long afterwards, one of his lieutenants returned with the requested documents. As Su Feng activated the microchip, a holographic screen appeared with relevant articles and information.

"Hoh, he makes a mess wherever he goes, doesn't he? Enemy of the Qin, Wang, and Li clans, and he's still trying to found a dojo in Ning..." Su Feng murmured to himself, chuckling as he did so.

After waiting outside the fortress for some time, a sentry finally approached Zhang Lie.

"Dragonwolf, please follow me. According to Commander-in-Chief Su Feng's orders, you'll meet him at the training ground."

The sentries standing alongside him moved aside, and Zhang Lie made his way into the Blackwind Fort.

"Why do you think the Dragonwolf's here to talk to the Commander-in-Chief?"

"How would I know? But given his nature, I'm sure it must be something important, something that concerns Ning or even all of China!"

"Hah, you've just had a brief conversation with him, and you think you can speak about his nature?"

"Of course! The Dragonwolf's a hero of Ning, after all."

The two sentries idly chatted as they continued patrolling the perimeter.

Meanwhile, Zhang Lie glanced around him as the soldier led him deeper into the fort. The Blackwind Fort was far more secure and tightly patrolled than a regular military outpost.

Even within the fort, he could see scores of soldiers walking around the area, as well as countless miniaturized robots. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that even a fly wouldn't be able to get inside without being spotted.

"Wait here," the soldier instructed. After about ten minutes or so, Zhang Lie had arrived at the training ground, a stage so large that a thousand hunters could simultaneously be on it. The arena's boundaries were inlaid with spears and swords, and it seemed to be sacrosanct to the gathered soldiers.

There was no one around but sentries, so Zhang Lie could only wait by the side of the arena. As the minutes ticked away, Zhang Lie began to grow impatient; how much longer would he have to wait?

"Are youth so impatient these days?"

Just as he was about to inquire about the situation with a nearby guard, he heard a voice from behind, as well as a piercing stare. It felt as though a humongous boulder were pressing down on his body.

Was this a show of strength? Well, he could reciprocate. Zhang Lie circulated his genetic energy around his body, releasing a black mist that darkened the surroundings as he stood up straight once more.

Su Feng's expression grew more serious. As expected, Zhang Lie was a surprisingly strong hunter.

"Not bad. With your strength, it's no wonder that you were able to defeat a three-star black-tipped scarab."

The commander-in-chief of the Blackwind Fort, Su Feng, was dressed in sharp military attire, his features hard and weathered, his eyes as piercing as an eagle's, giving off the impression of a honed blade.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes slightly, returning Su Feng's stare with one of his own. This was their first encounter with each other, and he had to be wary of Su Feng's attitude toward him.

"Don't worry. As a dragonsoul warrior, you don't have to worry that I'll do anything to you. Indeed, I have to praise your performance during that fight with the three-star scarab."

Su Feng smiled. He did want to seem stern and imposing in front of Zhang Lie, but Zhang Lie's personality and unwillingness to back down reminded him far too much of his own brashness as a youth.

"Thank you, Commander."

As Su Feng relaxed, so too did Zhang Lie.

"I heard that you have urgent news for me?"

"Yes, Commander!"

"About what?"

"This is highly sensitive information. Should I reveal it here?"

"Follow me." Su Feng beckoned toward Zhang Lie as he strode away from the arena. The two of them headed toward the center of the fort, which seemed to grow more spacious.

Many military outposts were constructed using stealth-based technology, and though the surroundings looked like ordinary desert, there were quite a few battle-tuned hovercrafts hovering around the area, as well as a few stationed battleships. From these preparations, it was clear that the soldiers of Ning were always ready for a sudden attack.

For a moment, Zhang Lie felt as though he were back in the Desert of Silence.

Su Feng continued walking forward, his uniform battered by wind and sand. The sand shone in the sunlight like a golden ocean, and Su Feng narrowed his eyes as he glanced up at the sun.

"It's time," he murmured.

The ground began to shudder. A hole opened up in the sands right before him, and a magnificent structure emerged from the desert. Sand poured down its exterior in a wave of gold.

As the sand flowed down the structure, its shape became obvious. The exterior was colored exactly like the golden sand, but the bottom of the structure, hidden deep within the desert, was a matte black.

The fact that this structure was hidden so expertly was testament to its importance.

Zhang Lie glanced at Su Feng with some shock. This was the first time they had met, but he was already bringing Zhang Lie to the operations room for the entire fort?

"You're a dragonsoul warrior, so you have the qualifications to enter," Su Feng explained.

The structure was still rising upward. With a loud crack, part of the structure detached and fell down via a hinge toward Su Feng: a metal drawbridge.

"Let's go. This is the most secure region in the Blackwind Fort, and I assure you that whatever information you provide will remain secure here."

Su Feng motioned for Zhang Lie to walk over the drawbridge with him. As soon as they entered the structure, it trembled again, then sank back down into the depths of the desert. Within moments, there seemed to be nothing unusual about that patch of desert at all.

The temperature of the interior was cool, a pleasant contrast to the hot winds of the desert. An illuminated corridor snaked forward into the unknown.

Su Feng continued walking forward, and Zhang Lie followed quickly behind. As they passed by a few tunnels, Zhang Lie could see quite a few gun-wielding hunters patrolling around the region.

"These are the top hunters in the Blackwind Fort," Su Feng explained, seeing that Zhang Lie's attention was fixated upon them.

Zhang Lie nodded. If he hadn't entered together with Su Feng, these soldiers would likely have attacked him at once.

Even more surprisingly to him, many of the soldiers were peak second-realm hunters, and there were even a few whose genetic energy he couldn't even sense at all—and these were only the reserve troops of Ning!

There was surely more than met the eye to the Blackwind Fort, and they had still yet to reach the command room proper. It was hard for Zhang Lie to imagine just how strong the soldiers who guarded the command room would be.

However, it didn't seem as though he would get a chance to find out. Su Feng brought Zhang Lie through a side corridor and into a sealed meeting room.

Chapter 132: The Military's Attention

After the two of them walked inside, passing through a series of crisscrossing red beams, the robotic door slammed shut with an ominous groan.

The soldiers inside bowed to and saluted Su Feng, then sat down and glanced curiously at Zhang Lie. He had been recognized the moment he entered. After all, his name was currently surging in popularity in the aftermath of the Kez invasion.

"Have a seat. These are my trusted followers, and anything you can say to me, you can say to them." Su Feng pointed at the conference table, patted Zhang Lie on the shoulder, and bade him sit.

The others had already been curious about Zhang Lie, but now they were staring at him with wide eyes. After all, none of them had ever seen Su Feng behave so familiarly with a young man.

Zhang Lie looked around him: there were actually only five others gathered in the room.

"This lad mentioned something about highly sensitive information, so I brought him here," Su Feng explained. The others all looked surprised, but none of them said a word.

"Well? Will you reveal what you know now?" Su Feng prompted, as everyone stared expectantly at Zhang Lie.

The public might have thought that his fight during the Kez invasion was impressive, but only these soldiers knew just how impressive it was. If they were in his shoes, they might not have been able to replicate his feat; in fact, even Su Feng himself didn't think he could do the same!

"Very well." Zhang Lie's gaze turned firm. "First, a question for everyone gathered here: how large is a hunter's gene capacity?"

"What? Even a three-year-old child could tell you that the capacity is a hundred fragments!" someone shouted, and the others nodded in agreement.

"Yes, what do you mean by asking us this? Do you mean that the answer to this question has something to do with your defeating that three-star black-tipped scarab?" a slightly older general queried.

Zhang Lie's lips quirked up. Su Feng had remained silent all this time, well aware that Zhang Lie wasn't finished.

"That three-year-old child would be wrong. You can have more than a hundred gene fragments of any type," Zhang Lie stated firmly.

"You must be joking! This goes against information that the world federation itself has provided. Dragonwolf, if this is a joke..." a soldier yelled out, staring at Zhang Lie angrily. Even Su Feng seemed a little doubtful. After all, what Zhang Lie said went against everything they knew.

"Silence!" Su Feng finally yelled out. The surge of genetic energy that accompanied his yell quelled the disturbance.

Su Feng didn't believe what Zhang Lie was stating, but he was quite certain that Zhang Lie wouldn't be lying under such circumstances. As a result, no matter how difficult he found Zhang Lie's words were to believe, he didn't contradict him outright.

"Continue," Su Feng stated, a warning glint in his eyes.

"Yes, you've all heard what I said correctly, and I'm not joking with any of you. I don't know just what the maximum capacity is, but it certainly isn't a hundred—I have over a hundred basic gene fragments!"

Zhang Lie's proclamation stunned the room.

The maximum capacity... wasn't a hundred fragments? This was the reason that Zhang Lie was able to defeat a three-star black-tipped scarab as a first-realm hunter?

"For spouting such nonsense, I intend to request that your designation as dragonsoul warrior be rescinded!"

"And I, your title of galaxy fighter as well!"

Two of the more staunchly conservative members of the group stood up again from the table, unable to bear listening to Zhang Lie's ludicrous words any longer.

Zhang Lie barely restrained himself from shaking his head. In his past life, the appearance of limit fragments had likewise been discredited by a conservative faction of hunters. There had been quite

a few soldiers among their rank; when the truth was revealed to one and all, their behavior made them seem like clowns.

"Do you have evidence of your claims?" Su Feng's heart thudded. If Zhang Lie were right, his discovery would herald a new golden age of hunters.

The two conservative soldiers sat back down, staring stonily at Zhang Lie. If he were unable to produce proof for his assertions, they would disparage him without any mercy. To lie in the sanctum of the most important military base in Ning would incur a commensurate punishment.

"There are many ways of validating what I've said," Zhang Lie continued.

Su Feng glanced at him. This was exactly what he was waiting to hear: as the commander-in-chief for the military forces in Ning, he understood the ramifications of Zhang Lie's statement. If the Chinese military were able to obtain this knowledge, their forces' strength would naturally rise across the board.

What followed was straightforward: just as he had done with Chu Feng and Yun Bing, he arranged for a number of soldiers satisfying the criteria for the breakthrough to experience a life-or-death situation.

Most soldiers were doubtful of Zhang Lie's words, and quite a few who envied him were waiting for him to fail so that they could expose him for the charlatan that he was.

And yet, when the results of the trial were out, and a number of soldiers followed Zhang Lie out of the training ground...

"Well?" Su Feng asked, barely hiding the excitement from his voice.

One of the soldiers was as white as a sheet, his body trembling, causing the shock and joy on his face to stand out all the more.

"Commander-in-Chief, the gene fragment capacity really isn't a hundred—just as the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie claims, limit fragments really do exist!" The soldier's voice was quavering because of his excitement, but he got the point across.

Su Feng's eyes gleamed. If he could incorporate this information into new recruits' training regimen...

Zhang Lie was surely a genius, a once-in-a-lifetime genius!

He looked ardently at Zhang Lie, and the two conservative soldiers who had spoken up earlier could hardly believe their eyes.

Su Feng remembered that, before the soldiers had participated in the trial, Zhang Lie had given them something to eat, something that he had apparently brought back from the dimensional world at great expense. This was surely the key to breaking past one's limits.

Very quickly, that first soldier who had passed the trial was inspected with an apparatus that, when compared to his condition prior to the start of the trial, revealed that he had obtained ten additional gene fragments. After a few more tests, the exceptional strength of these ten excess basic gene fragments were revealed.

The soldiers were all elated by the discovery, but Zhang Lie had to warn them of the conditions required for the breakthrough.

"Don't get too excited just yet. It isn't guaranteed that the breakthrough will be successful, and there are a few stringent requirements."

He had shrouded the trial in mystery, so the military would be unable to replicate this success without him. However, Su Feng would stop at nothing to pry this secret from him; as the commander-in-chief of the Blackwind Fort, he had to acquire the breakthrough technique at all costs.

"Zhang Lie, this information could advance all of humanity, so I hope you'll be willing to share it in full. Be it China, be it the world federation—I firmly believe that mankind as a whole needs this knowledge that you have!

Of course, as the one who made this exceptional discovery, you'll surely be rewarded generously by the military, the Chinese government, and even the world federation! We'll satisfy all your research requirements, and I'll arrange for you to be added to the list of important figures that we'll keep under guard, so you have to—"

"Commander-in-Chief, my dojo's opening ceremony is tomorrow, and I intend to announce the news about these limit fragments publicly at that point," Zhang Lie gently interrupted Su Feng, the first such interruption Su Feng had suffered in years, but Su Feng didn't seem displeased at all.

No—he was jubilated by what Zhang Lie had said!

"You'll reveal it to the world? Truly?"

"Of course!"

Su Feng frowned. As a dragonsoul warrior, Zhang Lie had to know that, if he were to reveal this information in front of Su Feng, he would have no chance of keeping it hidden much longer. He went silent. He had reviewed Zhang Lie's dossier, and he was well aware of his situation.

In particular, Su Feng knew that Zhang Lie was enemies with the Qin, Wang, and Li clans, and the fact that he was waiting to reveal this piece of crucial information only at his dojo's opening ceremony meant that Su Feng would have to protect him until then. The military would have no choice but to step in to resolve his personal feuds.

Su Feng took a deep breath. Zhang Lie represented a priceless treasure, and anyone who went against him would have to fight off the entire Chinese military.

"In that case, you're seeking protection?"

Zhang Lie only smiled.

Su Feng cocked an eyebrow. "Answer one last question from me, and I'll promise that your dojo's opening ceremony goes smoothly."

"Please go ahead, Commander-in-Chief."

"Why choose the Blackwind Fort? Given how important this information is, wouldn't you have been able to attract more attention by revealing it in the capital?"

Chapter 133: Distributing Invitations

"Because I'm a citizen of Ning, of course. Isn't that enough?"

"Good, very good! I'll have someone follow you around for a period of time, and you'll be safe with him. Furthermore, the day your dojo opens, I'll prepare a small gift for you," Su Feng said, smiling.

Neither of them spoke about their agreement outright, but each understood what it entailed.

Su Feng glanced toward Zhang Lie appreciatively. It wasn't easy for a hunter without any background to make a place in this world. Without any courage or intellect, he would hardly have been able to get the chance to meet Su Feng.

Su Feng knew that his reaction and subsequent offer of protection had been planned by Zhang Lie all along, and while he would normally abhor such behavior, he even seemed to be glad that Zhang Lie had chosen to divulge the information to him.

When he looked toward Zhang Lie once more, he seemed to see a rising star that would bring glory and fame to Ning.

"Thank you for your goodwill, Commander." Zhang Lie turned to leave.

From now on, the troops and military of Ning would be Zhang Lie's backer, a relationship far closer and more secure than what he had wrought with the Chu and Ning clans.

Indeed, all of China would soon become Zhang Lie's backer. After all, the discovery of these limit fragments would be momentous news.

Zhang Lie headed straight back to his dojo, and Su Feng to his office. A sudden chill caused Su Feng to shiver.

"Why do you still like appearing in front of others in this manner?" Su Feng sighed, turning around. A figure had made his way to Su Feng's back, his face covered in shadow.

"Why did you call me back so urgently? What's the matter?" a hoarse voice rasped out.

"I have a young man I'd like you to protect," Su Feng began seriously.

"Hoh, a young man? And what sort of young man would attract your attention?"

"He's a first-realm hunter—you must have heard his title before—the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie."

"The one who's been the darling of the media lately?" The figure raised his head, exposing his curious two-pupiled eyes.

"Don't look down on him. I'm fully confident that he'll become a pillar of our country," Su Feng stated severely, sensing the other party's disdain.

"Is that so? A rare evaluation from you. I understand." The figure vanished amidst another chilly gust of wind.

By the time Zhang Lie returned to the dojo, it was already late at night. Dim lamplight illuminated the thin, narrow streets of Ning. With so few people outside, Zhang Lie was able to relax and take off his mask. He only infrequently encountered a few homeless vagrants roaming the streets, one of the 'attractions' of the slums.

"You're Zhang Lie?" a voice suddenly exclaimed behind him. A chill snaked down Zhang Lie's back, and an aura of genetic energy exploded from him.

However, the owner of the voice seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Zhang Lie frowned, continuing to stand still as he circulated genetic energy. He fed some into [Ninecarp Transformation], causing the shadow of his black serpent to revolve around his body. He hadn't sensed the voice's owner at all; if the mysterious figure had launched a sneak attack at him, he would have been heavily injured, if not dead.

Had he finally attracted the attention of a strong hunter?

"May I ask who you are?"

"Don't be afraid, lad!"

This time, Zhang Lie could clearly sense that the voice came from the entrance to the dojo. He raised his head to see a figure standing there, the upper half of his body was shrouded in shadow.

In the dim lamplight, all Zhang Lie could see were a pair of old-fashioned Western pants and large leather boots. Zhang Lie's face turned serious. This man might not bear Zhang Lie any ill will, but his sudden appearance so late at night was certainly suspicious.

He didn't approach the dojo; the other figure began approaching him. Zhang Lie lowered his body slightly and charged up a [Fists of the Silent Sea].

"Don't worry. I'm Lin Xiu, from the Blackwind Fort." A weathered face appeared from the shadow, a thick beard displayed prominently against rather ordinary features. A cigarette hung by his mouth, giving Zhang Lie the impression of a seasoned hunter.

"Good to see you. Did Commander Su send you over?" Zhang Lie asked, relaxing.

"Su Feng was worried about your safety, so he sent me here overnight. Your response wasn't bad," Lin Xiu critiqued, removing the baseball cap from his head.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Lin," Zhang Lie replied respectfully. It was obvious that he was a close confidante of Su Feng if he referred to Su Feng without any honorific.

Furthermore, Su Feng was well aware of what sort of danger Zhang Lie would face. For him to dispatch only a single hunter as Zhang Lie's bodyguard was a clear measure of trust in Lin Xiu, as well as a sign of his strength.

As they walked into the dojo, they heard a few grunts coming from the nearby training ground: the members of Team Zenith were continuing their training well into the night.

"Your comrades are quite hardworking," Lin Xiu murmured appreciatively.

It was already past midnight, and from the hunters' weathered faces, they had been training the whole day.

"Strength only comes from hard work, after all." Instead of disrupting their training, Zhang Lie brought Lin Xiu toward his house, located at a rather isolated corner of the dojo.

Lin Xiu glanced around him. The Zhang estate had been preserved in its entirety; except for a few renovations to its exterior, its interior had barely changed. In contrast to the newly built dojo, it looked rather unassuming and unimpressive.

Lin Xiu slouched on an old sofa, lighting another cigarette and filling the room with smoke.

He seemed like rather a lazy fellow, but from the way his eyes gleamed from time to time, as well as the aura Zhang Lie felt during his first encounter with him, Zhang Lie was certain that the man in front of him was an immensely strong hunter.

"When's the opening ceremony?" Lin Xiu asked, stretching lazily.

"In three days," Zhang Lie replied. He had intended on waiting a few more days, but since Su Feng's protection was already in place, he could push everything forward.

"In that case, I'll attend as an instructor of the dojo." Lin Xiu breathed out a thick cloud of smoke.

"The dojo's opening ceremony is tomorrow," Qin Zongming informed the gathered elders in the meeting room.

"What do you intend to do, Head?"

"Send Qin Wu to the opening ceremony."

"But, Head, Qin Wu's in the third realm—"

"I will not be countermanded! We must carry out this operation successfully, or else!" Qin Zongming brusquely broke off the elder who tried to disagree with him.

The next day, as dawn broke, the residents of the slums rose to golden rays of sunshine.

"Have you heard? The Zenith Dojo's right about to open!"

"What?! When?"

"Apparently, in three days. They'll release information about the requirements to enter the dojo today, and they're already starting to prepare for the grand opening."

There was quite a bit of discussion going on about Zhang Lie and the Zenith Dojo, and quite a few residents had gathered by the dojo in hopes of finding exciting news to share.

Within the dojo, Zhang Lie was inspecting a series of microchips that were to be sent out to invited guests for the opening ceremony.

Sun Mengmeng and the other members of Team Zenith were labeling the microchips for their respective recipients: many of the most influential citizens of Ning and even elsewhere, including the five major clans of the capital.

"Captain, aren't we being a little too ostentatious?" Sun Xiaowu asked timidly, staring at the lists of addresses to fill in.

"Don't you know just who our captain is? He's a galaxy fighter, a dragonsoul warrior! He's on the same level as some of these clan heads, don't you see?" Sun Mengmeng rapped her brother on the head.

Zhang Lie glanced at them in amusement.

"Captain, are you really going to send an invitation to the Qin clan? To the Wang and Li clans, as well?!" Yang Ze shouted.

Everyone glanced at the addresses he was pointing at. The media had dug into Zhang Lie's background because of his fame, and by now, almost everyone in Ning knew that Zhang Lie was bitter enemies with those three clans.

Qin Xiao and Wang Jianxin's expulsion, along with Li Jin's death, all had Zhang Lie's hand in them. Although none of them had proof that he was the mastermind behind the crimes, no one else could possibly have done it.

The fact that he was sending the three clans each an invitation was a marked act of provocation, and it wasn't difficult to imagine just how poorly the clans would take this invitation.

"Don't worry—just send it over. Furthermore, do you think they won't show up just because we don't invite them?"

Zhang Lie remained unperturbed by the entire affair, and the other members of Team Zenith were well aware that he likely had some ulterior motive for doing so. Indeed, this invitation was to inform the three clans that he was aware of their plans, and he would gladly accept their challenge.

Zhang Lie had also made plans for recruiting disciples. The Zenith Dojo would be a nexus of power for him, and what he most wanted from his disciples wasn't talent or background, but rather loyalty and age. As long as they were loyal, and as long as they were still malleable, Zhang Lie was confident that he could unlock any potential they possessed.

In other words, anyone who had sufficient loyalty to the dojo would be able to receive Zhang Lie's instruction. This particular piece of information spread like wildfire across Ning.

Just about every person of authority in Ning had received an invitation from Zhang Lie, who was in truth little more than a resident of the slums and just a lowly first-realm hunter. Nevertheless, many parties were gratified to have received such an invitation, and they immediately began preparing a gift as soon as they received it.

Of course, three clans in particular were unamused. Wang Han stared at the holographic recording with obvious distaste.

"I would be honored to receive the Wang clan's patronage during my dojo's opening ceremony," Zhang Lie concluded at the end of the recording, his face beaming, without any sign of enmity at all.

"This piece of trash dares provoke me?!" Wang Han thundered, destroying the microchip with a callous flick of his finger. "Make the strongest restricted potion you can. We'll send Zero to the ceremony."

The killing intent that seeped into his voice caused the nearby elders to pale.

"We're sending Zero against a first-realm hunter?" an elder carefully clarified.

"You doubt me?" Wang Han frowned, focusing the full force of his aura on the unfortunate elder, who shrunk back in fear. "I'm sure the Qin and Li clans are also making plans for the opening ceremony. With all three of our challengers in play, I want to see just how long Zhang Lie will be able to hold out."

The same day, the Li clan's main conference room was torn to shambles by the head of the Li clan, Li Mo. After his outburst, Li Mo gradually calmed down. He was well aware that Qin Zongming and Wang Han had surely received a similar invitation as well.

"Send Li Mian to the ceremony," Li Mo instructed.

In the remnants of the meeting room, the Li elders glanced at the destruction their clan head had wreaked and chose not to speak up. As they left, Li Mo contacted Wang Han and Qin Zongming.

"I'm sure both of you have received the invitation," Li Mo began.

"He's an arrogant, insufferable twat!" Qin Zongming shouted. How could he bear the humiliation of being provoked by a hunter from the first realm? He was the head of one of the five major clans of the capital!

The other two clan heads felt the same way. It was unfortunate that Zhang Lie was under so many layers of protection; if they wanted to kill him, they would have to plan out their attack carefully.

Chapter 134: Start of the Show

"Well, it hardly matters. This lad won't be so arrogant when he's dead. Our plan's flawless, and I'm sure we'll be able to kill him on the day of his opening ceremony," Li Mo promised.

"Naturally. What we'll need to consider is how to deal with what happens afterwards. Although the world federation likely won't investigate his death in much detail, we had better be careful."

"I've sent a batch of shapeshifting potions to both of you," Wang Han said, his eyes narrowing as he imagined Zhang Lie's pitiful death.

The three men smiled at each other.

In another part of the capital, two middle-aged men were sitting in a pavilion as they played a game of go.

"Head, you've received an invitation from Ning." Two guards proffered two microchips to their respective clan heads.

Chu Lin and Yun Long glanced at their respective microchips and found them to be identical invitations from Zhang Lie. After looking over their contents, they turned to each other.

"Apparently, the other three are sending some third-realm hunters his way?"

"They'll field three challengers over three rounds. I must admit I'm curious as to the strength of this hunter that even Yun Bing seems to be besotted with."

The Zhou, He, and Qian clans had also convened a meeting because of Zhang Lie's invitation.

"So what if he's gotten two titles? Isn't he being a little too presumptuous?" The He clan head, He Liancheng, frowned. He had never before treated an invitation from a member of the younger generation so seriously.

"As far as I'm aware, the clan heads of all five major clans from the capital received this invitation, and some have already begun taking action because of it," the Zhou clan head, Zhou Ruo, stated calmly.

"Indeed, the Qin, Wang, and Li clans are all planning something big behind the scenes. The day of that kid's opening ceremony might well be his death," the Qian clan head, Qian Meng, added with a chuckle.

The three clan heads all had a rather strong impression of Zhang Lie, since they had lost the spoils from the Eclipse Sage's inheritance to him.

That said, they simply wanted to claim the Eclipse Sage's inheritance that Zhang Lie possessed for themselves, and they didn't bear as deep an enmity toward him as did the Wang, Li, and Qin clans.

"In that case, we'll let them do all the hard work for us, then have the officials from the ministry of ruins step in. We'll be able to extract some benefits from Zhang Lie's demise that way." Zhou Ruo's lips curled up in anticipation. "We'd better contact Zhang Quan immediately—you all know how much he despises Zhang Lie now."

Zhou Ruo crossed his arms over his chest. The more Zhang Lie clashed with the Qin, Wang, and Li clans, the better. Once they were all battered, they could step in with the ministry of ruins' authority to gouge them all. While everyone's attention was focused on the Qin, Wang, and Li clans, they could take away Zhang Lie's corpse and try to extricate the Eclipse Sage's inheritance from it.

The three clans wouldn't even have to lift a single finger until the very end.

Zhang Quan, the official from the ministry of ruins, had also received an invitation from Zhang Lie, his face a rictus of disgust. Ever since the incident in the Eclipse Sage's ruins, he had loathed Zhang Lie. After all, the Eclipse Sage's inheritance should have gone to the branch of the ministry of ruins in Liao.

If not for the Kez invasion and Zhang Lie's subsequent acquisition of two important titles, he would have long since found a reason to target him. However, now that Zhang Lie was the darling of the media, the world federation, and the Chinese government, he could hardly strike at him given his status as a government employee.

Zhang Lie's invitation was therefore all the more infuriating to him. Just as he was about to scream in rage, his transceiver beeped: he received a call from Zhou Ruo.

"May I help you, Clan Head Zhou?"

"Would you like an opportunity to get rid of Zhang Lie?"

Zhang Quan hesitated for a moment, his features distorting. "What do you mean?" he asked, after checking that there was no one in the vicinity.

"Zhang Quan, don't forget that the Eclipse Sage's inheritance is with Zhang Lie." Zhou Ruo smiled. Zhang Quan's expression made his interest evident, so their plan would likely come to fruition.

"I know what you and the other clans are planning. I'm warning you now, the Eclipse Sage's inheritance belongs to the world federation," Zhang Quan said coldly.

"So be it." Zhou Ruo hung up.

It was Zhang Quan's turn to hesitate. He mulled things over for a moment, then called Zhou Ruo back, an implicit agreement to cooperate with the Zhou, He, and Qian clans.

A storm was brewing over the horizon.

Three days later, golden rays of sunlight gave Zhang Lie's new Zenith Dojo a resplendent glow.

The slums of Ning found itself host to a surprising number of hovercars and lavishly dressed people that day, including many from the major clans of Ning.

"This dojo must have cost quite a fair bit of gold," Qin Feng murmured to himself at the entrance to the dojo, a lavish gift in his hands.

"You'd better not run your mouth, Young Master Qin! We're attending the opening ceremony and representing the Qin clan of Ning. Don't provoke that Zhang Lie—you know how extraordinary his status is now!" one of Qin Feng's guards whispered to him.

Qin Feng waved him off impatiently. He didn't need the reminder; whenever he thought back to what had happened at the bar that night, a shudder would creep down his entire body.

"This dojo belongs to that king of the slums?"

"Do you want to die? You can't call him that anymore!"

"Eh, so what? Even if he gets a few more titles, he's still an ordinary hunter without any backing.

"You think the Yun, Chu, Zhou, and He clans would attend this ceremony for a nobody?"

A few youths chatted with each other as they got out of their hovercars. They were young masters of various clans from Ning; if their parents hadn't forced them to attend this ceremony, they certainly wouldn't have done so. So what if this dojo's leader was the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie? He'd simply gotten lucky, nothing more.

However, before they could continue their conversation, a luxurious hovercar flew by them.

"What? There are clans from the capital here as well?" a boastful pink-haired youth cried out. He gaped, dumbstruck, as a few hunters left their vehicle further ahead: Chu Feng, Yun Bing, along with quite a few others from the clans of the capital, with some important figures from the Chu and Yun clans alongside them.

"No wonder we were all forced to attend!" one of the other youths in the group exclaimed.

By this time, they had arrived at the entrance of the dojo, which was of comparable quality to the highest-class dojos they had been to.

"They don't even have a designated greeter," another of the youth criticized.

Indeed, there didn't seem to be any hosts ready to welcome the arriving guests. The entrance to the dojo remained shut despite the hovercars arriving one after the other, and some of the guests were getting visibly annoyed.

"Hah, look at how arrogant this Zhang Lie is! Guess his dojo might not even end up opening today."

Some of the younger hunters were whispering to each other in schadenfreude, but right after they spoke, the black, sturdy doors to the dojo slowly swung open.

The spectacle instantly drew everyone's attention. Under the radiant sunlight, the members of Team Zenith slowly walked out of the dojo, their faces groomed, their auras restrained, their bodies tempered, their expressions calm and collected.

At times they seemed like a pack of wolves, or even flames roaring amidst the darkness.

Zhang Lie, dressed from head to toe in black armor, captivated everyone's sight. The rest of Team Zenith trailed out behind him in two rows, led by Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi.

They were no longer nameless hunters now; after all, although they hadn't received as impressive a title as Zhang Lie, they had all been recognized as courageous warriors. Their willingness to rush into a sea of insects to save their captain had been commended by one and all.

Behind them all were Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong. Zhang Hong was a familiar face to many residents of the slums given her profession, and she was rather recognizable.

On the other hand, Lin Xiu, rugged and bearded, was a completely unfamiliar figure. None of the residents of Ning, nor even the hunters from the major clans of the capital, had any impression of him. Not only that, he was striding forward to Zhang Lie, standing only half a step behind him, in front of even the other members of Team Zenith.

As their procession walked toward the front, Zhang Lie bowed down to everyone gathered by the entrance of the dojo. "I, Zhang Lie, representative of the Zenith Dojo, welcome you all!"

"The Liu clan of Ning greets and congratulates Dojo Leader Zhang."

"As does the Ma clan, also from Ning."

"So too the Sun clan, from Ning!"

As countless delegations stepped into the dojo, placing their gifts to the side, the crowd's displeasure at having been forced to wait outside vanished like mist in the sun.

Chu Feng shook his head: even some of the smaller clans from Ning knew to take advantage of this opportunity to develop a relationship with Zhang Lie, but the Chu clan had chosen to remain neutral at this critical juncture!

Yun Bing felt similarly, but none of her emotions could be seen from her face.

"Thank you, thank you." Zhang Lie returned each of their bows without putting on any airs.

"How could we, the Qin clan, miss out on the opening of the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie's dojo?" Just as the atmosphere seemed to be turning festive again, a cold voice interrupted the proceedings from afar. A few hovercars had just landed in the parking lot outside the dojo, and a delegation of hunters in green had just stepped outside.

Zhang Lie's lips curled up at the appearance of the Qin clan.

Chapter 135: Stepping on Stage

"Ah, isn't that Qin Lan, the peak second-realm hunter from the Qin clan? And Qin Yao and Qin DiHu are here too!"

"The Qin delegation... looks a little unusual, doesn't it?"

Many hunters were murmuring to each other after seeing just how many strong hunters the Qin clan had brought to Zhang Lie's opening ceremony. The red-haired Qin Lan frowned at the crowd, which immediately went silent. His icy cold stare made them shiver involuntarily.

Zhang Lie observed Qin Lan carefully. Was this the hunter that the Qin clan had sent out to deal with him?

"What's the matter? Aren't you going to welcome me, Dojo Leader Zhang?" Qin Zongming walked up to Zhang Lie with a smile. A bystander not in the know might have thought the reunion to be one between friends who hadn't met for many long years.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes, somewhat disgusted by Qin Zongming's duplicity.

"If even the Qin clan head is unwelcome here, Dojo Leader Zhang, should we of the Wang clan also depart?" A number of blue hovercars landed, and a delegation in blue, led by Wang Han, strode forth.

Many of those hunters in the delegation were well-known hunters of the Wang clan in the second realm.

"So the Wang clan came prepared too..."

"It looks like we won't be lacking for entertainment today."

The crowd once again began whispering among themselves. Zhang Lie stood calmly as Wang Han walked toward him.

The crowd tensed in anticipation.

Chu Feng glanced at Chu Lin, who was watching Zhang Lie's display coolly. He had no intention of stepping forward; the Chu clan would remain neutral.

"Of course I'm happy to welcome both you and the head of the Qin clan, Clan Head Wang. After all, I specially sent invitations to both of you as honored guests. Please enter!"

"Good, good. I must congratulate you, Dojo Leader Zhang, for being able to found a dojo at your young age. You surely are talented! Here, a congratulatory gift." Wang Han handed over a small wrapped box.

"And here is mine." Qin Zongming also handed a gift over with a faint smile on his face.

Neither box was large, but both were exquisitely decorated. The crowd, well aware of the enmity between Zhang Lie and the two clans, didn't know what to make of the exchange.

"My thanks, Clan Head Wang, Clan Head Qin," Zhang Lie replied politely. The three of them glanced at each other blankly, and the tension dissipated almost as quickly as it had come.

"Sorry I'm late." Just then, a sleek red hovercar expertly parked itself by the entrance of the dojo. Dressed in red, Li Mo walked out, followed by a middle-aged man.

"That's Li Xin, a third-realm hunter!" someone shouted from within the crowd.

Li Xin was a genius, and there were only a rare few hunters from the same generation who could match his skill. He had just entered the third realm of the dimensional world; who would have expected that Zhang Lie's dojo's opening ceremony would be grand enough for him to make an appearance there?

Li Xin glanced disdainfully at Zhang Lie as he walked up to the entrance of the dojo with Li Mo, who strode forward with a gift.

"Congratulations on the opening of your dojo, Dojo Leader Zhang. May everything go smoothly for you today.

Zhang Lie accepted the gift with a smile.

Chu Lin and Yun Long also handed him a gift on behalf of their clans.

"Thank you, thank you. Please, head inside!" Zhang Lie thanked each visitor he received, but he looked toward the Yun and Chu clan heads with a curious half-twist of a smile.

The honored guests from the major clans entered the dojo in waves, and the once-crowded entrance of the dojo slowly became empty. However, this state of affairs didn't last long.

Shortly afterwards, a series of engine noises came from the distance, heralding the arrival of another dozen or so hovercars.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes.

As expected, these were the delegations from the remaining major clans of the capital: the Qian, Zhou, and Hao clans. The three clan heads gave Zhang Lie a customary greeting before heading inside, as though they were genuinely only present to celebrate the founding of Zhang Lie's dojo.

After the five major clans of the capital came a group of officials from the world federation, led by yet another familiar face: Zhang Quan.

Zhang Lie smiled. There was no doubt in his mind why Zhang Quan had come. After all, the two of them had clashed within the Eclipse Sage's ruins, and he was likely excited to witness Zhang Lie's downfall.

"Even the government sent people here?!"

"Isn't that nonsense? After all, the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie's a galaxy fighter!"

"But isn't that Zhang Quan behaving in a rather unfriendly manner?"

"It must be because of the Eclipse Sage's inheritance," some hunter whispered knowingly.

Zhang Quan ignored the dissipating crowd as he strode straight toward Zhang Lie. "Congratulations on the opening of your dojo—but be careful not to perish during the ceremony," he snarled, not hiding his animosity at all.

"Haha, of course I won't! In fact, I believe you'd sooner perish than I would!" Zhang Lie retorted.

Zhang Quan gave him a wicked smile as he walked through the entrance to the dojo.

"Hold on—where's your gift? As the head of the branch of the ministry of ruins in Ning, did you come to my opening ceremony without even preparing a gift?" Zhang Lie shouted in exaggerated fashion.

The crowd played along.

"What? Who's this? Isn't he shameless to be accepting the invitation without preparing a gift?"

"Looks like some government officials are just that shameless!"

The resulting murmurs from the crowd instantly caused Zhang Quan to flush red. After all, Zhang Quan wasn't any ally of Zhang Lie's, and he was only here today because he wanted to watch Zhang Lie's downfall. Why would he waste time preparing a gift?

And yet Zhang Lie, the shameless fool, had the gall to ask for a gift in front of the entire crowd!

"Ah, how could I have forgotten? I was simply in such a hurry to get inside!" Zhang Quan pulled out a glowing jade stone from his soul space.

"My goodness, an origin stone! I really must thank you for your generosity, Official Zhang. Please, enter!"

The appearance of the origin stone was marked by envious stares from the crowd all around, and Zhang Lie snatched the 'gift' out of Zhang Quan's hand like a bolt of lightning.

The veins on Zhang Quan's head throbbed.

"We'll see just who has the last laugh!" Zhang Quan scoffed, turning away in a huff as he walked inside.

By then, almost all the VIP guests had gathered. The few guests that continued to trickle in were a few local factions from Ning, whom Zhang Lie nevertheless greeted and thanked with respect.

However, just as the opportune time for the opening ceremony drew near, and Zhang Lie prepared to head to the stage to officiate the event, three figures walked in from the distance.

They all seemed to be rather imposing hunters, but strangely, Zhang Lie had no recollection of any of them at all. And even though they tried to cloak their enmity, Zhang Lie could still sense it from a distance.

Zhang Lie frowned. Softly, he asked, "Do any of you recognize those three hunters?"

"Captain, these are all dojo leaders from the capital," Sun Mengmeng whispered back.

"From the dojos in the capital?" Zhang Lie relaxed; he could guess why they were here.

"Yes, Captain! The one in gold's Ren Tianlong, the current leader of Dragon's Ascent, a dojo well-known in the capital. He's an exceptionally strong hunter, and there have been reports of him taking on three sura by himself. Apparently, he hasn't been out in the public eye for quite some time. I wonder what he's doing here?" Fang Yi explained, glancing at the hulking figure in the middle.

"The other two hunters by his side are the dojo leaders of Heaven's Wolves and Mortal World, Xia Tong and Zhao Zhi. They're both famous third-realm hunters who generally prefer to avoid the public eye. I can't believe they're here for your ceremony, Captain!" Sun Mengmeng continued.

As a citizen from the capital, she was quite familiar with the three of them.

"May your dojo prosper." While Zhang Lie was speaking with Sun Mengmeng, Ren Tianlong had strode up to him and delivered a customary greeting expressionlessly.

The other two dojo leaders did the same, greeting him and delivering him a gift mechanically.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes again.

There were quite a few factions that had chosen to attend the opening ceremony for his dojo, quite a few of whom boasted members from the second or third realms of the dimensional world.

Given their strength, there were two predominant reasons they were personally attending: first, because they were impressed by Zhang Lie and wanted to develop a relationship with him, and second, because they were on inimical terms and wanted to put him in his place.

Given Zhang Lie's current reputation and popularity, the opening of his dojo must have caused some stress for the other dojo leaders in the vicinity, particularly in Ning and the capital. One place was where he had fought off the Kez invasion with his life on the line, and the other was his hometown.

With this in mind, it wasn't difficult to imagine why some dojos from the capital would attend his dojo's opening ceremony with visible enmity.

There were quite a few hunters who had come opposing Zhang Lie, but it was only the three dojos that Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had pointed out that he paid much attention to. Those three dojo leaders were the only truly strong ones that he could sense.

"Captain! Everyone's gathered, and we're ready to begin the ceremony!" Sun Mengmeng called out.

There were only a few spectating citizens remaining by the outside of the dojo.

Zhang Lie nodded, motioning for them all to head inside. However, he left the entrance to the dojo wide open so that regular citizens would be able to see much of the affair from the outside.

The ceremony itself was slated to take place at the training ground. As Zhang Lie walked to center stage, the hubbub slowly died away, and everyone focused their full attention on him.

A key part of the ceremony was for the dojo leader to accept all challengers to prove his strength in front of the public eye, and it was for this reason that many of the dojo leaders had attended the ceremony for themselves that day.

Zhang Lie surveyed the crowd from where he stood, sensing a clear number of hostile stares.

Chu Feng swallowed a gulp of saliva in anxiety. Most of those who were intending to challenge Zhang Lie were peak second-realm hunters, and there were even a few third-realm hunters present as well. Furthermore, they were in the real world, not the Blacksteel settlement, where the combatants' safety was guaranteed.

Chu Feng found it very difficult to imagine just how Zhang Lie would survive all the challenges, but Chu Lin and Yun Long seemed perfectly tranquil, with no intention to step in at all.

Chapter 136: Victory in One Blow

"The opportune hour has come. The opening ceremony shall now begin!"

With a huge bang, fireworks rose into the air, and the word 'Zenith' slowly emerged in the skies, formed out of a series of colorful explosions. After the fireworks, a screen of light emerged over the top of the training ground, sealing it off from the outside. The soulstone floor soaked up the light and gave off a radiant blue glow.

The guests' faces turned serious as the dojo's opening ceremony began in earnest.

The dojo's energy systems activated, surrounding the entire dojo in phantasmagorical flashes of light. Small holes emerged from the floor, manipulating the environment in a localized region of the arena.

As genetic energy surged through the paneling, the arena switched between different virtual environments, shocking the gathered guests. While the exterior design of Zhang Lie's dojo wasn't anything unusual, the interior machinery was state-of-the-art.

No ordinary hunter could afford to open such a dojo, let alone someone who came from the slums and was without a backer, like Zhang Lie. After all, he was only in his early twenties. With his burgeoning reputation, if this opening ceremony were successful, Zhang Lie was sure to become a power to contend with.

Warning bells rang in the head of everyone who opposed Zhang Lie. They had to kill him now, before he could grow into his full power!

The smiles had long since disappeared from the faces of the heads of the Qin, Wang, and Li clans, and their cold, distorted expressions were rather frightening.

With another mechanical whirr, expressionless robotic hunters emerged from the ground.

"Simulated practice?"

"What are these robots doing here?"

"Manipulating your environment at will, and training with foes whose strength you can calibrate... This is as close to a real battle as you can get, and only the top dojos are as well equipped. Honestly, considering that Zhang Lie's just opening his dojo, I'm shocked by the quality of his facilities."

Many of the dojo leaders spectating the ceremony felt immensely threatened the moment Zhang Lie began putting on his display.

"This is an interesting dojo!" commented Ren Tianlong, leader of Dragon's Ascent, his eyes sparkling.

Once the demonstration of all the facilities was complete, mist covered the training ground, spelling out two large words: Zenith Dojo.

Zhang Lie bowed to a smattering of applause that grew to a thunderous crescendo. Everyone in the audience was shocked. Many of the spectators thought that Zhang Lie was making use of his newfound popularity to start a dojo, but they hadn't expected just how much time and energy Zhang Lie had put into the design.

It seemed as though he really were serious about this venture.

"As expected of the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie."

"The quality and quantity of facilities available is comparable to that of top dojos in the nation."

Zhang Lie's expression remained cool and confident throughout.

"Not bad, but it's still somewhat worse than our Warrior's Heart dojo!" a muscular hunter grouched. He represented the Warrior's Heart dojo in Ning, which was ranked third in the region. He wasn't the dojo leader, but rather his first disciple, Liu Dongsheng.

"In that case, why don't you challenge him later on?" a dojo leader by his side suggested.

"So I will! Do you think he's all that strong?" Liu Dongsheng countered. Perhaps Zhang Lie was a genius, but he was still a first-realm hunter, after all. As a peak second-realm hunter himself, he had no fear of Zhang Lie.

However, if he knew that Zhang Lie had destroyed two peak second-realm hunters working in tandem from the Wang clan, he might not have dared to challenge Zhang Lie.

"Zenith, peak, acme—my goal is to repeatedly surpass my own limits, to evolve to handle greater and greater challenges, to adapt to my environment and to continue to improve myself. It is for this purpose that I established the Zenith Dojo, and for this purpose that the Zenith Dojo is named!" Zhang Lie concisely explained the motivation behind his decision.

"Excellent! The name itself shows foresight!"

"Here I thought Zhang Lie had done all this on a whim, but he's actually put serious thought behind his decision!"

The crowd applauded.

After all, Zhang Lie's goals were admirable, and from the demonstration of the dojo's facilities, it was clear that Zhang Lie had designed the dojo with these goals in mind. Far more of the spectators in the audience wanted to develop a relationship with Zhang Lie than to destroy him.

Of course, after the applause would come attacks from his enemies.

As Wang Han clapped, he shouted, "I must admit I'm captivated by your motivation behind the word 'zenith', but I'm more curious about the overall strength of this dojo that claims to be at the zenith!"

Many of the dojo leaders were already raring to challenge Zhang Lie. Zhang Lie gave the audience a faint smile: it looked as though the three clan heads plotting against him were eager to start their attack.

Naturally, the crowd understood the hidden meaning behind Wang Han's words.

"Of course. Following tradition, the floor is open to challengers."

Some members of the audience, brash and impatient, were already rolling up their sleeves.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing clenched their fists tightly; what they had been dreading was about to happen.

Fight, fight! I want to see just how long Zhang Lie will be able to stand before he falls. Zhang Quan pushed up the rim of his glasses, smirking inwardly.

"Who wishes to test the Zenith Dojo's mettle?" Zhang Lie called out, surveying the gathered crowd.

"Haha! I, Dugu Xun, leader of the Lone Wolf dojo, accept the challenge!" A middle-aged man leapt out of the stands and onto the arena, the aura surging from him making his strength evident to all.

"The Lone Wolf dojo, the top-ranked dojo in Hong? And that Dugu Xun's a peak second-realm hunter, with an undefeated record in Hong! Isn't this far too disadvantageous for Zhang Lie?"

"Well, what choice does he have? Most dojo leaders are second-realm hunters, and only the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie is an exception. If he wants to be a dojo leader as a first-realm hunter, then he had better have overwhelming strength, as well as the ability to defeat second-realm hunters!"

Most of the spectators didn't favor Zhang Lie, given his apparent disadvantage in terms of strength and experience.

Dugu Xun glanced at him arrogantly, clearly not thinking much of his opponent.

"Haha, Dojo Leader Dugu, you're not a weak hunter, but I'm afraid challenging me might be too much of a stretch. Why don't you beat one of my instructors first?"

Just as Dugu Xun looked down on Zhang Lie, so too was Zhang Lie looking down on Dugu Xun.

Dugu Xun's face turned red. "Oh? You're an arrogant one, aren't you? In that case, send this instructor of yours forward!"

Lin Xiu, dressed in black and white, appeared on stage like a gust of wind. No one saw just how this rough-hewn middle-aged man had made his way on stage—he seemed to have appeared out of thin air.

Zhang Lie made eye contact with him, then stepped off the stage, leaving only the two of them in the arena.

"Dojo Leader Dugu, you may have the first blow," Lin Xiu stated calmly, as though he were instructing, rather than sparring against, Dugu Xun.

"Just as arrogant as your dojo leader, are you?" Dugu Xun thundered. "In that case, die!"

Dugu Xun leapt up into the air, pouncing straight toward Lin Xiu. The mud-colored genetic energy he exuded covered the stage; when Lin Xiu tried to step away, he found his feet stuck to the ground. Dugu Xun was an earth-attuned hunter, and his framework was particularly suited to controlling the battlefield, catching his opponents unaware.

"That instructor's been caught by Dugu Xun's attack! He's dead!" a spectator murmured.

The hunters of Team Zenith were rather worried by the sight: they had all heard of Dugu Xun's name. This so-called instructor of theirs might have looked imposing, but he had been caught by Dugu Xun's first attack!

"Let me see just how you'll escape!" Dugu Xun laughed coldly.

Seeing his opponent defenseless, he rushed forward even more quickly, the polearm in his right hand smashing down toward Lin Xiu with staggering force. If this blow were to hit, Dugu Xun's victory would be all but guaranteed.

However, Lin Xiu barely reacted to the incoming blow. He slowly raised his arm and waved it about. An explosion erupted, dissolving Dugu Xun's mud-colored genetic energy. Sensing a pain at the back of his neck, and a sudden loss of vision in his eyes, Dugu Xun collapsed.

When the smoke cleared, silence descended over the training ground. No one knew just how the supposed instructor had attacked. Lin Xiu had barely moved, but Dugu Xun was slumped on the ground in an unconscious heap.

Chapter 137: The Arrogant Lin Xiu

"Dugu Xun lost just like that?!"

"Did any of you see that guy strike?"

"No, I didn't! Just what's going on?"

"Is he really just an instructor from this dojo?"

Many of the dojo leaders were staring at Lin Xiu with openmouthed shock, not having suspected that a nameless instructor would be able to defeat a peak second-realm hunter in just one blow.

Qin Zongming, Li Mo, and Wang Han were all clutching their seats in concern. Lin Xiu's skills were far beyond what they had expected, and they couldn't help wondering just where Zhang Lie had found such an instructor for his dojo.

"This won't be an easy opponent to handle, not if Dugu Xun was defeated in a single blow," Qin Zongming whispered to Wang Han.

"Don't worry. We never expected to succeed during this part of the plan, anyway; the important part is what comes next!"

The unconscious Dugu Xun was quickly brought away.

Lin Xiu, standing in the middle of the arena, yawned lazily. The dojo leaders' faces spasmed. If only they could jump down into the arena and knock him out in one fell swoop!

"Are there any other challengers?" Zhang Lie called out, barely hiding the traces of a smile.

What could the gathered spectators do? If this Lin Xiu had knocked Dugu Xun out in one blow, he could well do the same to them. Most of them weren't even as strong as Dugu Xun! Why would they go on stage to embarrass themselves?

As the boisterous crowd fell silent, Qin Zongming shot a look at Qin Lan, who was at the end of the row of VIP seats. Qin Lan slowly got up, causing the guests' expressions to shift. Was the Qin clan going to send Qin Lan as a challenger?

Apparently not. Qin Lan slowly walked out of the dojo, not saying a single word.

"Are we starting our preparations now?" Wang Han whispered to Qin Zongming.

"That instructor seems a little familiar to me, and I suspect it's him..." A flicker of fear flashed in Qin Zongming's eyes.

"Him? Who is it?"

"Who cares? Let's just send someone up and see," Li Mo interjected.

"If there are no further challengers, the ceremony shall end here!"

Lin Xiu, who had remained silent all this time, looked toward the guests, none of whom dared to look him in the eye.

Even Zhang Lie, who was standing right by the arena, was shocked by Lin Xiu's strength. Despite his proximity to the fight, all he saw was Lin Xiu's body flashing, followed by Dugu Xun slumping onto the floor.

"Just where did our captain find this instructor? Isn't he way too strong?" Sun Xiaowu swallowed a gulp of saliva.

None of the others responded, but they looked just as shocked as the rest of the audience. They stared at Lin Xiu, almost as if they had recognized who he was, but were unable to believe it.

"I would hate for the ceremony to be concluded prematurely. Mo Tianshan, leader of Heaven's Flair from Ning, at your service," a stentorian tone rang out from the stands. Mo Tianshan stood up from his seat.

Many of the guests were rather surprised: after all, Heaven's Flair was the second-ranked dojo in Ning, and Mo Tianshan was its dojo leader, the strongest representative of the dojo.

"Didn't he retreat from the public eye a few decades ago? Why is he appearing here now?"

"Apparently, Mo Tianshan was a peak second-realm hunter when he retreated, and now, after a few decades... I expect this dojo instructor will be steamrolled."

"Ah, a pity."

The crowd broke out into hushed conversations the moment Mo Tianshan had stood up.

Lin Xiu faced his opponent, who leapt from the stands straight toward the arena, landing with a huge thump that seemed to shake the entire building.

"I, Mo Tianshan, challenge you." His voice was deep and flat, as expressionless as Lin Xiu himself, but his aura surged out from him like a large mountain.

With a few motions of his hands, Zhang Lie shrouded the entire arena in mist. He was well aware that Mo Tianshan was a strong hunter, and if he were to fight unrestrained against Lin Xiu, the audience might be struck by a glancing blow or two.

"Come," Lin Xiu said.

Mo Tianshan lowered his body, his gaze sharpening. Without any external fluctuation of genetic energy that Zhang Lie could discern, his aura shot into the heavens like a sword. Then, as his genetic energy erupted in a golden flash, an old grandfather's clock seemed to spring into existence around Mo Tianshan.

As it tolled, several of the guests seated closest to the arena found their chests starting to hurt from the pressure.

"Isn't this Mo Tianshan's famed soulcrushing clock? He's using this technique immediately?!"

"I heard that Mo Tianshan likes wandering around and acquiring dojos from all over the country. Is he here for the Zenith Dojo?" Chu Feng murmured.

"That sounds likely. Zhang Lie might be in danger: this dojo instructor of his is quite strong, but I doubt he can overcome Mo Tianshan," Yun Bing analyzed.

The two of them predicted the outcome of the fight before it had even started.

Zhang Lie crossed his arms over his chest as he glanced at Lin Xiu. Neither Dugu Xun from before, or Mo Tianshan now, had managed to wipe the indolence from Lin Xiu's eyes. In truth, Zhang Lie

was quite surprised that Su Feng had managed to find him such a strong bodyguard in almost no time at all.

Mo Tianshan finally launched his attack. The grandfather's clock's tolls shook the audience as it glowed golden. As the dials began to spin, the numbers on the clock transformed into swords that shot toward Lin Xiu.

"Oh, a soulcrusher clock? It isn't a bad technique. From the looks of it, you're at least expert-level with it, maybe even higher."

Lin Xiu remained casually indifferent to the barrage of attacks coming his way; instead, it was Mo Tianshan who felt a curious pressure coming from his opponent. The glowing numbers stabbed into the floor by Lin Xiu's vicinity, dousing the arena in gold.

"[Soulcrusher Clock: Stasis]!" Mo Tianshan shouted, launching a lethal blow at Lin Xiu.

Lin Xiu remained immobile. Just as the attack was about to hit him, genetic energy emerged from his body. With a roar, the water serpent that manifested from Lin Xiu swept the swords away as the arena flooded with water.

"Water is the origin of life," Lin Xiu murmured. With a flick of the serpent's tail, the waves of water crashed against Mo Tianshan's body, sending him flying out of the arena.

Mo Tianshan crashed against a wall, spitting out a mouthful of blood as he did so.

"Thank you for your clemency," Mo Tianshan choked out. "Might I ask your name?"

"Lin Xiu!"

"Lin Xiu? That name sounds a little familiar, doesn't it? Could it be—"

"What, Mo Tianshan was defeated in one blow too?"

"Does anyone know just who this Lin Xiu is?"

"If even Mo Tianshan fell to a single blow, could any of us hope to stand against him?"

The conclusion to these two challenges was rather difficult to accept.

"Where did that kid find such an instructor?" Chu Lin thought to himself. No matter how exceptional Zhang Lie was, he was only a first-realm hunter, but that instructor was someone extraordinary.

In other words, Zhang Lie was little more than a kid to him; despite his unusual strength, he was only at the level of a peak second-realm hunter at most. On the other hand, this dojo 'instructor' was at least a peak third-realm hunter, and not merely compared to those of his own generation.

The Eclipse Sage himself was only a third-realm hunter, though, in his time, he was already at the apex of humanity.

Yun Long's eyes gleamed. He and Chu Lin were both starting to regret their decision to remain neutral. Were Zhang Lie only a talented genius, they wouldn't have worried too much about forming a relationship with him; after all, genius still needed time to blossom. Considering Zhang Lie's

background, they didn't think he would be able to make much of himself. But now, with a peak third-realm hunter appearing at his dojo's opening ceremony...

Unfortunately, it was too late for them to act. If their clans were to forge a relationship with Zhang Lie, it would have to be through Chu Feng and Yun Bing.

The Zhou, Qin, and Hao clan heads' faces fell. This wasn't an outcome that they wanted to see at all!

"Don't worry. At this point, I'm sure the Qin, Wang, and Li heads are even more worried than we are. Let's just wait and see what they do," Zhou Ruo murmured. Indeed, Qin Zongming, Wang Han, and Li Mo all seemed to be rather rattled; their seemingly perfect plan was slowly being dissolved by Zhang Lie.

"We have to use our ace." Qin Zongming clenched his fists tightly. He had prepared for this eventuality, but hadn't expected that he would have to use it at all.

"There's no choice. That instructor's not an easy fellow to deal with, and if we don't kill Zhang Lie today, our clans will surely perish," Wang Han gritted out.

"Will anyone take the role of the third challenger?" Zhang Lie called out, stretching. With Lin Xiu helping him out, he was far more relaxed than he expected to be.

"I shall challenge you." A thin, emaciated man in black walked out from the crowd, attracting everyone's attention with how pale and sickly he seemed to be.

Lin Xiu began to frown.

"Someone like this is going to waste our last opportunity? Don't volunteer if you don't have the strength to back it up!" several dojo leaders heckled.

Nevertheless, the thin man shrugged off all the criticism being thrown his way. He glanced at his detractors, shutting them up with a chilling stare. Once all the dojo leaders quieted down, he stepped up on stage, opposite Lin Xiu.

Lin Xiu glanced at him appraisingly.

"Sheng Fei, from the Soaring Dragon dojo in Ning," the thin man introduced himself, causing many of the guests in the audience to pale.

"The old leader of the Soaring Dragon dojo? Someone like him's taking part in this challenge?!"

"Just how many people did this Zhang Lie offend?!"

"Ah, it looks like this Zenith Dojo isn't going to stand a chance!"

After a momentary silence, the crowd erupted in conversation once more, again having predicted the outcome of the match before it even began.

By Zhang Lie's side, Sun Mengmeng gasped. "The Soaring Dragon dojo?"

Zhang Lie frowned as he reviewed his memories. "The Soaring Dragon dojo, top-ranked in Ning, and within the top ten nationwide," he murmured.

"Famed for the strength of its founding leader, Sheng Fei, who was renowned for hunting down ten third-realm hunters in rapid succession. Even in the third realm, he's almost without peer..." Sun Mengmeng's voice began to quaver.

"Sheng Fei himself?! He was almost a monarch-level hunter a decade or so ago, and now—"

"That dojo instructor's dead!"

The crowd clearly favored Sheng Fei over the relatively nameless Lin Xiu.

A storm of genetic energy began to brew over the arena.

"Where did all these exceptionally strong challengers come from? If the dojo leader were the only one who could accept challengers, surely Zhang Lie would be dead by now! And don't you think there's something fishy about the way the Qin, Wang, and Li clans are acting? They can't be thinking to strike at Zhang Lie, can they?" a few of the spectators whispered to each other.

"I will cede the first blow to the young," Sheng Fei stated.

"Youth doesn't correlate with power," Lin Xiu replied. "You had better go first—if I make a move, you won't have the opportunity to do so!"

Lin Xiu's brimming confidence left the audience agape. Was he so arrogant that he thought he could best Sheng Fei in one blow?

"You, you dare?!" Sheng Fei's voice trembled, as though he were trying to suppress his rising anger.

Lin Xiu smiled disdainfully at him. "Do you think you're really all that high up the hierarchy of the third realm?"

Sheng Fei's forehead furrowed. Either Lin Xiu was just putting on a front, or he was one of the truly strong existences of the third realm. "Just who are you?"

Chapter 138: The Four Sages

"You? You don't deserve to know my title!" Lin Xiu smiled at Sheng Fei disdainfully.

The outpouring of genetic energy around Sheng Fei suddenly turned cold. The darkness-attuned genetic energy, gleaming with malicious light, made Sheng Fei look like an evil scorpion.

"Trying to act mysteriously, are you? I'll vanquish you in one blow!" Dark genetic energy exploded from Sheng Fei's body, dyeing the arena dark.

"Isn't this instructor being a little too arrogant? I can't believe he dares to anger Dojo Leader Sheng Fei!"

"Just watch—he's about to die!"

If nothing else, the audience was finally getting a good show at last. Despite Lin Xiu's overwhelming victory in the last two fights, Sheng Fei was still the crowd favorite: he was well-known in the hunter community, after all.

"[Descent of Hades]!" The dark energy filling the arena seemed to grow thicker. Black clouds of fog and smoke billowed out from the stage, forming an ancient throne on which a black figure seemed to be seated. A sense of chilling death swept over the crowd.

"It's Sheng Fei's signature [Descent of Hades]!" someone shouted from within the crowd.

The figure on the dread throne slowly stood up, sending chilly winds howling every which way. Dark clouds gathered above the arena. A pair of demonic claws ripped past the clouds and pressed toward Lin Xiu.

Shrouded in the mist, Lin Xiu remained immobile, as though he were scared stiff.

"See? This is as far as this dojo instructor can go. How can he hope to challenge Sheng Fei?"

Many in the audience thought that Lin Xiu was surely dead.

"[Descent of Hades]? It might look impressive, but the technique itself isn't very strong," Lin Xiu mumbled to himself. No one noticed what he said except for Zhang Lie, who was the closest to him. Only he discovered that Lin Xiu had begun circulating genetic energy.

The moment the claws swiped at him, a pale blue light caused the dark clouds above him to dissipate, forming a bulwark against the darkness. By the time the fog cleared enough that the arena was visible to the audience, Lin Xiu was the only one left standing; Sheng Fei had collapsed to the floor like a dead dog.

By his chest, a finger-sized hole was dripping blood. The guests were openmouthed with shock, as though they were all stunned by the outcome of the match.

Sheng Fei had lost after just a single blow?! He hadn't even lasted as long as Mo Tianshan did!

"D-Did Dojo Leader Sheng Fei really lose that easily?" someone whispered.

"The three challenges are over," Lin Xiu said listlessly, yawning again. He stepped down from the stage and stopped by Zhang Lie's side.

In the stands, Li Mo, Wang Han, and Qin Zongming clenched their fists tightly, their faces pale.

"Are the dojo leaders of Ning all such worthless trash?" Wang Han murmured. They weren't even able to get rid of a paltry dojo instructor!

"No, they aren't weak—the opponent's just far too strong for them. If I'm not mistaken, that dojo instructor's likely one of the four sages of China's Fenglin Volcano!" Qin Zongming spat out. He had no intention of continuing with the plan; it was obvious that, with Lin Xiu present, none of them would be able to harm Zhang Lie.

"The four great sages? Aren't they part of the military and known for their secretive nature? Why would they be participating in the opening ceremony for Zhang Lie's dojo? Could the Chinese military have sent him over? No, surely not—there's no way the military would dispatch a sage just to protect someone like Zhang Lie!" Wang Han shouted in disbelief.

"Forget it, forget it! We don't have a choice. We can't let the challenges end just like this; if we can't deal with that dojo instructor, then we simply have to get Zhang Lie in the arena himself. No matter what, we can't let this golden opportunity slip away!" Li Mo whispered.

After Lin Xiu jumped off the arena, Zhang Lie stepped up once more, ready to announce the banquet that would mark the end of the ceremony. However, the moment he stepped up, murmurs of unrest spread through the audience.

"Please wait! The traditional challenge is meant to test the dojo's overall strength. Surely it's against the spirit of the challenge to have a single dojo instructor take on all three challenges? It's still early, so I suggest that we have a few more matches!" Wang Han stood up with a curious suggestion.

"Indeed, I'd like to see Dojo Leader Zhang fight himself!" Li Mo agreed.

"Yes, yes! It would be far more interesting if Dojo Leader Zhang could show us his skills as well," several other dojo leaders quickly agreed with the motion.

Zhang Lie smiled. As expected, the Qin, Wang, and Li clans wouldn't give up.

"That's right, Dojo Leader Zhang! Shouldn't you give the leaders from the other dojos some chance to shine? No one from the capital has challenged you yet!" Zhou Ruo exclaimed.

Wang Han's suggestion was supported by so many factions that Zhang Lie couldn't easily refuse. If he did so, then the dojo might lose much of its reputation, and the opening ceremony wouldn't conclude satisfactorily.

"In that case, we'll have three more challenges: but, once again, only those who defeat my instructor will have the right to challenge me," Zhang Lie replied, accepting the proposal.

Qin Zongming relaxed, but the next hurdle they would have to overcome would be Lin Xiu. If they wanted to attack Zhang Lie, they would have to defeat him first.

"What should we do? How will we get rid of Lin Xiu?" Wang Han frowned. The fact that Zhang Lie had accepted so readily gave him quite a bit of stress: Lin Xiu was simply so strong that his confidence couldn't help but waver.

"There's no issue. Our target has never been Lin Xiu, but rather Zhang Lie. We'll give up two challenges, but I'll make sure that Zhang Lie's on stage himself for the last one!" Li Mo was still relatively calm; he knew just how strong the subsequent challengers would be.

"I apologize for the trouble, Master Lin!" Zhang Lie inclined his head toward Lin Xiu as he walked down the stage once more, whereas Lin Xiu again took center stage.

"Captain, there wasn't any need to agree to their unreasonable demands! We've followed the standard ceremonial proceedings throughout!" Sun Mengmeng cried out.

"Don't worry. It's not as if they would have stopped trying to attack me if I declined their suggestion, after all."

With Lin Xiu around, he didn't have much to worry about. He might not have his past life's strength, but that didn't mean his experience had vanished. Given Lin Xiu's performance, Zhang Lie could tell that he was at least as strong as a sage.

Lin Xiu's gaze was as indolent as ever.

"Who will challenge me?" he asked. His voice wasn't very loud, but it carried across the stage.

The audience stirred once more, but no one stepped forward this time. After all, Dugu Xun, Mo Tianshan, and Sheng Fei had all lost to Lin Xiu in a single blow. Only someone whose strength was well above that of all three hunters even stood a chance.

"Is there no one?" Lin Xiu asked again.

Qin Zongming gave Ren Tianlong a look; the latter nodded and slowly stood up. The audience quickly made way for the imposing hunter.

"It's Ren Tianlong himself! Apparently, he once faced three third-realm superior-grade lifeforms alone, and he's purportedly stronger than even Sheng Fei!"

"So? Sheng Fei was defeated in a single blow! I doubt this Ren Tianlong will do much better. Not losing in one blow's enough of an accomplishment!"

By now, the audience was siding with Lin Xiu. Ren Tianlong was a legendary figure, but Lin Xiu had dominated the first three matches with barely any effort.

"Sir, I'm Ren Tianlong. Let's have a good match!"

Ren Tianlong walked out from the crowd and leapt onto the stage. Compared to the three dojo leaders from Ning, he was far more reserved. His expression was serious as he got into a battle stance.

The two of them glanced at each other, neither wanting to make the first move.

"Ren Tianlong, eh? You're not the real deal, are you?" Lin Xiu asked, his voice pitched low enough that none but the two of them could hear their conversation.

"As for you, sir, I'm sure you're far more than a dojo instructor around here!" 'Ren Tianlong' countered.

It was clear to the audience that Lin Xiu was an exceptional hunter, or 'Ren Tianlong' wouldn't be on stage now.

"It must feel uncomfortable to use a shapeshifting potion, musn't it?" Lin Xiu continued.

"I can't fool your eyes, sir."

Knowing that his true identity might well be exposed if he allowed this conversation to continue, 'Ren Tianlong' charged forward with a burst of genetic energy, shielded by a curious glow.

"You're from the Qin clan, aren't you? It looks like you've really done significant preparation in order to deal with Zhang Lie. But did you really think that it was a good idea to send a water-attuned hunter against me? If nothing else, I have to commend you on your courage."

A faint blue glow shone from Lin Xiu's body.

"Take this!" 'Ren Tianlong' swung at Lin Xiu with a shining fist. Waves shot out from his fist, morphing into a ferocious blue qilin that rushed toward Lin Xiu.

"The legendary-grade [Qilin Fist], huh? It looks like my guess wasn't wrong— but your attack's lacking!"

Lin Xiu needed only one finger to counter the attack. Ripples of genetic energy spread out from his finger, forming a screen of water against which the blue qilin crashed. The qilin roared and smashed its body against the translucent barrier, but failed to break or even dent it.

Instead, as Lin Xiu flicked his finger, the screen of water exploded along with the qilin, transforming into a thin arrow of water that Lin Xiu sent toward 'Ren Tianlong'. 'Ren Tianlong' stumbled back in shock; the arrow pierced his palm and shot out his right shoulder with a spray of blood before dissipating into red-tinted mist.

Chapter 139: Monarch of the Six Seas

As the protective barrier by the edges of the arena faded away, traces of fresh blood caught the eye. The audience was silent. 'Ren Tianlong' stood quietly, blood seeping down his palm, as a bloody odor spread across the arena.

Had Lin Xiu won in one blow again?

"His opponent was Ren Tianlong from the capital! Just who is that Lin Xiu figure?! Isn't the disparity in strength a little too large?"

The audience exploded into chatter once more.

The dojos of the capital were, as a general rule, stronger than those in Ning. Ren Tianlong was known to be a strong, mysterious hunter, and everyone had witnessed the strength of his blow, but Lin Xiu had countered it with ease.

The Wang, Li, and Qin clan heads were all staring at Lin Xiu with disgust.

"This fellow—"

"There's no doubt—he's one of the four sages of the Fenglin Volcano!"

Wang Han clutched his armrest until his knuckles turned white, creating a crack in the reinforced armrest with brute force alone.

"One of the four sages! Even if we used extraordinary methods, it'll be difficult to get rid of him," Qin Zongming sighed.

"Don't worry. The key will be in the next battle!" Wang Han took a deep breath, then glanced toward one spot in the audience, where a bald man nodded back at him. As he did so, the man retrieved a syringe from within his clothes. Everyone else was focused on the arena, and no one noticed what he had done. He injected the contents of the syringe into his arm, the pale blue glow causing his veins to bulge as a blue glow shot through them.

In little more than a second, everything seemed normal again, and Wang Han relaxed.

Qin Zongming and Li Mo slumped by their seats as they waited for the next challenge.

"Is there anyone else who wishes to challenge me?"

'Ren Tianlong' had admitted defeat. His injury wasn't particularly serious, but the gulf between him and Lin Xiu was obvious, and there was no point in dragging the fight out further.

No one met Lin Xiu's gaze.

The discussion among the audience quieted down as they waited for the next volunteer.

"I will be the next challenger." After a momentary silence, a figure rose up from the audience, a bald and rather thin dojo leader.

"This is Dojo Leader Liu Shuang, from the Starshine Dojo!"

Someone from the audience recognized him at once.

"That's right, he was the former dojo leader of Starshine, and he's a third-realm hunter now!"

"Isn't it strange? There are so many top-rate hunters here to challenge a first-realm dojo leader?"

"Isn't that so? And the Zenith Dojo's just starting out, too..."

"Well, from my perspective, it won't matter who the challenger is."

"That's right! Can any of these leaders beat Zhang Lie's instructor? He's been defeating everyone with just one blow!"

It was difficult to determine who would win. Although the audience was surprised by Liu Shuang's identity, many favored Lin Xiu. They didn't think highly of Lin Xiu at first, not until he dispatched his four opponents with just a single blow each.

Lin Xiu gazed coldly at Liu Shuang, from whom he could smell a strange odor. This is... a restricted potion!

"He's consumed a restricted potion!" Zhang Lie, by the side of the arena, frowned. He was also able to detect the strange odor that permeated Liu Shuang's body. "The Wang clan really does love resorting to such means!"

"Captain, will Instructor Lin be able to handle him?" Sun Mengmeng asked, swallowing a gulp of saliva. The challengers had been getting stronger and stronger, and Liu Shuang had even used a potion!

"Handle him? Our Instructor Lin wouldn't break a sweat even if he had to handle two of him at once!" Zhang Lie smiled.

The potion that Liu Shuang had consumed would increase his genetic energy activity fivefold, and he would temporarily lose his sense of pain. A hunter would generally only use such a potion in life-threatening circumstances, because its side effects were commensurate with the boost it granted.

To be using such a potion during a practice match...

"It's a shame to see a dojo leader without any sense of ethics," Lin Xiu commented idly.

"Hah, I don't have a choice—you're too strong." Liu Shuang licked his chapped lips.

"Unfortunately for you, even that potion won't help you do anything against me!" Lin Xiu countered. A blue pillar of genetic energy shot into the air as he turned serious for the first time.

"That dojo instructor's going for the first blow?"

"Just how strong is he? I can sense the fluctuations of genetic energy right where I'm sitting!"

Exclamations rang out from the audience.

The pressure from that pillar of genetic energy was like that from a vast ocean, all concentrated on Liu Shuang's body. Even before Lin Xiu attacked, the pressure from his genetic energy was already causing Liu Shuang to sweat.

Lin Xiu stepped forward. His genetic energy spread over the entire arena, turning it into a blue ocean. As he moved, ripples of blue light emanated from his feet and struck Liu Shuang, each stronger than the last.

Like a deity, Lin Xiu strode imperturbably forward, crushing Liu Shuang with nothing more than his aura and pressure.

Blood seeped out of all the orifices of Liu Shuang's body. Liu Shuang stood hunched, unable to do more than circulate his lightning-attuned genetic energy at full power to shield against Lin Xiu's pressure.

"Th-This is [Domain of the Sea God]! He's from the Fenglin Volcano!" Finally, a knowledgeable member of the audience uncovered Lin Xiu's identity.

Liu Shuang felt the pressure growing stronger as Lin Xiu walked closer.

"No, this can't be—this pressure's comparable to [Domain of the Sea God]! Could it really be him? Surely not, surely not. He's a high-ranking member of the military, so why would he be present now?"

He shook his head forcefully, trying to dispel the doubts that clouded his mind.

"If you admit defeat now, I'll spare your life," a cold voice grated out, seemingly right by Liu Shuang's ear.

The next moment, the pressure increased sharply, and Liu Shuang's vertebrae seemed to pop.

As Liu Shuang's body crackled with lightning, a curious odor emanated from his body.

"What? There's no way he can purge his opponent's blood like that!" Wang Han cried out, noticing what was happening.

"Kneel!" Lin Xiu commanded.

Liu Shuang felt his back dip with the pressure, cracking his bones and forcing him to the ground, despite Liu Shuang's every effort to remain upright.

Those spectating the match gaped in stunned silence: Liu Shuang was no match for Lin Xiu! Even Zhang Lie seemed shocked. Lin Xiu's indolence had vanished and been replaced with a ruler's authority.

"Someone like you doesn't deserve to be a dojo leader." Lin Xiu stared at Liu Shuang from above. Liu Shuang's throat gurgled, as if he were trying to force a few words out.

"Don't bother explaining. I would hate to mar this opening ceremony with a death. Don't let me ever see you again—now, scram!" Lin Xiu, disgusted by Liu Shuang's pleading, suddenly struck his prone body with a foot, kicking him away like a soccer ball.

Liu Shuang's body flew over the stands and out of the Zenith Dojo. The audience was silent: most of the onlookers still hadn't recovered from their earlier shock, when Lin Xiu had forced Liu Shuang to kneel with just his aura and pressure alone.

"What's the Fenglin Volcano, and just who is that dojo instructor? How could he be so strong?!"

"You don't even know about the Fenglin Volcano or the four great sages of China? Surely you know about the Sage of the Six Seas, then? That's him, Lin Xiu!"

"What? How did he become a dojo instructor?!"

"Of course he's not a dojo instructor! He's just there to protect Zhang Lie!"

"So Zhang Lie has connections to the military? In that case, I've decided: my son will attend the Zenith Dojo!"

The audience once again buzzed with excitement. Almost everyone knew what was going on now. The Sage of the Six Seas himself was protecting Zhang Lie, who had clear ties with the military. The repeated challenges had only secured the reputation of the Zenith Dojo, whose name would surely spread far and wide across China, and even throughout the world federation.

Lin Xiu reined in his aura and again assumed his insouciant persona. "Are there any challengers remaining? Fair warning: I won't show any mercy to those who dishonor their name."

No one dared rise to the occasion. After all, they would have to face the Sage of the Six Seas himself! Who would want to go against such an indomitable existence?

Wang Han's eyes turned cold. Lin Xiu was a mountain, an obstacle they would have to overcome to get to Zhang Lie.

"What are we going to do? Our plan's going to fail!" Qin Zongming murmured.

"Not yet. The Sage of the Six Seas is an imposing figure indeed, but now that his identity's been revealed..." Li Mo began.

"Hoh, it looks like you have an idea in mind!"

"Perhaps, but whether or not it'll succeed will depend on Zhang Lie." Li Mo's eyes gleamed.

Chapter 140: Forced On Stage

"What do you mean?" Wang Han asked. "Should we send a younger hunter to challenge him?"

"Of course! I don't believe that the Sage of the Six Seas would be willing to fight against someone of the younger generation."

Wang Han mulled over the proposal. He was thinking of something similar, but Zhang Lie was an overwhelming opponent for the hunters of his generation. At the very least, there were no suitable hunters in their three clans who could even defeat Zhang Lie, let alone kill him directly.

"Don't worry, Clan Head Wang—I've come prepared." Li Mo was as confident as ever.

"Li Xin!" he called out, and one of the hunters from the Li delegation stepped forward. His deep blue armor made him look somewhat like Li Mo. He was glancing at Zhang Lie with an icy demeanor.

"Li Xin? The Li clan's going to send Li Xin to challenge the Sage of the Six Seas? What a joke! Li Xin might be a genius in his own right, having advanced to the third realm before the age of thirty, but no matter how strong he is, he's still a member of the younger generation. Against a sage, what could he do?"

Vigorous discussion broke out among the audience.

Even Zhang Lie was a little confused. Neither Ren Tianlong nor Sheng Fei were a match for Lin Xiu—just what could Li Xin do?

Only a moment later, he realized what kind of trick Li Mo was trying to pull.

"I'm truly impressed by the instructors under the Zenith Dojo's employ, but it's a shame that Dojo Leader Zhang himself has yet to have a chance to shine! As a result, I've specially called Li Xin over in hopes that you'll accept the challenge. You're both relatively close in age, so it's in accordance with the rules," Li Mo explained.

"Oh? That's not a bad idea. Li Xin might be older than Zhang Lie, but they're both from the same generation!"

"Indeed, this would certainly be an interesting fight!"

"Interesting? Same generation? Zhang Lie's barely in his twenties, and Li Jin's already well into his thirties! Given the time dilation in the dimensional world, they're pretty much a century apart! Furthermore, Li Xin's been in the third realm for more than a year, whereas Zhang Lie hasn't even been in the first realm for a full year yet!"

Naturally, some people realized that Li Mo was twisting the truth.

In the arena, Lin Xiu smiled. Under ordinary circumstances, he would disdain the very idea of interfering in the younger generation's business, but not if it was under military command. Above all, he was a soldier, and his job was to carry out orders efficiently and effectively. His task was to protect Zhang Lie, and he would do so even at cost to his reputation.

Furthermore, strictly speaking, Li Xin and Zhang Lie certainly weren't considered hunters of the same generation—or, more accurately, if Li Xin and Zhang Lie could be considered to be in the same generation, so could he and Li Xin. After all, Lin Xiu had just entered his forties!

However, if Zhang Lie were to choose to avoid this last challenge, it would surely affect the reputation of the Zenith Dojo.

Zhang Lie didn't deny Li Mo's argument outright, but he seemed a little discomfited by the idea.

"Clan Head Li, your argument has some merit, but I'm not sure it's in the spirit of the challenges."

Li Mo smiled. "Rules are there to be broken! Dojo Leader Zhang, your instructor's peerless—isn't it meaningless to have him continue fighting?"

"Of course it's meaningful," Zhang Lie countered. "I'm showing off the impressive ability of the instructors of Dojo Zenith."

"These are pretty words, Dojo Leader Zhang, but are you simply masking your fear?" Li Mo raised his eyebrows, his lips curling up into a mocking grin. The longer this verbal battle went, the more confident he was that his plan would succeed.

At this point, all he wanted to do was get Zhang Lie on stage!

"A-Afraid? Not quite, but I'm only a first-realm hunter!" Zhang Lie stuttered and stammered, an uncomfortable expression on his face, stunning Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, and the other hunters of Team Zenith. They stared at him as though they were looking at an impostor.

After all, in front of them, Zhang Lie had never seemed to be afraid of anything. Even when he was faced with a three-star black-tipped scarab, he had rushed forward without any reservation. Although his opponent was a third-realm hunter, the members of Team Zenith didn't think that Zhang Lie would be so scared that he would start stammering.

In other words... he was faking it.

"Surely you must be joking, Dojo Leader Zhang. If you can found a dojo, then you must surely be stronger than an ordinary second-realm hunter. Isn't it too modest to style yourself as a first-realm hunter?"

"That's right, Dojo Leader Zhang, show us your true capabilities! Aren't you the fearless Dragonwolf that we've all heard about?"

Other members of the audience began to instigate him.

"Look, Dojo Leader Zhang! Everyone wants you to show us your skills."

Wang Han smiled like a fox. If Zhang Lie were to step on stage, he would likely lose; if he didn't, the boost to the dojo's reputation from the first five challenges would all go to waste.

Zhang Lie sighed, and he seemed even more troubled.

"But I—against a strong opponent, I'm afraid it'll be hard for me to hold back, so..."

"Is that all, Dojo Leader Zhang? Please, feel free to use your full strength! If anything happens, don't worry, you won't be to blame!" Li Mo boomed, as though he could already visualize Zhang Lie's death throes.

"Dojo Leader Zhang, you won't deny us all the chance to see the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie in person, would you?"

The crowd was thrilled by Wang Han's suggestion. After all, most of the audience had only ever seen Zhang Lie fight on a recording, and this was a rare opportunity to witness his strength for themselves.

It was for this reason that Li Mo had guessed that the audience would side with him.

"Very well, Clan Head Li. As long as you don't blame me for any accident—"

"Of course not, of course not! No matter what happens, the Li clan will not hold you responsible, Dojo Leader Zhang!"

"In that case, I would be honored to accept Young Master Li's challenge. Please, be careful!" Zhang Lie shook his head helplessly, his tone so disdainful of Li Xin's strength that Li Xin almost exploded on the spot.

The two of them stepped on stage; the audience's attention was fully focused on them.

"I heard you were the one who killed Li Jin," Li Xin began, his eyes gleaming with killing intent.

"Indeed. I was only planning on giving him a beating, but he refused to stop bothering me, and then—well, you know the rest," Zhang Lie replied with a gentle smile.

"If you kneel down and beg for mercy now, I might consider sparing your life," Li Xin spat out. To him, Zhang Lie was a stinkbug he could crush without any effort at all.

"You're welcome to try." Zhang Lie's body vanished without a trace.

"Ha! Have you got nothing but tricks?" Li Xin's eyes filled with disdain. He released a gust of genetic energy, forming a web of lightning that blanketed the arena. The lightning web shifted back and forth, trying to sift the arena for traces of Zhang Lie.

"Do you really think you can hide in stealth against a lightning-attuned hunter?" Li Mo chortled to himself, as did Wang Han and Qin Zongming.

Zhang Lie, who was hidden by one corner of the arena, suddenly smiled. Lightning-attuned genetic energy was an extreme counter against environmental- and stealth-based techniques, but Zhang Lie's venombane scorpion soulshard was far from ordinary. In addition, the stealth ability it conferred wasn't environment-based, but a rarer spatial version instead.

Li Xin's lightning web impacted a particular location with a purple flash, and Zhang Lie's figure appeared before his eyes. Unstealthed, Zhang Lie stumbled forward with his sword. Zhang Lie's thrust was rough and haphazard, as though he had been caught unawares.

"[Thunderflash Sword]!" A blinding flash of lightning passed through Zhang Lie without any resistance at all.

The spectators were silent, their eyes wide open in shock. Had the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie been vanquished just like that? The match had barely begun! The spectators couldn't believe that he had fallen so easily.

"Captain!" Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng and the others instinctively cried out in shock.

"Don't worry, that's not his real body," Lin Xiu whispered to them.

Indeed, Zhang Lie's 'corpse' was slowly turning transparent, and there was no sign of blood on the floor.

Li Xin's eyes bulged. If this was just a clone, where was his actual body? After all, his lightning web had covered the entire arena; there was no way Zhang Lie had avoided the attack. He would have sensed any disturbance in the web, but there had been nothing unusual at all!

This lad's stealth technique is pretty interesting. No wonder he was able to kill Li Jin! Genetic energy exploded from him as he clutched his broadsword and began searching carefully for Zhang Lie.

"Zhang Lie's trying to hide? Isn't he being too cowardly?"

"Cowardly? Are you a fool? His opponent's a third-realm hunter, and he's only in the first realm! Why would he go for a direct confrontation?"

"That's right. If it were me, I'd do the same—start by exhausting and annoying your opponent!"

"In that case, we're in for a slog! They both seem to have significant reservoirs of genetic energy, so how long will we have to wait before something interesting happens?" the guests murmured to themselves.

The hotly anticipated clash had devolved into a game of hide-and-seek. It really was looking like it would be a boring match.

Li Xin could find no trace of Zhang Lie at all. As Zhang Lie vanished and reappeared, he activated [Mirrored Refraction] concurrently with his stealth ability to create clones of himself where he stood. The moment the clone appeared, he vanished.

Li Jin struck clone after clone to no effect; during this process, it became clear to him that Zhang Lie's stealth went beyond the level of a standard environment-based technique, and he instead began to focus on the minute spatial fluctuations that occurred each time Zhang Lie used his ability.

He felt a spatial fluctuation behind him, and he immediately swung his sword toward that location. The blade of the sword smashed against the arena as Li Xin frowned: he hadn't struck Zhang Lie, but only one of his countless clones!

After yet another failed attack, Li Xin was exasperated.

"Is this really a third-realm hunter? He's starting to look more and more like a fool!"

"I have to admit, Li Xin does look rather foolish chasing after shadows the way he's doing now!"

"Right, can't he just stand still and do nothing? Why waste so much energy?"

"What? Don't you think Zhang Lie's fighting style is deplorable? Real men should face each other head-on!"

"Not when there's such a wide power disparity between them, surely?"

The spectators seemed to be even more flustered than the combatants themselves.

"Young Master Li, as a third-realm hunter, I hope you'll go easy on my first-realm self," Zhang Lie suddenly said, incensing Li Xin further. His body appeared behind Li Xin, to his right, but Li Xin sensed spatial fluctuations coming from his front instead.

"Die!" Li Xin thundered, striking toward his front with his broadsword. Lightning crackled and space twisted: this blow was far stronger than any that had come before it, because this was the only blow that Li Xin had imbued with his full strength!