

U. Warlord 141

Chapter 141: Exceeds Expectations

Li Xin's blow shook the entire arena, but it once again passed harmlessly through Zhang Lie's 'body'. Clone, clone, clone after clone! Li Xin's face distorted, and he suddenly realized that he had fallen into an intricately planned trap.

"What? Li Xin must be a fool to be chasing after these clones so persistently!"

"Aren't you the fool? Can't you see that all Zhang Lie can do is hide? I thought he was supposed to be a strong hunter, but now it feels like he just got lucky!"

The clash between the two combatants caused the audience to favor Li Xin—but after Li Xin had struck with all his strength, exposing his weak points, Zhang Lie, who had been hiding and manipulating him the entire fight, finally made his move.

A wolf's howl shook the air, and Li Xin felt a sudden, malicious chill by his back. A blood-colored wolfman walked out from behind Li Xin. As he punched forward, a blood-red pillar of genetic energy rose from where he stood, and a dragon of blood coiled around his body.

A mysterious aura emanated from his body, causing the crackling lightning to still and go faint. Ripples spread out with Zhang Lie at the epicenter, quelling everything they touched. A serpent in black and red soared through the skies, blanketing the arena in night.

It was the middle of the day, but a radiant moon and the starry night sky covered up the sun. The moment this moon began to glow, Li Xin felt the genetic energy being drained from his body.

Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed as he held up Venombane, a storm of genetic energy exploding around him as a bloody dragon coiled around the blade. He left afterimages behind him as he swung his blade, but to the onlookers, his actions seemed unusually slow, as though time had been locally dilated around him.

"Die!" The blood moon glowed, the serpent shrieked, and an ancient authority seemed to descend on the arena.

"This—Dragonwolf!"

"Is this the power of the Eclipse Sage?"

"Could Zhang Lie really be this strong? This is on the level of a third-realm hunter!"

"No, no—how could Zhang Lie have become so strong?!"

The guests felt a sudden fear clawing through their hearts. They were only spectators—but they too were frightened by the attack that all but decimated the arena.

"Li Xin!" Li Mo called out from the stands, his face a book of dread. Zhang Lie's blow had exceeded his expectations, as well as Li Xin's tolerance.

Li Mo tried to rush toward the stage, but a man blocked him as soon as he stood up.

"Clan Head Li, surely you aren't trying to disrupt the match, are you?" Lin Xiu smiled at him. Li Mo opened his mouth, but couldn't say anything in defense. His face warping in rage, he sat back down.

As the dust and smoke cleared from the arena, amidst a faintly red mist, only a lone figure remained standing: Zhang Lie. Li Xin had vanished entirely; not even his corpse was left behind.

The guests were all stunned, as was Lin Xiu. After all, none of them thought that Zhang Lie would dare to kill Li Mo's beloved, talented son right before his eyes. Not only that, they were shocked by the power that Zhang Lie had demonstrated during the match.

Zhang Lie was only a first-realm hunter! The fact that he was able to kill a three-star black-tipped scarab, comparable to a peak second-realm hunter, had been chalked up to luck; that should have been the limit of his strength to date. In other words, he certainly shouldn't have been able to exceed that level of strength, at least in the short term.

Under ordinary circumstances, no matter how lucky he was, a peak first-realm hunter could boast of his strength just by surviving a few blows against a third-realm hunter, let alone defeating one. The disparity in strength between the two hunters would be far too large to be overcome—not by framework, techniques, or soulshards. However, not only had the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie been able to fight against a third-realm hunter, he had even vaporized him in a single blow.

Lin Xiu felt that he now understood why Su Feng had sent him to guard this lad.

"So this is the bloody dragon for whom the Dragonwolf was named! It's far more impressive in person!"

"Li Xin's a third-realm hunter, but Zhang Lie annihilated him that easily?"

"Poor Li Mo—his darling son died just like that!"

"Who's to blame? After all, Zhang Lie was the one who was against the challenge from the very beginning!"

"Maybe so, but isn't Zhang Lie way too strong? Just what kind of monster is he?"

"Isn't that so? Who else do you know who could defeat an opponent two realms higher and annihilate him in a single blow? He's peerless!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

The crowd roared in approval of the skill that Zhang Lie had demonstrated, but Zhang Lie raised an arm, quelling the chant.

"I apologize, Clan Head Li, for failing to restrain myself adequately."

"Zhang Lie, you—" Li Mo clutched his armrests until his knuckles turned white, but that was the only word he could force out. Thinking back to what Zhang Lie had repeatedly asked before the match, it seemed as though he had planned all this out.

When they cajoled Zhang Lie into taking a challenge, they had fallen into his trap. Zhang Lie knew that they were going to target him, and he had devised a plan to counteract theirs.

Qin Zongming and Wang Han, by Li Mo's side, were shocked by the strength that Zhang Lie had displayed, an overwhelming strength that threatened even them.

"I do apologize, Clan Head Li. I know how upset you must feel, but I truly didn't do it intentionally," Zhang Lie emphasized again, his face despondent.

Li Mo spasmed as he watched Zhang Lie's act, so enraged he barely avoided spitting out a mouthful of blood.

"Y-You!" In the end, flecks of bloody spittle nevertheless came out with his last exclamation. He sprang out of his seat, unable to bear the thought of staying any longer.

"Please stay, Clan Head Li! I've prepared a sumptuous feast for you!"

Li Mo choked as he turned to leave, his face intermittently flushing white and red. Li Xin, genius of the Li clan in his generation, would forever rest in the Zenith Dojo.

The Qin, Wang, and Li clans had gone mute. Wang Han and Qin Zongming found themselves somewhat relieved that Li Mo had proposed the plan of sending a hunter to fight against Zhang Lie, and that it was Li Xin who had gone up to challenge him. Otherwise, the annihilated hunter would have been a member of their clans.

By that point, they were truly afraid of Zhang Lie, an existence who could overwhelm a hunter two realms above him. They crouched down in their seats, trying not to draw attention to themselves, as the ceremony concluded.

In truth, if they were to continue to pressure him into more challenges now, Zhang Lie would have been hard-pressed to deal with them—by now, he was nothing more than an empty shell, drained of his reserves.

Killing an opponent two realms higher was a ridiculously taxing process, one that no one else would have been able to handle. That single blow had consumed all of Zhang Lie's genetic energy, and was the strongest blow that he had been able to launch to date.

With that single victory, the Zenith Dojo's name and popularity immediately rose to the top tier of dojos in China. Zhang Lie's opponents cowered before his strength, as well as the power that he had now begun to amass.

"Did you all note down the blow that Zhang Lie used in that last fight?" Zhou Ruo asked.

Zhang Lie's strength was far beyond what they had expected, and it shook even them. That last attack had been a frightening combination of techniques, each of which they had to be wary of. In addition, they had to carefully consider whether they really wanted Zhang Lie as an enemy.

On the other hand, Zhang Quan, seated nearby, was staring at Zhang Lie hard enough that it seemed as though he was dissecting Zhang Lie in his head. The domain of [Eclipse], something that should have belonged to the Liao branch of the ministry of ruins—that was, to him—had now become part of Zhang Lie's repertoire.

He had paid careful attention to Zhang Lie's fight, and he was certain that, without [Eclipse] draining Li Xin's genetic energy, Zhang Lie would hardly have been able to defeat him in one blow.

How could Zhang Quan bear having such a wondrous treasure of a technique be stolen from him? But what could he do now? Compared to some of the other guests in the audience, he barely had any right to speak.

Meanwhile, the Chu and Yun delegations were rather despondent. The strength that Zhang Lie had displayed shocked both the Chu and Yun clan heads. Who would have expected that a first-realm hunter could boast such strength?

Not only that, Zhang Lie had had a superb understanding of the big picture, and it seemed as though the events of the opening ceremony had gone exactly as he had planned. Within a few days, he had managed to establish connections with the Blackwind Fort, and had even obtained a sage-level bodyguard from the military. His resourcefulness overwhelmed the two clan heads.

"It looks like we should have considered this matter more carefully," Chu Lin murmured, a serious expression on his face. He criticized himself for not having listened more to Chu Feng's pleas and for falling prey to his pride.

He had lost an excellent opportunity to develop a relationship with Zhang Lie, and seeing his performance today, Chu Lin could hardly imagine just how far Zhang Lie would be able to go.

"And I should have listened to Yun Bing! At the very least, we haven't soured relationships between us and Zhang Lie. Given our choice to remain neutral, it's not suitable for us to meddle in the younger generation's affairs with regards to Zhang Lie. We had better leave it for Yun Bing and Chu Feng to handle on their own," Yun Long surmised.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing sighed. Zhang Lie's performance had shocked them both, and they were once again dismayed by their clans' respective decisions. They had been in a position to help Zhang Lie greatly, but their elders had denied them that opportunity.

From today onwards, they were certain that Zhang Lie would distance himself from their clans, as well as them.

The guests all around them were discussing the exciting challenges they had witnessed today, both with regards to Lin Xiu, one of the four sages from the Fenglin Volcano, and Zhang Lie, who had stepped forth at the very end.

Of particular note was Zhang Lie's final blow against Li Xin.

"Alright, there aren't any other challengers, are there?" Zhang Lie asked, glancing all around them. His smile left the audience shivering; many of the younger hunters didn't dare to meet his eyes.

The arena was silent. The wolfman's last attack had been deeply imprinted in everyone's mind, and no one dared test Zhang Lie any further.

When the audience remained silent for a few long moments, Zhang Lie finally relented. "In that case, I declare the challenges over!"

Chapter 142: Su Feng's Arrival

Wang Han pursed his lips at Zhang Lie's announcement. "Are we really going to let him end the ceremony just like that?"

Qin Zongming glanced at Wang Han, then at Zhang Lie's calm expression. Sweat beaded on his face. What could they do? He could hardly find a disciple from his clan who would be able to fight against Zhang Lie, and even if someone were willing to do so, the outcome would be obvious.

"There's nothing we can do at this point. Let him end the ceremony." Qin Zongming's attitude caused Wang Han to sigh in relief. He had no ideas remaining either; he simply couldn't stand ceding the victory to Zhang Lie just like that.

As if sensing their defeatist attitudes, Zhou Ruo's face turned dark. "The Qin, Li, and Wang clans—each is more useless than the last! They can't even handle a child like Zhang Lie!"

"Given how strong Zhang Lie is, they're really not to blame. Perhaps we could send Zhang Quan to test the waters," He Tian, the He clan head, replied.

They of the capital certainly wouldn't sacrifice themselves for the plan as Li Mo had; they could just move in after Zhang Quan. After all, Zhang Quan was a government official, and his status was sufficient to annoy Zhang Lie a little.

"Official Zhang, did you see the technique that Zhang Lie was using? It looks like a modified version of [Eclipse]—don't you think he's rather arrogant to be using it in front of you? Are you going to let the matter of the ruins go just like that?" Qian Meng whispered by Zhang Quan's side.

Zhang Quan scowled. Indeed, he had to acquire [Eclipse] at any cost, but if none of the Qin, Wang, and Li clans could deal with Zhang Lie, what could he, a lone government official, do?

But if he were to miss this opportunity, Zhang Lie's performance was more than sufficient to have him be considered a strategic asset, one that the world federation would spare no expense to nurture.

"Clan Head Qian, what do you mean?" Zhang Quan pressed Qian Meng.

"What do I mean? Official Zhang, there's no need to pretend to be dumb. You know just as well as we do that Zhang Lie's going to start amassing power and followers if this dojo gets off the ground, and if you want to try to wrest [Eclipse] back from him then..."

Of course, Zhang Quan had already considered that point.

"Or, in other words, you want me to be your vanguard," Zhang Quan surmised.

"Vanguard? No, certainly not! It's simply that we aren't government officials like you, and we aren't protected by our status. As part of the ministry of ruins, you have the authority to challenge Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Quan narrowed his eyes: Qian Meng did make a valid point.

"Wait!" Just as Zhang Lie was about to step off the stage, Zhang Quan stood up.

Zhang Lie sighed internally. In the end, he couldn't sit still, could he?

"Ah, Official Zhang! Is something the matter?" Zhang Lie asked politely, with a genial smile.

Zhang Quan took a deep breath. He'd faced Zhang Lie before in the Eclipse Sage's ruins, and he didn't think himself an opponent for Zhang Lie, but he could certainly cause trouble for Zhang Lie without fighting him directly.

He raised his eyebrows. "I was shocked by the demonstration of your strength, Dojo Leader Zhang, but I believe one of the techniques you used was [Eclipse], the lost inheritance from the Eclipse Sage's ruins!"

"Hmm? The Eclipse Sage's [Eclipse]?! No wonder Zhang Lie was able to defeat Li Xin in a single blow—he had [Eclipse]!"

"But I've seen records of [Eclipse], and in no case did its activation involve an underworld river or a blood moon!"

Zhang Quan's words sparked considerable discussion in the audience. Just about everyone present knew of hunters as strong as the Eclipse Sage. Everyone looked toward Zhang Lie, waiting to hear his response.

"Yes, I did. I believe you were present when I received it, Official Zhang. For what purpose do you bring this up again?"

In truth, Zhang Lie didn't really care about as weak a figure as Zhang Quan any longer. With the military backing Zhang Lie up, Zhang Quan wouldn't be able to threaten him at all.

The other hunters in the audience were again shocked by Zhang Lie's confirmation. No wonder! No wonder Zhang Lie was so strong—he had inherited the Eclipse Sage's [Eclipse]! They scrutinized Zhang Lie even more carefully. It was very likely that he would become a rising star of China, and even of the entire world federation!

"I'd simply love to see a demonstration of [Eclipse], Dojo Leader Zhang."

"I apologize, but I won't do so now." Zhang Lie rejected Zhang Quan's suggestion immediately.

"But isn't it an excellent day for a demonstration, Dojo Leader Zhang?"

"Right, Dojo Leader Zhang, won't you show us the technique?"

"Didn't you already use [Eclipse] during your last battle? Please, show it to us again!"

"Yes, it's been so many years since [Eclipse] last made an appearance!"

More and more members of the audience were supporting the idea.

"Dojo Leader Zhang, I believe I speak for everyone present when I say that we all want to see the true power of [Eclipse]," Wang Han added. If someone else wanted to target Zhang Lie, he'd certainly join in!

Many of those in the audience were established hunters in their own right, and for Zhang Lie to reveal one of his trump cards so publicly was certainly an unreasonable request.

"If you'd really like to see it for yourself, Official Zhang, I'm happy to accept another challenger." Zhang Lie continued to smile, but there was an edge of rime in his voice.

Zhang Quan's face sank. Who would dare send someone up against Zhang Lie now? They were just asking to die!

"Dojo Leader Zhang, I'm an official representing the Liao branch of the ministry of ruins. I could, but won't, challenge your claim to [Eclipse]; instead, at the very least, won't you please agree to the

demonstration so I can have a record of it for the ministry? If you refuse, you'd essentially be working against the world federation!"

Zhang Quan nudged the rim of his glasses.

The audience quieted down. The way Zhang Quan was phrasing things, either Zhang Lie had to demonstrate [Eclipse], or he would be refuting the authority of the world federation.

"Dojo Leader Zhang, won't you cooperate and perform this public service? After all, you're a galaxy fighter recognized by the world federation!" Zhou Ruo stood up and added.

"Indeed, indeed! Why not help the federation and give us all a good show?" added He Tian. He seemed to be trying to mediate the conflict, but his true intention was to force Zhang Lie to demonstrate [Eclipse].

Zhang Lie frowned. Did they think he would succumb to peer pressure?

"Zhang Quan, I don't think you presume to speak for the world federation, do you?" Zhang Lie ignored the Zhou and He clan heads as he refuted Zhang Quan's words.

"Oh? And to think that you're a galaxy fighter, Zhang Lie! Do you intend on continuing to violate the laws of the federation?" Zhang Quan smirked. He'd caught Zhang Lie!

"Official Zhang, please, feel free to report whatever you think I've done wrong. I'd love to see just how much you can achieve as a corrupt minor official!"

"Y-You dare besmirch the world federation?!" If Zhang Lie didn't fear his threats, then Zhang Quan couldn't do anything against him now.

"Isn't he petty? Why won't he show us the technique?"

"Hah, that's one of the Dragonwolf's trump cards! Would you be willing to show one of your top-tier techniques to a group of powerful hunters who might use it against you one day?"

The audience was of two minds about Zhang Lie's decision.

Zhang Quan stiffly turned around and motioned for the officials from the ministry of ruins to step forward. His delegation was honestly quite weak; Zhang Lie alone would have been enough to take on them all. However, if he really were to strike down officials from the world federation so publicly...

Zhang Lie was uncertain about how to proceed, but fortunately, the decision was taken out of his hands.

"Dojo Leader! Commander-in-Chief Su Feng has just sent note of his impending arrival!" One of the new hires from the Zenith Dojo rushed up to Zhang Lie with a golden note in his hands.

Zhang Quan's face went slack. Su Feng! Others might not know who Su Feng was, but he did—Su Feng was the commander-in-chief of the Blackwind Fort, one of the ten most important military outposts of the world federation. Why would someone like him be visiting Zhang Lie?

The heads of the major clans of the capital felt much the same way. News of Su Feng's impending arrival were unbelievable: would someone so important come to visit a small dojo?

What a ludicrous joke—and yet the note was as real as could be!

Zhang Lie opened the note in front of everyone's eyes. A holographic projection of a middle-aged man appeared in front of the crowd. "Su Feng, from the Blackwind Fort, here for a special visit to the Zenith Dojo!"

His voice shook the gathered crowd. Commander-in-Chief Su Feng really was on his way! Before the crowd could erupt in commotion, a piercing siren came from above the dojo.

The citizens of Ning, some still curiously observing the events from outside, opened their mouths wide as they stared at a series of hovercars that stopped by the entrance to the dojo, streamlined and filled to the brim with military armaments.

Some of the citizens pinched their thighs, trying to make sure they weren't dreaming.

Once all the hovercars had gotten into position, a fortress-class airship emerged from overhead, its exterior coated in some curious reflective material that disrupted the vision and made it difficult to determine its exact position.

As smoke filtered out of the bottom of the airship, it began to land, hovering not a hundred meters aboveground from the entrance to the dojo. A number of muscular hunters, all dressed in green, their bodies surging with genetic energy and an indomitable aura, strode forth.

"Those are Blackwind warriors!"

"My goodness, they're true Blackwind warriors!"

"Commander-in-Chief Su Feng is really here!"

The doors to the airship sealed shut as the last soldier made his way out. His military cap half-shrouded his face, but his piercing gaze caused those who looked his way to shudder. Commander-in-Chief Su Feng approached the Zenith Dojo.

Chapter 143: An Opening Celebration

Zhang Quan's face turned pale the moment he saw the imposing figure, and the clan heads and dojo leaders opposing Zhang Lie suddenly turned uneasy. Why was Su Feng visiting Zhang Lie? Even the titles of galaxy fighter and dragonsoul warrior shouldn't have been enough to attract his attention.

Was there some unusual relationship between them? Doubts filled the audience's mind.

"Not bad! There are quite a few people here, aren't there?"

Su Feng's eyes swept over the guests—just an ordinary glance, nothing more, but everyone seemed to collectively hold a breath. Su Feng, from the Blackwind Fort, along with his team of elite soldiers... none of the guests present dared to draw attention to themselves.

The Blackwind soldiers were elite warriors that the military had stationed at the third realm. As soldiers whose primary purpose was to counter alien invasions, their martial ability was naturally staggering. A few dozen soldiers had accompanied Su Feng on this sudden visit.

"Is that Commander-in-Chief Su Feng?" someone whispered.

Qin Zongming and the others swallowed a gulp of saliva—who would have expected that Su Feng himself would attend such an event?

"Commander-in-Chief Su Feng!" Zhang Quan and the clan heads of the capital hurriedly stood up and bowed in deference, and they were quickly followed by the rest of the audience.

Hovercar after hovercar filled the entrance to the dojo, and a staggering number of soldiers spilled out.

"Look—there must be at least a whole platoon of soldiers gathered here!" The citizens of Ning had never seen such a scene. They wanted to find out just what was happening within the dojo, but they didn't dare step too close.

"Here! A congratulatory gift for you," Su Feng spoke to Zhang Lie, then nodded at the gathered guests. He motioned for his subordinates to come forward with the lavish present. The last two Blackwind soldiers strode forward bearing an object.

Zhang Lie was surprised by how much thought Su Feng had put into this: his appearance alone was shocking enough, let alone the gift he had prepared.

"Congratulations on the opening of your dojo, Dojo Leader Zhang!" Su Feng handed Zhang Lie the prepared gift himself, his face beaming.

Zhang Quan and the others felt their hopes shatter. Given these circumstances, it seemed as though Zhang Lie would be protected by Su Feng from now on.

"Commander Su, you're too kind."

The object that Su Feng presented him was pitch black and gave off surprisingly concentrated cosmic energy. As Zhang Lie stepped closer to it, he realized that the genetic energy he had consumed during the fight against Li Xin was quickly being regenerated. Zhang Lie gaped in surprise.

"This is a starstone?!"

"Indeed. A small gift—don't mind it." Su Feng smiled.

Despite the pressure that Su Feng gave off, the guests still began to chatter away.

"A starstone, such a large starstone!"

"No wonder I felt as though my genetic energy was trying to burst out of my body when Commander Su appeared—it must be the effect of the starstone!"

"What a generous gift! Who could this Zhang Lie be? Surely not a relative of Commander Su... surely not his illegitimate son...?"

"Oh? This isn't something you can find on Earth, and it's rare even in the Milky Way. The disciples of the Zenith Dojo are really going to get a big boost!"

Su Feng's generosity shocked them all.

Of course, what they didn't know was that Zhang Lie's value to Su Feng was worth far more than this starstone.

"In that case, I really have to thank you, Commander Su."

Many of the guests were eyeing that hunk of starstone with jealousy and envy, even the five major clan heads of the capital.

"Between us, there's no need for courtesy! The starstone is a gift, yes, but also the precursor to a request. As the commander-in-chief of the Blackwind Fort, I'd like to hire you as an instructor for the fort—I hope you won't deny this request of mine!" Su Feng continued.

Zhang Quan's forehead beaded with sweat.

Zhang Lie was going to be employed as an instructor for the Blackwind Fort? Why was he receiving such preferential treatment?

It was rare for even the most notable third-realm hunters to be employed as external instructors for the military, let alone a first-realm hunter like Zhang Lie!

Why? Why did everything good seem to happen to Zhang Lie?

"What? Is Commander Su serious?"

"The Dragonwolf Zhang Lie as an external instructor for the Blackwind Fort? Just what can he teach the soldiers?"

The guests gasped to themselves as they added Zhang Lie to the list of people they would never dare to offend. Who would dare touch an instructor of the Blackwind Fort?

"Of course, Commander Su!" Clearly, Su Feng wanted to invest in his future potential, and Zhang Lie wasn't going to turn him down. The information that Zhang Lie possessed certainly qualified him as an instructor. After all, he would be primarily responsible for handling affairs related to limit fragments.

Su Feng casually glanced around him. "Is the opening ceremony over?"

"Yes, yes, it's over! There was a small misunderstanding just now!" Zhang Quan interjected hurriedly before Zhang Lie could speak, as though he wouldn't have the chance to do so if he were too slow.

"No, Commander Su, please wait a moment. The ceremony isn't yet over. I want to take this opportunity to spread an important piece of information," Zhang Lie clarified.

Sun Mengmeng and the others hurriedly added another seat to the VIP area by the stage. However, instead of leaving the stage, Su Feng patted Zhang Lie's shoulder and stood behind him, as though he were trying to transmit some of his strength and authority to Zhang Lie.

"Good, good. It isn't a bad idea to announce it now!"

Zhang Lie's enemies went pale: with Su Feng as his backer, they would have no chance of dealing with Zhang Lie at all!

Zhang Lie began, "Everyone, the ceremony traditionally ends with an advertisement for the new dojo, but I'm sure you're all well aware of what the Zenith Dojo has to offer by now. As a result, I'd like to take the opportunity to share a gift instead, a gift for one and all. Let me pose you all a question: as a first-realm hunter, am I strong?"

The room burst into an uproar.

"Of course!"

"What other first-realm hunter would have been able to defeat a third-realm hunter in a single blow?!"

Zhang Lie smiled. "In that case, would you all like to know the secret to my strength?"

Chu Feng, Yun Bing, and the Chu and Yun clan heads realized the identity of the gift that Zhang Lie was about to share.

When Zhang Lie sold the Chu and Yun clans the information about the limit fragments, one unusual stipulation that he added was that neither clan would be allowed to pass the information to the authorities. Only now did the Chu and Yun clan heads understand why—had Zhang Lie been planning to found a dojo all along?

This was certainly an excellent opportunity to spread this piece of information: there were countless strong and famous hunters present, as well as a few reporters from the media.

Once this information was revealed, the Chu and Yun clans would have no advantage over the other factions who had yet to learn about the existence of these limit fragments, and given the Chu and Yun clans' decision to remain neutral, it was unlikely that Zhang Lie would be willing to work with the two clans with regards to manufacturing Potion #1.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing glanced at each other, sighing again at their elders' lack of foresight. In the end, as members of the younger generation, they had no authority to direct clan affairs.

The other guests were quite curious about what Zhang Lie was hinting at.

"It's because our gene capacities aren't capped at a hundred fragments each—I've overcome this limit!"

Despite the series of shocks that had stunned the audience, this was the most overwhelming of them all.

"What?! How could our gene capacities not be a hundred fragments each? Isn't this common knowledge?"

"You must be joking! What's the limit, then? A thousand gene fragments?"

"Dojo Leader Zhang, you must take responsibility for your words!"

This news, if it were true, would be overwhelming indeed.

Except for Su Feng and the Yun and Chu clans, who already knew about this information, everyone else, Lin Xiu included, stared at Zhang Lie.

"Yes, you've heard me correctly: I don't know what the upper limit to our gene capacities is, but it isn't a hundred fragments!"

Having revealed this piece of information thrice already, Zhang Lie was getting quite used to handling the disbelief and shock that resulted from it, and his performance greatly enhanced his credibility.

Thinking back to the unusual strength that Zhang Lie had shown, much of the audience was willing to entertain the notion, even if they weren't completely convinced.

However, a small minority believed that Zhang Lie was trying to hoodwink them all.

"That's impossible! It's common knowledge that the gene capacity is a hundred fragments. You're just spouting nonsense!"

Beside him, Su Feng glared in irritation. Clearing his throat, he called out, "Listen up! As commander-in-chief of the Blackwind Fort, I validate Zhang Lie's words."

The audience fell into stunned silence. If Su Feng was willing to back Zhang Lie up with his authority granted by the world federation, then things were different. No one doubted the truth of Zhang Lie's words any longer—or if they did, they weren't foolish enough to say so.

After all, the commander-in-chief of the Blackwind Fort certainly wouldn't joke about such serious matters. There was only one conclusion: the maximum capacity wasn't a hundred gene fragments.

"No, how could this be?!" several dojo leaders muttered to themselves, clearly needing some time to digest the news.

Just as the crowd was all reeling, Zhang Lie continued, "And now that I've brought up these limit fragments, I'll continue with the gift I have for all of you: information about obtaining these limit fragments for yourself, based on my own experience."

Zhang Lie paused while his words sank in.

"Quick, this is important news! We have to record it!" The members of the media who were present at the ceremony pulled out their own recording devices to capture this moment when the truth of these limit fragments was revealed to one and all. As media reporters, they knew how momentous this occasion would be.

"To surpass the basic gene capacity limit of a hundred fragments, there are three important requirements. The first, and most basic, condition is to raise your foundational framework to its tenth stage, and to not have progressed to a more advanced framework in the meantime. The second is to consume sufficiently many white grub cores, or their extracted growth factors. The third is to reach a certain density of adrenaline in your body, so as to spark a transformation in your genetic core."

Zhang Lie revealed everything he knew about the foundational breakthrough. This was information that every member of the audience undoubtedly would attempt to confirm for themselves.

Many of the guests dropped their sense of propriety and began contacting their disciples, subordinates, or other clan members to have them verify this information immediately.

Zhang Lie paused while the guests mulled over the shocking information. Most people focused on the white grub cores, a key ingredient that Zhang Lie had mentioned, but only a rare few noticed the crux of the issue, such as Lin Xiu, still standing by the side of the arena. "And what about those who've already moved to a more advanced framework?"

Zhang Lie's reply was somber. "Those hunters must choose to either purge their framework and start from scratch, or to accept their inability to obtain these limit fragments."

"Purge their framework—" Lin Xiu hesitated, his face turning blank. Purging one's framework wasn't a hard decision for first-realm hunters, but for those who were already in the second or third realms, this was a far more devastating requirement.

After all, they had spent the majority of their lives cultivating their framework, and if they had to start from scratch—the very thought of it was enough to cause them pain!

Chapter 144: Waiting in Line

Those hunters of the older generation essentially wouldn't benefit from Zhang Lie's breakthrough. Of course, even so, this information was spreading and being disseminated at a frightening pace, because it could benefit a whole new generation of hunters and improve humanity as a whole.

Simultaneously, the Blacksteel settlement began filling with people. Everyone who was able to teleport to the Blacksteel settlement did so, all having received their news from one source or another, and rushed toward the white-grub cave. However, by then, the white-grub cave was devoid of any lifeform.

"And with that announcement, I declare the opening ceremony truly over! The dojo will be hosting a luncheon momentarily, and everyone here is welcome to join in."

Guests began to depart from the Zenith Dojo, Wang Han, Qin Zongming, and the other enemies of Zhang Lie gnashing their teeth as they did so. Whenever they thought about how much they had suffered at Zhang Lie's hands, all they wanted to do was to run up to Zhang Lie and kill him, but they knew that this was impossible now. They didn't have the ability to do so, and the price that they would have to pay would bankrupt them and more.

Ignoring Zhang Lie's title of dragonsoul warrior, just the fact that Commander-in-Chief Su Feng had employed him as an instructor for the Blackwind Fort meant that he was nigh-untouchable.

"Let's go! At this point, there's nothing we can do," Wang Han sighed, leaving the Zenith Dojo without looking back.

Qin Zongming, having regained his rationality, came to the same conclusion. If he really did want to strike, the next opportunity would be at the Void Cup.

"I won't be staying for the luncheon," Su Feng told Zhang Lie. "Once you're done with affairs here at your dojo, report to the Blackwind Fort immediately."

Su Feng patted Zhang Lie on the shoulder once more, causing Zhang Lie to nod and bow respectfully.

The airship took to the air, and Su Feng left the Zenith Dojo. With his departure, the other guests collectively heaved a sigh of relief, then began to discuss what they had seen and heard with each other.

Zhang Lie's strength and announcement of these limit fragments were the best advertisement he could get for his new dojo. Many of the richer citizens of Ning pushed to have their children enrolled in the Zenith Dojo, but the seemingly straightforward enrollment conditions were far more complicated than they appeared. The clause on loyalty alone was sufficient to deter many a hunter from trying to enter the dojo.

Glancing at the crowd all around him, Zhang Lie suddenly smiled. My dojo's finally open.

A traveler walked into one of the less populous areas in Ning, glanced around, and entered a rather nondescript hotel. The hotel's facilities were rather old and outdated. The traveler sighed, ignored

the front desk, and headed upstairs. He walked to Room 309, but before he could enter, he heard a noise from within, as well as a potent fluctuation of genetic energy.

"Who is it?"

"It's me," Qin Zongming, the traveler, replied.

The person in the room calmed down. He opened the door, revealing a pale, sallow face.

Qin Zongming sighed again as he walked inside. The windows of the room were set to night mode, and there was barely any lighting within. Through weak rays of light coming from the open door, he could see the shabby furniture within.

"Dad, has Zhang Lie..." Qin Xiao asked, licking his parched lips, as Qin Zongming sat down on a weathered sofa.

"We failed. We all failed. Zhang Lie's got a powerful backer now, and even with a few major clans working together, we couldn't do anything about him!" Qin Zongming spat out.

"What? How could that be? He's a piece of trash from the slums. How could he handle the combined might of a few large clans?"

Qin Xiao's face was filled with disbelief.

"We understand far too little about him," Qin Zongming began. He told Qin Xiao what had happened that day during the Zenith Dojo's opening ceremony. By the time Qin Zongming recounted how Commander-in-Chief Su Feng had paid Zhang Lie a personal visit and employed him as an instructor of the Blackwind Fort, Qin Xiao's face was stark white.

With the Blackwind Fort as Zhang Lie's backer, who would be able to do anything about him? And what of his own revenge?

"Xiao'er, don't you worry. We're not the only enemy that Zhang Lie's made. Furthermore, it's not impossible that you'll have a chance to strike during the Void Cup. He announced an important piece of information during his opening ceremony, one that's sure to augment the abilities of you hunters from the younger generation. Furthermore, I've had someone record the entirety of Zhang Lie's match. Train hard, and I'm sure that, with your talent, you'll be able to defeat this brat one day!"

Qin Zongming placed a microchip in his son's palm.

"Just what information did he announce?" Qin Xiao asked, curling his fingers around the microchip.

When Qin Zongming explained the foundational breakthrough to him, Qin Xiao's face turned bleak. He didn't satisfy a single one of the conditions!

"Dad, are you suggesting that I should purge my framework and start from scratch?" His eyes were crazed and wild.

"Indeed. As long as you do so, you'll have access to these additional limit fragments, and they'll be the key to your victory over Zhang Lie!" Qin Zongming emphasized.

Qin Xiao hesitated. Giving up all that he had worked so hard for the last few years required no little amount of courage; after all, even if Zhang Lie's procedure were to work, he had emphasized that success wasn't guaranteed.

"The Void Cup's about to begin, so if I purge my framework at this point..."

"Don't hesitate! You'll certainly be able to handle the city-level stage even if you purge your framework now!"

Qin Xiao was somewhat hesitant to do so at this critical juncture, because he didn't think he would be ready for the Void Cup by then, but Qin Zongming broke him off.

"Xiao'er, you're my future. I won't harm you, and I'll do everything I can to get you the resources you need for the breakthrough."

"Very well, Father." Qin Xiao sat down cross-legged, the fluctuations in his genetic energy growing wild as he began the process of purging his framework.

After exchanging a few more words, Qin Zongming left the hotel as silently as he came.

By the outskirts of the Blacksteel settlement, the once-desolate white-grub cave was now crowded with throngs of hunters. Of course, this had only happened after Zhang Lie released crucial information about the foundational breakthrough.

"Just what's going on? Weren't there countless white grubs here just a few months ago? Why aren't there any more left?"

"A clan must have monopolized them all, I'm sure of it!"

"No, no—look at all the dust around here! I think there haven't been any white grubs for quite a while."

"Could someone have cleaned out the cave long ago?"

"Ah, don't you all remember Zhang Lie's old nickname?"

As the gathered hunters kicked up a fuss, someone brought up a fact that the hunters had temporarily forgotten. During Zhang Lie's early days as a hunter, he had been known as the king of the dumps because he had stayed at the white-grub cave for three whole months after his induction as a hunter.

Three whole months in the real world—in other words, two and a half years in the dimensional world!

Many hunters, including some of the ones gathered here, had joked that he was a fool, but now, it seemed as though they were the real fools.

The white grubs that Zhang Lie had spent so long hunting represented the lowest class of lifeforms in the dimensional world. What good could their cores be used for? Thinking back to the sight of Zhang Lie lugging bag after bag of white-grub cores to the Blacksteel settlement, the hunters felt as though someone had slapped them on the face.

"It looks as though we'll have to go to Zhang Lie to get any of these cores!"

"Quick, we'd better spread this information around."

"Right, didn't the Yun and Chu clans sweep over the cave a while back? They might have some supply remaining as well!"

Quite a few hunters did know about Zhang Lie's actions in the white-grub cave, but none of them had expected that the white grubs would have been hunted to extinction.

News that white-grub cores were no longer available quickly spread through the settlement and beyond, and as the bottleneck for this critical foundational breakthrough, they became precious beyond measure, especially when news spread of a few rare geniuses who had consumed a few white-grub cores in the past and had then successfully undergone their breakthroughs.

The price of the cores quadrupled, tripled, then quadrupled again, sending the markets into a frenzy. The market supply quickly ran out, leaving the hunters with no choice but to seek out Zhang Lie.

Qin Zongming quickly learned about the news.

"What? That damned bastard!" In anger, he slammed a fist down on a reinforced wooden table, causing the entire room to quake. Before he announced the news of this foundational breakthrough, he had seized all the white-grub cores and hunted the white grubs to extinction!

"Is there nowhere else where these cores can be acquired?" Qin Zongming asked, sucking in a deep breath. Unless he had no other choice, he didn't want to have to make a request of Zhang Lie.

"Head, I'm afraid the white grubs are endemic to the Blacksteel settlement, and no one knows anything about their so-called growth factors other than Zhang Lie himself!" one of his subordinates reported.

Qin Zongming's face turned dark.

"In that case, the only way we hunters will be able to get any white-grub cores at all will be to purchase them from the Zenith Dojo."

"Under such conditions, this does seem to be the only route for procuring these ingredients, but given the relationship between our clan and Zhang Lie, I doubt it'll be easy for us to acquire them," an elder commented.

"Silence! No matter how hard it is, the Qin clan must acquire some white-grub cores. Send someone to the Zenith Dojo at once!"

"Yes, Head!"

This was Qin Zongming's only option left.

By then, the entrance to the Zenith Dojo was clogged up with hovercars, and there were even more hunters present than at its opening ceremony.

Two long lines had already formed outside of the entrance of the dojo.

The representative from the Qin clan twitched. The reason for these lines was obvious; everyone knew just who possessed a supply of these white-grub cores, and they had immediately rushed to his dojo that had just opened in an attempt to secure some.

"Those here to purchase white-grub cores, line up to the left! Those here for admission into the dojo, line up to the right!" a few of the dojo's employees shouted, directing the numerous guests into the two long lines.

After the opening ceremony, Zhang Lie had warned Zhang Hong about a series of more tedious affairs that she would have to handle; she had expected that it would involve administrative tasks for the dojo's new disciples, but the truth was far more surprising. Zhang Lie had hidden this new 'business venture' from her, and now there was a sea of people both within and without the dojo!

Many came from Ning, but there were even a few from the capital and from Meng, quite a fair distance away. There was no choice, after all. The few lucky hunters who had managed a foundational breakthrough had exaggerated its effects, and suddenly all the major clans found themselves unable to sit still.

These limit fragments would represent a new beginning, a higher vantage point! How could these prideful clans bear having their scions worse off than those of other clans? As a result, acquiring a few white-grub cores became a matter of prime importance. Successful breakthroughs would shore up a clan's strength, preserving its authority for years to come.

If not for such a tempting matter, neither the Qin nor Wang clans would have deigned to send a representative over.

Murmurs rose from the crowd: the Li clan's hovercar had just been spotted in the distance. Clan Head Li's two sons had both been killed by Zhang Lie, and yet he was still sending a representative over to buy these white-grub cores...

Everyone in line was thinking two things: not to provoke Zhang Lie, or suffer the fate of the Wang, Li, and Qin clans; and to acquire some white-grub cores at all cost!

The Li representative joined the very end of the line on the left, even as a few other hunters in line murmured and pointed at him. The Li representative scowled, but what could he do?

A large sign was hung up at the very front of the line: If you try to cut in line, or if you make a fuss, you'll be barred from making any purchases!

If the Li clan didn't want to be surpassed by other clans, then it had to acquire these cores for its younger generation, and the only means of doing so was through Zhang Lie. Even if Li Mo bore Zhang Lie a blood feud, he had to send someone over and swallow his pride. As the head of the Li clan, he had to put the clan's future first and foremost.

Chapter 145: Ten Thousand Points

"Do you think the Li clan will be able to make the purchase? What a joke!"

"Isn't that so? Why would Zhang Lie help his enemies? He wouldn't, would he? At the very least, I certainly wouldn't sell to the Li clan!"

The Li representative's arrival sparked a vigorous discussion among the crowd, while the Li representative buried his head in shame. The remarks skewered him like sharp swords, turning his face even redder.

Li Mo, who was waiting in a hovercar parked outside the Zenith Dojo, turned grim. The Li representative was wearing a transceiver so that Li Mo could respond immediately to any unforeseen circumstances, so the other clans' remarks landed directly in his ear.

He had expected that he would be able to send a relatively unknown person to make the purchase without drawing any attention, but that seemed impossible now.

To have hunted the white grubs to near-extinction before revealing this crucial piece of information... Zhang Lie really was a cruel bastard!

Li Mo gritted his teeth. Anger was devouring his rationality and stirring up the genetic energy in his body. Nevertheless, no matter how enraged he was, all he could do was continue gritting his teeth and clenching his fists.

"Head, I'm not certain we'll be able to purchase these white-grub cores," one of the elders beside him sighed, a hint of brooding resentment in his tone. The blood feud between the Li clan and Zhang Lie had been caused almost entirely by the clan head, and it was his poor decisions to date that had led them to their present straits. It would be near-impossible to purchase some white-grub cores under these conditions.

Li Mo went silent. He didn't know if he could purchase these cores either, but it wasn't up for debate: he would have to get them some way or another, or the clan would surely decline comparatively in strength with the next generation, leaving the Li clan doomed to extinction.

"Let's see what they say. If we can't purchase anything, we'll get someone to buy them on our behalf," Li Mo concluded. His fists were clenched so tightly that his bones were starting to creak.

The Chu and Yun clans had sent Chu Feng and Yun Bing as their representatives, in light of the fact that Zhang Lie had promised to give them a discount. Even if they had already bought a sufficient number of cores, they could start stockpiling more now.

Nevertheless, Chu Feng and Yun Bing were worried about meeting Zhang Lie again. During the opening ceremony, despite the danger Zhang Lie was in, neither the Chu nor Yun clans stepped in to help him. Weren't they being shameless to ask him for a discount now?

The long lines persisted from sunrise to sunset; as buyers left, elated with their purchase, more joined the line. By the end of the day, what changed wasn't the length of the line, but rather the people within it.

After a whole day and night, the Qin, Li, and Wang representatives finally made their way to the front of the line. As they glanced at Zhang Hong, standing outside the entrance to the dojo, their heart palpitated.

"Those here to purchase white-grub cores, this way!"

When they walked by Zhang Hong without being stopped by her, they scurried to the left, as though they would be expelled if they were just a little slower.

"What? Is Zhang Lie so generous that he'd sell to the Qin, Wang, and Li clans? In that case, I'm sure we'll be able to get our discount, then!" Chu Feng sighed in relief.

Yun Bing didn't comment. Given her understanding of Zhang Lie, she was quite certain that Zhang Lie had something in store for the three clans' representatives, and even the discount that she and Chu Feng had negotiated would likely be invalidated.

"Ah, is it Young Master Chu and Miss Yun? Please head to the left."

Zhang Hong made her way over with a smile. Both of them had been to the dojo before, and Zhang Lie had introduced them as friends. She knew nothing of the Chu and Yun clans, but some of the members of Team Zenith had mentioned that the two of them had helped them out tremendously in the Eclipse Sage's ruins, so she naturally felt some goodwill toward them.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing hesitated for a moment before glancing at each other.

"In the past, we were always able to purchase the cores directly from Dojo Leader Zhang. Can't we do so anymore?" Chu Feng ventured, his expression a little embarrassed.

"Unfortunately, that's what I was told," Zhang Hong replied, her voice kind but firm.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing both sighed. As expected, their discount no longer applied. In that case, they had no choice but to follow the rest of the crowd.

As they headed to the left, they saw the Qin, Wang, and Li representatives, who had just registered for the purchase. After registering, the three of them left overjoyed, as though they were guaranteed to be able to buy the precious white-grub cores after doing so.

What they didn't notice was the attendant smirking maliciously after they had recorded their names.

"Young Master Chu, Miss Yun!" When she saw Chu Feng and Yun Bing walk over, she hastily plastered a smile on her face as she greeted them.

"Can we see the dojo leader?" Yun Bing asked, hesitating momentarily.

"Unfortunately, Dojo Leader Zhang has instructed us that he won't be entertaining any visitors for the moment."

She looked at them apologetically. It was her second day working at the dojo. Before, she had been merely a citizen of the slums, and she still wasn't used to being able to talk to such privileged people as the two young clan heads of the Yun and Chu clans.

"But, in the past—" Chu Feng seemed rather upset by the cold shoulder, but Yun Bing pulled him back.

"That was then, and this is now. If either of you want a few cores, I'm happy to give you a few for free." Just as the attendant was trying to formulate a diplomatic response, Zhang Lie walked out into the lobby with Lin Xiu.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing both turned to him; Zhang Lie was smiling.

"Zhang Lie, we've worked together in the past. Are you going to do this just because of a misunderstanding...?"

"I've already given you a batch of cores on discount. Now that everyone's here to purchase cores, don't expect to be able to buy in bulk just like you did last time," Zhang Lie explained.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing both sighed.

Yun Bing was visibly worried. "In that case, as for Potion #1—"

"Don't worry. I know the two of you are beholden to your clans, and I won't renege on my promises to the two of you."

Zhang Lie might have been unhappy with the Yun and Chu clans, but he understood that Yun Bing and Chu Feng weren't necessarily able to direct their clans, and just the fact that they had come to his dojo beforehand was valuable enough already. Furthermore, he still owed them both a favor from the Eclipse Sage's ruins.

After a relaxed conversation, Chu Feng and Yun Bing went to register to buy the cores just like everyone else. Fortunately, at least, they didn't return empty-handed.

"Alright. Head to the Blacksteel Inn in the Blacksteel Settlement and find Yang Ze. With this receipt, you'll be eligible to buy the white-grub cores from him," the attendant told them.

Their business concluded, Chu Feng and Yun Bing left the Zenith Dojo.

At the same time, the Qin, Li, and Wang clan heads relaxed after hearing that their representatives had successfully registered to purchase white-grub cores.

These cores would be instrumental to the clans' further development. Given their enmity with Zhang Lie, they didn't expect to be able to purchase the cores so readily, but their registration had gone off without a hitch.

"As expected, he's a poor lad from the slums, greedy for money. With these cores in hand, Qin Xiao will surely be able to defeat him during the Void Cup, I'm sure of it!" Qin Zongming unclenched his fist as he cackled.

Back in the dojo, Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes as he glanced at the countless names on the microchip.

"Review these names carefully; I'll defer to your judgment. I won't sell to the Li clan, so strike their name off the list. Furthermore, raise the price fivefold for those dojo leaders that struck at me during the opening ceremony, and tenfold for the Qin and Wang clans. Do you understand?"

Zhang Hong noted everything down and reviewed the other names on the list. When she was finished, she handed the finalized list of the eligible buyers to Yang Ze.

Before this, Zhang Lie had given no explanation for this process, so all those who had registered thought that they would be able to purchase these white-grub cores.

He's a rather wicked hunter, isn't he? Lin Xiu couldn't help thinking to himself.

Those who were struck from the list didn't know that they had lost their eligibility, and were happily heading toward the Blacksteel settlement in the dimensional world. He was honestly quite curious as to how they would react when they finally found out about the news from Yang Ze.

By the time, Yang Ze had the finalized list in his hands, the Blacksteel Inn was already filled with a gigantic crowd.

"What's the matter? Are you trying to cut in line? That'll bar you from making a purchase!"

"Ouch, you've stepped on my foot!"

"What?! So what if you're the Liu clan? The Light's Radiance dojo isn't afraid of you!"

Even before the main event began, there were already countless clashes within the inn, and several opposing factions were already making plans to settle the score with a brawl outside the settlement.

"Don't make a fuss! Line up quietly. If anyone hollers, their eligibility for purchase will be revoked!" Yang Ze shouted, walking out from his suite.

The entire Blacksteel Inn fell silent the next moment.

"Yang Ze, the list is out! The captain said that we could start selling the cores now!" Li Feng rushed into the inn. His exclamation sounded particularly loud amidst the silence, and the hunters close to him couldn't help craning their heads to try to sneak a peek at the list.

Yang Ze held the list of buyers in his hands like an imperial edict, and the crowd collectively held a breath.

"We'll start selling the cores now, starting with the first in line!"

The hunters at the front of the line were naturally overjoyed; after this purchase, they would be able to experience a foundational breakthrough for themselves!

"How much do you think these cores will sell for?"

"Who cares? They're cores from the lowest-grade lifeform in the dimensional world. How expensive can they get?"

Many hunters were quietly murmuring to each other, guessing what the price of these cores would be.

"What? Are you crazy? A hundred thousand points for a single core?! You must be joking, surely!" one of the hunters at the very front exclaimed, causing a huge commotion throughout the inn.

Chapter 146: Scram

The price for these white-grub cores was simply too ridiculous. A hundred thousand points—a million dollars! Wasn't this supposed to be a core from a low-grade lifeform? Why was it comparable in price to superior-grade crafting materials?!

The hunters simply couldn't imagine paying so much for these low-grade cores.

"Yes, that's the price. If you still intend to buy the cores, get your points ready. Otherwise, scram!" Yang Ze shouted decisively. At the very least, that was the cheapest price any of them would pay; several clans would have it much worse.

Rather than quelling the crowd, however, Yang Ze's shout only seemed to agitate it.

"What? That's daylight robbery!"

"Right! This is a low-grade material, and Zhang Lie was just lucky to have discovered it early!"

Yang Ze refused to back down. "That's the listed price. If you don't think these cores are worth that much, you're free to leave. No one's forcing you to purchase them. And if you're not purchasing the cores, leave the inn and make space for others!"

The detractors immediately went silent. Not purchasing these cores? No, that wasn't an option. Zhang Lie had monopolized the stock of white-grub cores, and if they didn't buy any from him, where would they acquire any?

"Well, you there? Are you going to buy the cores or not? If not, make way!"

"I—I'll buy them! I'll buy it!" the hunter first in line shouted out, clenching his teeth.

"Good, that's the spirit. I'll tell you now: ten thousand points per core is the best deal anyone here is getting!" Yang Ze exclaimed. After the hunter bought a hundred cores, he quietly moved to the side and watched the other buyers.

Indeed, the other buyers were all given a similar price.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing, standing by the back of the line, smiled bitterly at each other. To think they had complained about buying the cores for ten thousand points apiece!

The transactions gradually grew faster as the buyers further back in the line prepared the necessary funds ahead of time. Quickly, it was time for the representatives from the Starshine and Dragon's Ascent dojos.

"I'd like to purchase a hundred cores. That'll be ten million points, correct?" one representative asked, preparing to pay.

"I'm sorry, but it'll cost you fifty thousand points apiece," Yang Ze corrected him.

The representative recoiled in shock. "What? They've all paid ten thousand points each. Why do we have to pay five times more?!"

"Because you're not like those other hunters, of course. Have you all forgotten something?" Yang Ze smiled coldly. These dojos had challenged Zhang Lie during the opening ceremony with the express intent of causing trouble, and this was Zhang Lie's retaliation.

"Fine, then we'll take fifty cores!" The representative gritted his teeth, but regardless of how upset he was, it was imperative that the dojo procure a stock of these cores.

Others who had provoked Zhang Lie in the past quickly reacted to the unwelcome news: Zhang Lie didn't intend to be magnanimous at all!

The representatives from the Zhou, He, and Qian clans suddenly turned uneasy. Who knew how much extra they would have to pay? Those from the Qin, Wang, and Li clans were even more uncomfortable. Instead of a price hike, Zhang Lie might choose not to sell to them altogether!

"Fifty thousand points apiece for the Zhou, He, and Qian clans from the capital," Yang Ze said, when their representatives stepped forward.

"What? Five times the baseline as well?!" the Zhou representative cried out.

"I've confirmed the price with the dojo leader," Yang Ze replied blandly. It was obvious why they were being charged extra. The representatives from the three clans hesitated; they didn't usually have the authority to handle such large transactions.

"Purchase them. After all, we've already been told to acquire these cores no matter the price," one of the representatives whispered to the others. Though they winced, they made the purchase, spending over thirty million points for just over sixty cores.

The Qin, Wang, and Li representatives barely avoided trembling. If this was the treatment afforded to three of the major clans of the capital, just how much would it be for them?

As the line grew shorter, they quickly moved forward in line.

"Ah, the Qin clan..." Yang Ze stared at the representative in front as he dragged out the tension.

The Qin representative swallowed.

"The Qin clan's price will be a hundred thousand points apiece," Yang Ze announced.

The gathered hunters went silent. The first few hunters who had purchased these cores for ten thousand points apiece were smirking as they pretended to cough; compared to Zhang Lie's enemies, they at least received far better treatment.

"What? Aren't you deliberately targeting the Qin clan?!" the Qin representative shouted. A tenfold increase was ridiculously expensive; no one else had received such a shocking markup.

"Indeed, the dojo leader's intention is to target the Qin clan. If you're not interested, feel free to leave," Yang Ze replied.

The Qin representative visibly deflated.

Everyone knew very well that these white-grub cores were necessary for the foundational breakthrough, and since Zhang Lie alone possessed these cores, they had no choice but to purchase them from him, even if they were being deliberately targeted.

Qin Zongming had emphasized just that.

"Fine! I'll buy it! Give me a hundred cores!" the Qin representative shouted.

"A hundred cores?! That would cost a hundred million points!"

"The Qin clan's really staking everything on this, aren't they?"

The crowd began to discuss the Qin clan's expenditure as the Qin representative hurriedly made payment. The Wang representative, which followed right after the Qin, received similar treatment. The two clans had lost almost half their accumulated points within the first realm of the dimensional world, a severe financial burden, all for just a few white-grub cores!

The Li representative swallowed, ready to suffer the same fate as the Wang and Qin, but when he stepped forward and reported the name of his clan, Yang Ze fell silent.

The Li representative trembled. Was Zhang Lie going to charge the Li clan a million points per core?

"I'm sorry, but the Li clan isn't on the list of eligible buyers. I can't sell you any cores," Yang Ze said, then waved a hand at him in dismissal.

The Li representative was stunned. Had he lined up for a whole day and night for nothing?! "What do you mean, we're not on the list?!"

"Haven't I been clear? Your clan isn't listed here, so you can't buy these cores." Yang Ze was getting a little impatient.

"Ridiculous! We're the Li clan, one of the major clans of Ning! Don't you—" Genetic energy burst from the Li representative, as though he were so enraged that he was about to attack Yang Ze.

"Of course I do. You're the clan whose two young masters fell to Zhang Lie! Are you going to leave, or not? You're in the Blacksteel settlement. Are you really going to make a move here?"

Yang Ze didn't spare the Li representative any face.

"You truly aren't going to sell the white-grub cores to the Li clan, no matter the price?" the Li representative asked again, hoping this was just a cruel joke.

"I've said it already: we won't sell to the Li clan," Yang Ze reiterated.

"Won't you leave if you aren't buying anything?"

We're still in a rush."

"Hurry up!"

Those hunters waiting in line behind the Li representative all urged him along, giving him no choice but to leave the line. He glared at Yang Ze from the crowd, then hurriedly rushed out to report the news to the Li clan.

"Does Zhang Lie think the Li clan will suffer this indignity?!" Li Mo howled, punching the holographic screen displaying Zhang Lie's face right in front of him. With the expulsion of his genetic energy, the holographic display turned staticky, then vanished altogether.

Even so, Li Mo was still furious. His eyes turned dark, and he entertained the notion of rushing to the Zenith Dojo and killing Zhang Lie on the spot.

"Head, please calm down! The most important thing at present is to find a means of acquiring these white-grub cores," the Li clan's first elder, Li Tian, hurriedly said.

Li Mo took a few deep breaths.

"Yes, Head, the clan's future is far more important than the lives of your two sons," a few elders emphasized stonily, most of them having been in fervent support of developing a good relationship with Zhang Lie.

They seemed to be telling Li Mo that, if he had listened to their suggestions, the Li clan would surely have been able to acquire these white-grub cores more easily, and Li Xin wouldn't have died.

Li Mo's face twitched, and imposing genetic energy flared from his body. "There's nothing we can do about the past now. Don't worry. I'll think of a solution regarding these cores," Li Mo spat out coldly, then ended the meeting.

Afterwards, he quickly contacted the Qin and Wang clans.

Although the Li clan wasn't able to purchase any cores, the Wang and Qin clans could; if he had no other choice, he would buy them from the two clans instead. However, both clans refused him, claiming that they simply had no cores to spare, and that they had spent far too much to acquire the cores just for themselves.

He asked a few other clans, but to no avail. In the end, he looked toward the Zenith Dojo with a malicious glint in his eyes. Not only had he lost his two sons, even his position in the clan was getting shakier by the minute. Furthermore, if he weren't able to acquire the white-grub cores as he promised, the leadership of the clan would surely pass to another hunter.

"I swear I'll kill you." His killing intent seemed to flood the room.

After he calmed down once more, he contacted the Chu clan.

Chapter 147: Dojo Expansion

"I apologize, Clan Head Li, but we need these white-grub cores for ourselves! And I'm afraid I won't be able to purchase any on your behalf. If Zhang Lie were to find out, his anger would surely shift to us, so please find some other method!"

"Clan Head Chu, please, I'm happy to negotiate regarding the price—"

"Clan Head Li, do you think the problems you have with the Zenith Dojo can be fixed by money alone? Does Zhang Lie lack for your wealth?"

Li Mo's face grew progressively uglier over the course of his conversation with Chu Lin. In the end, he had no choice but to drop the call in despondence. The Chu clan head was right: the enmity that lay between the Li clan and Zhang Lie wasn't something that money could resolve.

"Well, Clan Head? Have you managed to secure the cores?" mocked several of the elders who were against him.

Li Mo's face twisted. No one knew just how intense his hatred against Zhang Lie was.

"We have to hurry—the Void Cup's just about to begin!" another subset of the elders called out. If the Li hunters of the younger generation weren't able to perform the foundational breakthrough before then, they would be overcome by hunters from the other clans who had.

Li Mo made call after call, but after countless failed attempts, he crushed his transceiver to powder in his hand. "I don't believe Zhang Lie holds a complete monopoly over these white grub cores!"

He sent his subordinates out to find any other source of the prized ingredient as the Void Cup drew closer and closer.

The Zenith Dojo was welcoming a surprising influx of applicants. As expected, there were quite a few interested students from Ning, but also even from the rest of China, the world federation, and even a rare few from the solar system.

Outside the dojo, there were a few citizens discussing the Zenith Dojo's potential recruits.

"Have you looked at the applicant requirements for the dojo?"

"Of course! Apparently, they're quite lax—they only value loyalty and growth potential."

"Really? Not the applicants' talent?"

"At the very least, there aren't any formal requirements on that front."

"Wonderful! Apparently, the Zenith Dojo's facilities are comparable to the top-ranking dojos in the country, and their fees aren't even expensive!"

"Isn't that so? Only someone like the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie would be able to start such a dojo!"

"That's not the best part—every month, the dojo will host a competition among its disciples, and those who perform best can get pointers from Zhang Lie himself! In fact, he'll even award them an opportunity for a foundational breakthrough!"

Indeed, Zhang Lie didn't place much emphasis on talent in the selection criteria for the dojo's disciples. The Zenith Dojo, which emphasized breaking through one's limits, naturally focused more on hard work and effort. From Zhang Lie's perspective, even the rarest talent could lose out to unceasing effort.

"Captain, we have a whole bunch of new applicants daily! We've already sifted out the most promising among them."

In the Zenith Dojo's conference room, Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, and Zhang Hong were seated in front of Zhang Lie and reporting on their efforts to date. Zhang Hong handed him a microchip with the shortlisted applicants, which Zhang Lie perused. These trainees would have to pass a series of examinations to become full disciples; the examinations were meant to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Since the opening of the Zenith Dojo, they had received nearly a hundred thousand applications, and although many of these applicants could be eliminated directly, the dojo staff would have to continue sifting through these applications for quite some time.

Zhang Lie glanced over the list. "Thank you for your hard work, Zhang Hong. Please add one additional line to the recruitment notice: if there are applicants who score equally well on the placement test, we'll prioritize those from less prestigious backgrounds. Furthermore, let's start preparing to construct branch dojos in other locations nationwide," he instructed.

Zhang Hong's face turned weary. "We can do it, Dojo Leader, but it'll be a lot of work. We'll need at least ten times the manpower if we want to get this done within a reasonable timeframe!"

"I'll grant you the authority to do so. I can handle matters in Ning myself, so I'll leave you with the other locations."

"What, you aren't afraid I'll run off with the funds?" Zhang Hong joked.

"I wouldn't employ people I don't trust. I've worked with you, Lawyer Zhang, and I don't believe you're that type of person. Furthermore, even if you were to run off with my money, what could you do? You'd have to live the rest of your life hiding from the public eye, scampering from place to place."

"Ha! Well, I'll have to get back to work now, if I want to get any of these tasks done on time." Zhang Lie's approval made Zhang Hong smile as she walked out of the conference room.

"This placement test of yours is quite interesting. Can you give me a copy? I'd like to test out something similar on the Blackwind Fort's recruits," Lin Xiu suddenly asked.

"Of course! I'll bring it to the Blackwind Fort personally in two days and give a live demonstration there." Naturally, Zhang Lie would do his best to satisfy Li Xiu's every request.

With the money pouring in from the sales of the white-grub cores, the Zenith Dojo and its subsidiary branches would surely develop rapidly, and those disciples that passed through the rigorous screening process would all undergo a foundational breakthrough. The Zenith Dojo would surely be teeming with strong hunters after just a short period of growth.

Zhang Lie's lips curled up. A strong hunter on his own wouldn't be able to do all that much, but what about a horde of them? This was the primary reason he had founded the Zenith Dojo: to form a coalition of strong hunters that would be able to advance fearlessly through this cruel universe.

"Alright, everyone, I know you're all busy with dojo-related affairs, but make sure you're focusing on preparations for the Void Cup. There isn't much time left, so we'll need to find a way to get you all more soulshards," Zhang Lie continued.

Right, the Void Cup was almost here! The city-wide selection stage wasn't supposed to be too hard, but the members of Team Zenith were still quite worried. After all, Zhang Lie was expecting them to place within the top ten overall, which meant that they would have to fight and overcome the strongest hunters in each region.

Lin Xiu narrowed his eyes as he glanced at Zhang Lie. "I won't be able to interfere in the events of the Void Cup, so you'd better not attract too much attention to yourself," he warned.

"Yes, I know." Zhang Lie smiled, his eyes gleaming.

"Given the enmity between you and the Li clan, they'll surely try to kill you during the Void Cup. While you remain in Ning, my presence and the Blackwind Fort will stop them from trying anything unwise, but once you leave, that protection no longer applies," Lin Xiu emphasized, thinking that Zhang Lie wasn't treating this matter seriously enough.

"Thank you for the reminder. I have a plan, so if they do attack, they'll end up with a nasty surprise," Zhang Lie replied, a sharp edge to his aura suddenly overwhelming the room.

Even Lin Xiu was taken aback. Indeed, with Zhang Lie's current strength, he wouldn't have to worry about anyone in the Void Cup at all, but if the Li, Qin, and Wang clans were to attack him indiscriminately without sparing any expense, they could still pose a significant threat.

The fact that Zhang Lie was still so cavalier had to mean that he had an ace up his sleeve.

Zhang Lie was, as yet, the only hunter of the younger generation that Lin Xiu thought had the potential to surpass the older.

"Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, you'll lead everyone into the dimensional world tonight. Before the Void Cup begins, we'll have to shore up your weaknesses," Zhang Lie instructed.

"Yes, Captain!" everyone shouted, then went to finish up their respective tasks for the dojo before their return.

Chapter 148: Void Cup Preparations

In a dimly lit room of a dilapidated inn in Ning, lightning-attuned genetic energy crackled as Qin Xiao's pale face suddenly relaxed, and the aura surrounding his body slowly settled down once more. As he emitted the last of the excess energy, Qin Xiao suddenly opened a pair of piercing eyes.

"I've done it, I've broken through! A hundred and ten basic gene fragments! So that's what it was—the benefit from these ten basic limit fragments is far superior to ten basic gene fragments, and even

to ten mutated gene fragments! No wonder Zhang Lie was so strong! No wonder he spent all that time killing white grubs! Damn him, damn that bastard!"

Qin Xiao grinned at his accomplishment, but his grin quickly turned into a twisted grimace.

Beside him, Qin Zongming could clearly sense the changes in Qin Xiao's body. After his breakthrough, Qin Xiao's aura gained a surprising heft, his pale face became more rosy, and he looked to have regained some of his lost vitality.

Qin Xiao clenched his fist tightly. After purging his framework and starting over, he finally found out why Zhang Lie had been so strong. What he didn't know was that, despite his breakthrough, he still couldn't compare to the Zhang Lie of the present. Zhang Lie had broken through the basic and the mutated gene capacity limit, and only then had he been able to kill a hunter two realms higher in one blow.

After sensing the changes in his body, Qin Xiao suddenly calmed down and sighed. "Dad, registration's already started for the citywide stage, and the national tournament will begin in two weeks. It's true that my foundation's gotten a lot stronger, but I've lost the framework and techniques that have brought me this far. I can re-acquire them, but it'll still take me a considerable amount of time. Under these circumstances, I'm worried I won't be able to make it through the national tournament."

In order to build a good foundation for himself, Qin Xiao had chosen to purge his framework and start anew to obtain ten additional limit fragments. However, the news had come too late, and he wouldn't be able to return to peak condition before the start of the national tournament. In that case, it would be impossible for him to advance through the ranks of the Void Cup and avenge himself.

"That's not a problem. If I didn't have something in mind, would I have instigated you to break through?" Qin Zongming smiled.

"What? What's your plan, Dad?" Qin Xiao glanced at him in excitement.

"I can get you an inheritance that'll get you near your peak strength. With appropriate superior-grade soulshards, it might even be possible for you to kill Zhang Lie during the Void Cup itself! At the very least, you'll certainly place well in the national tournament and obtain rewards from the national treasury."

Qin Zongming naturally wanted the best for his dear son, whose innate talent had to be carefully tended.

"And what about Zhang Lie? Are we going to forget about him just like that?"

"Forget about him? No, of course not! If not for him, how could we have ended up in such dire straits? However, it's impossible for you to challenge him at the moment, so I'll need to come up with some strategy to ruin him once and for all after the national tournament."

Qin Zongming's words caused Qin Xiao to quiet down. The reason his blessed life had gone so awry was because of Zhang Lie. Not only that, he had even gouged the Qin clan by charging them tenfold what others paid for these white grub cores. Neither son nor father was the type to drop a grudge, but with Zhang Lie's star rising, it didn't make sense for them to strike unless they were certain that they could defeat him.

Qin Xiao clenched his fist so tightly his joints turned white.

"Keep this with you. If you have no other choice, use it during the Void Cup."

Qin Zongming handed Qin Xiao a box containing a frightening aura of genetic energy, so dense he could sense it even without touching it.

"This is—"

"Shh, be quiet. Focus on your training during this period of time. I won't come to visit you for a while." Qin Zongming patted Qin Xiao's shoulder, then vanished out the window.

Seeing his father's back, Qin Xiao sighed to himself. He opened the box and found a container with what seemed to be crackling violet lightning inside, dyeing the room a curious shade of purple with its glow.

Qin Xiao let out a frightening smile.

Countless hunters flocked into the Blacksteel settlement. With the impending Void Cup and recent news about white-grub cores, even more hunters than usual had headed to the Blacksteel settlement through countless trials and obstacles.

The days before the Void Cup, many genetic hunters spent their time in the training ground or outskirts of the Blacksteel settlement, and there were quite a few others who were furiously hunting down superior-grade lifeforms in order to top up their superior gene fragments and soulshards.

Everyone was preparing for the Void Cup, Team Zenith included.

Zhang Lie's present goals were to advance his [Ninecarp Transformation] and [Eclipse] further.

Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others certainly had gene fragments, frameworks, and techniques that would serve them well for the Void Cup, but if they wanted to do well, they would need to rectify their soulshard deficiency.

As a result, in order to raise the overall strength of Team Zenith, they would have to target specific superior-grade lifeforms in anticipation of their soulshards. Naturally, their first battlefield would be the Desert of Silence, the region in the first realm of the dimensional world boasting the highest density of superior-grade lifeforms, and a commensurate rate of finding superior-grade soulshards.

"In the two weeks before the citywide tournament, head to the Desert of Silence and acquire as many soulshards as you can," Zhang Lie instructed.

"Yes, Captain!" Team Zenith set off almost immediately.

Zhang Lie didn't follow them there; by now, the members of Team Zenith were individually comparable to young clan heads like Chu Feng and Yun Bing, and the Desert of Silence wouldn't prove particularly dangerous.

After they had all left, Zhang Lie returned to his room, where he sat cross-legged as he made final preparations for the Void Cup. Now that he had capped all his gene fragments and reached the advanced level with most of his techniques, there were only two remaining that he could work on.

As he circulated his genetic energy, causing a black glow to suffuse his body, waves of energy emanated from his body, and a radiant moon replaced the sun.

"[Ninecarp Transformation]! [Eclipse]!"

A serpent's form wrapped around Zhang Lie, then soared toward the moon, slowly dyeing it red as it approached.

Chapter 149: Danger in the Desert

The stars shone so brightly that Zhang Lie felt as though he were immersed in the Milky Way itself. The glowing moon slowly turned dim as the serpent wrapped around it, opening its mouth wide so that its sharp fangs were visible. As it hissed, an immense pressure descended on the room, causing the reinforced floor to creak.

All around Zhang Lie, the ground seemed to tremble. He was shocked by the strength of the attack: [Ninecarp Transformation] and [Eclipse] seemed to be growing more and more compatible with each other, and the combination skill formed from both techniques promised a devastating blow.

Furthermore, it seemed as though an improvement in one technique would also spark faster growth in the other.

Suddenly, he thought to himself, What if I were to let the serpent swallow up the moon completely? Just what could an attack of that magnitude achieve?

Zhang Lie tested out his hypothesis immediately, forcing the two techniques to combine more intimately than they ever had before. As more and more genetic energy emanated from his body, the serpent's fangs struck the moon.

A sudden roar caused a huge fluctuation of energy within Zhang Lie's training room. He had forcibly stopped the circulation of his genetic energy moments after combining the two skills, and his forehead was beaded with cold sweat from the exertion.

As he panted, the glowing moon and black serpent dissolved away. He glanced at the reinforced floor on which the moon had been shining and saw the small holes drilled through it: the domain of [Eclipse] had grown even stronger than before.

Not only that, his path forward was obvious. If he were able to combine the two skills fully, with the serpent swallowing the moon, just what devastation could he wreak?

"It's a pity that just using the combination attack once drains almost all my reserves, or I'd try it a few more times," Zhang Lie mumbled to himself. It was clear that the combination would strengthen his domain massively, increasing both the pressure and rate at which genetic energy drained from those caught in his domain.

This would surely be a trump card during the battle against the moonlit wyrm in the future.

He meditated beside the starstone to recuperate his genetic energy, then spent the entire day trying to combine the two techniques together more and more effectively.

Meanwhile, after Zhang Lie returned to the dimensional world, Lin Xiu also returned to the Blackwind Fort.

"From what you've said, it doesn't seem as though he fears the Li or Qin clans," Su Feng commented, after Lin Xiu reported about Zhang Lie's actions to him.

"Indeed. He seems to be very confident that he can handle whatever counterattack comes his way, and his confidence is well-founded," Lin Xiu replied.

Su Feng was very curious just how Zhang Lie had obtained the information that he had presented to the Blackwind Fort. He had no background to speak of, so how had he discovered these limit fragments? After all, this news had shocked the entire world.

Everyone outside of China—and even in the Milky Way at large—was searching for similar growth factors to activate a foundational breakthrough. All this implied that no one had ever come up with such a theory before; Zhang Lie had developed it from scratch and had even actualized it in practice.

How could he have done so without any background at all?

"Could it be that our background check wasn't thorough enough?" Su Feng muttered to himself.

"Lin Xiu, what do you know of Zhang Lie's background?"

"His sister's legs are paralyzed, and both his parents have been missing for over a decade. His parents were second-realm hunters before they vanished," Lin Xiu replied. It hadn't been difficult to uncover this information.

Su Feng frowned. Could Zhang Lie have found out about these limit fragments through some chance opportunity, then?

"With your manpower, it shouldn't be too hard to learn more about this lad's parents, and maybe to find out where they are now. Do you still need me to protect him during the Void Cup?" Lin Xiu asked, knowing that the Li, Qin, and Wang clans wouldn't simply let matters rest.

"Just observe him from a distance. There's no need for you to step in unless Zhang Lie's life is in danger. Take the opportunity to check in on our insect friends' actions; it seems like they might be making a move." Su Feng instructed, his expression grave.

"What? Are they coming a second time?" Lin Xiu cried out.

"All I can deduce for now is that the Kez invasion of the capital was far from an accident."

"Got it." Lin Xiu rushed out of Su Feng's office.

Meanwhile, Su Feng returned to the footage from the Kez invasion that he had been studying. He had circled a few particularly notable pieces of footage in red, including Zhang Lie's fight.

Days later, within a training ground in the Blacksteel Inn, as genetic energy filled the field, a gigantic serpent soared into the air. As it wrapped around a glowing moon and began to devour it, the skies all around seemed to darken, replacing the midday sunlight with a starry sky.

Just as the serpent was about to devour the moon completely, a series of cracks rang out from the ground down below. As the genetic energy fuelling the illusion dissipated, the image of the serpent and the moon vanished.

Zhang Lie's back was drenched with sweat. Despite a few days' effort, he was ultimately unable to combine the two techniques completely, but his practice with [Eclipse] had significantly widened the range of its domain.

He kept feeling as though he were missing something crucial for the combination.

He sucked in a deep breath and expelled it. Once the moon was half-devoured, [Eclipse] would start flaring up, consuming large amounts of genetic energy and displaying a stronger effect.

Personally, Zhang Lie believed that having a sufficient quantity of genetic energy would allow him to combine the two techniques together in a relatively simple fashion, but acquiring so much genetic energy could well be a problem.

Well, I won't make much progress right now. The Void Cup's about to start, so I'd better check up on everyone's progress.

Zhang Lie stood up, had a quick shower, and then rushed toward the Desert of Silence. However, the moment he walked out of the Blacksteel settlement, he found Chu Feng, Chu Xun, and Yun Bing coming his way.

"Zhang Lie, where have you been? Why haven't we been able to find you? Don't be upset with my brother on account of what happened at your dojo's opening ceremony, please. It was all our grandfather's fault! He wouldn't listen to us, so you'd better not get mad at us!" Chu Xun shouted at him, her cheeks flushed in anger at her grandfather.

It had been quite a while since the opening ceremony, and Zhang Lie was surprised to have encountered them here.

"Sorry for the fuss, Zhang Lie." Chu Feng sighed, shushing his little sister.

"Don't worry, I'm used to her personality by now," Zhang Lie replied.

The atmosphere suddenly turned awkward: the Chu and Yun clans' attitude, regardless of whether Chu Feng and Yun Bing could be held responsible, had still somewhat soured relations between them.

"I have to do something urgently, so I'll see you all when I get back!" Zhang Lie rushed past Chu Feng and Yun Bing.

"Zhang Lie!" Just then, Yun Bing suddenly called him back.

"What's the matter?" Zhang Lie turned back, frowning. He had already made up his mind not to give the Yun and Chu clans any discount on the white-grub cores, and if Yun Bing and Chu Feng were to prod him further about this matter, he would naturally get upset.

"Be careful. The Void Cup's about to start, and hunters from the stronger settlements will be roaming around and snatching people's soulshards," Yun Bing continued. She had seen the unkind flash in Zhang Lie's eyes when he turned around, and she couldn't help but be a little disappointed.

"Is that so?" Zhang Lie frowned harder. He didn't have much recollection of the Void Cup, because by this point in his past life, he certainly didn't qualify as an applicant, so he hadn't paid it much attention.

Before the Cup began, quite a few hunters would try to hunt down superior prey in order to obtain a few more soulshards and gene fragments, and, in response, there were a number of hunters who hunted these hunters, robbing them of their hard-earned soulshards and points.

"Right, right! There have been reports of them hanging around the Desert of Silence!" Chu Xun added.

"What? The Desert of Silence?!" That was where Team Zenith was hunting superior-grade lifeforms!

"Yes, indeed. Quite a few hunters head to the Desert of Silence right before the Void Cup for last-minute training, and there are hunters who specifically prey on them," Yun Bing explained in greater detail.

"Thank you."

Zhang Lie rushed off toward the Desert of Silence.

"Zhang Lie's not... trying to hunt down those hunters, is he?" Chu Feng asked, after a momentary silence.

"I think it's possible that his teammates are in the Desert of Silence." Yun Bing narrowed her eyes. Given Zhang Lie's strength, he had no need to head to the Desert of Silence to try to pick off a few superior-grade lifeforms, but his team was different. "In that case, it's quite likely that his teammates might be in danger. Come on, we'd better follow him!"

Chu Feng and Yun Bing also began rushing in the direction in which Zhang Lie had gone.

The usually barren Desert of Silence was, at this time, sufficiently populated that quite a few teams could be seen hunting the lifeforms within.

"Heh, we've amassed over ten million points just from hunting down all these lone wolves already!" a thin, stick-like man exclaimed in joy, as he headed deeper into the desert with his team.

"We have Young Master Long to thank for all this," a massive hulk, who seemed like the team's leader, replied cheerfully.

Everyone turned to the long-haired youth walking in the center of the team.

Chapter 150: Ambush in the Desert

"Yes, if not for Young Master Long helping us out at a critical moment, we certainly wouldn't have been able to take down that last hunter so easily."

"Haha, that's right! I'm honored to have seen you in action, Young Master Long!"

"Not only that, if not for Young Master Long, we might not have dared to enter the desert at all—or become prey for other hunters!"

Everyone in the team seemed to be sucking up to this Young Master Long. His expression didn't change, but a hint of pride flashed through his eyes. Sensing that their bootlicking was having an effect, the team continued heaping praises on him.

"Alright, it's about time that we found our next prey."

Only when Young Master Long himself was getting embarrassed did the team finally start heading deeper into the desert. Wind and sand filled the air. There were quite a few hunters' skeletons that were half-buried in the sand, and patches of golden sand which had been dyed red.

"Be careful! We're already rather deep into the Desert of Silence, and the hunters that dare to hunt in this area are ones that we'll have to be very careful with," Young Master Long reminded.

Right after he spoke, they could sense fluctuations in genetic energy nearby, as well as a low howl.

"There's a team of hunters up in front," a hunter cried out.

Young Master Long frowned. He tried to analyze their strength from the fluctuations in their genetic energy.

"Let's go get our last prey for the day. They're exhausted after a long battle. I still have other things to do, so we'd better make this fast." He motioned to the group as he walked toward the source of the energy.

Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, and the others were panting as they took a momentary break. In just a single day, they had taken down seven superior-grade lifeforms in a row, but none of them had dropped a superior-grade soulshard. At the very least, however, they had all amassed sufficient flesh to reach the superior gene capacity.

"Damn it, how many lifeforms have there been? Just how hard is it to get a superior-grade soulshard?!" Sun Xiaowu tugged at his hair in abject disappointment.

"We already knew just how hard superior-grade soulshards were to get. Let's take a break and continue hunting down more lifeforms later," Fang Yi suggested.

"Fang Yi's right. You all know how hard the captain worked to get each and every one of his superior-grade soulshards, don't you?" Sun Mengmeng added. She had witnessed the growth in Zhang Lie's strength, as well as the trials he had overcome to achieve that growth. This had been the case both for his blood ant and forest wolfman soulshards.

"I'll admit that our captain has put in a lot of effort for his soulshards, but don't you think he's been quite lucky to date?" the reticent Zhou Ying suddenly volunteered, causing everyone else to fall deep in thought.

"Perhaps the captain's just a very lucky person!"

"If he can do it, then so can we! After all, we're Team Zenith, and our captain's Zhang Lie. We can't let him lose face because of us!"

"We'd better start preparing for our next target." Yang Ze stood up, brushed the sand off his armor, and prepared to get moving again.

Everyone else dragged their weary bodies up.

"Right, we have to hunt down superior-grade soulshards that'll fit us all. We can't disappoint the captain during the Void Cup!" Li Feng called out. Zhou Ying and Sun Xiaowu also perked up, their refusal to back down spurring them onward.

Suddenly, before them came another party of hunters, the sound of their approach hidden by the howling wind. Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi immediately motioned for their team to stop as the other party emerged.

They were all wearing dark red armor, with two shining jewels of genetic energy embedded by their shoulderguards. These jewels were relatively expensive and unaffordable to most. The word 'Godspath' inscribed on them revealed the hunters' identity.

"What are hunters from the Godspath settlement doing here?" Sun Mengmeng clutched her bow tightly as she prepared for a fight.

Fang Yi and the others also prepared for a battle, understanding that the superior-grade lifeforms weren't the only danger in the Desert of Silence. Not only did they have to be wary of superior-grade lifeforms, they also had to be careful with regards to the hunters that were roaming the area.

The hunters from the Godspath settlement stopped short. The sand beneath their feet shook; as the winds around them grew stronger and stronger, despite the fact that they were only ten meters or so away from each other, they couldn't even see each other's faces clearly.

"Oh, it's people from the Blacksteel settlement."

"What? The Blacksteel settlement, where Zhang Lie's located?"

"So what if they're from the Blacksteel settlement? With our numbers, even if Zhang Lie himself were here, I don't think he'd be able to best us. Even so, be careful—they entered the deeper part of the desert before us," Young Master Long whispered to his group.

Despite the wind and sand, Sun Mengmeng and the others could clearly feel the killing intent emanating from them. "Beware of them," Sun Mengmeng whispered.

"Hand over your soulshards and the beast carcasses you've hunted, and I might consider letting you go," Young Master Long shouted disdainfully.

Fang Yi's face went grim. These were likely hunters who specifically targeted other hunters in the days leading up to the Void Cup.

"Is this the quality of the hunters in one of the best settlements in the region? I hadn't expected to find so many cowards," Sun Mengmeng taunted them.

"The dimensional world's all about strength. There are those like us from every settlement you'll find—if you want something to blame, blame your lack of strength!" Young Master Long laughed, then began charging up for an attack.

"Be careful, this guy's strong!" Sun Mengmeng whispered again, sensing the fluctuation of his genetic energy.

Sun Xiaowu and the others prepared for a battle. However, after hunting down superior-grade lifeforms for an entire day, they weren't certain they could beat an elite team like this.

"Die! The weak don't deserve to live." Young Master Long licked his parched lips as he charged up an attack.

The other hunters from the Godspath settlement swallowed a gulp of saliva, excitement evident on their features. They knew that Young Master Long enjoyed killing; this was one of his ways of relaxing before a competition.

As Young Master Long removed his palms from the sleeves of his long robes, his nails began to grow at a rapid clip. Genetic energy surrounded his nails, elongating and honing them to a fine point, as though they were the claws of a dragon.

"You're from the Long clan?!" Sun Mengmeng shouted.

Before the hunters of Team Zenith could strike, he had rushed within attacking range. As he swung his claws about, the wind and sand responded to his motions. In a matter of moments, a draconic twister formed from sand and wind spun toward the beleaguered hunters.

"The Long clan's signature art, [Draconic Tempest]!" the leader of Young Master Long's temporary team cried out.

Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi frowned as they tried to analyze the technique. As the sand dragon roared, releasing a bout of genetic energy, they stumbled backwards before they could release a counterattack.

"Xiaowu!" Sun Mengmeng hurriedly called out.

Sun Xiaowu stepped forward, a golden gleam rising above his skin and spreading over his body. When it covered Sun Xiaowu's body in its entirety, a dull thump emanated from it. At the same time, the sand dragon clawed towards him.

Sun Xiaowu rushed forward, golden scales appearing over his arm as he punched at the dragon. Young Master Long's grin widened as he directed the dragon to attack.

Genetic energy in white and gold clashed in mid-air.

With a dull thump, Sun Xiaowu retreated, and the golden flash of genetic energy disappeared.

Young Master Long was surprised: he had expected the claws to pierce through Sun Xiaowu's chest and to kill him instantly. How was it that Sun Xiaowu had only been pushed back? The other members of his temporary team were also taken aback. No other prey had survived that attack!

"Xiaowu, are you alright?" Sun Mengmeng hurriedly stepped forward. Sun Xiaowu had been wounded by the attack, but it wasn't anything serious.

"I'm fine! It's just a light wound. Everyone, be careful, this hunter's techniques and framework aren't bad!" Sun Xiaowu called out.

"Ant, how have you not perished?!" Young Master Long's face fell. How could he have failed to down his opponent in one hit?

"Kill them all!" Sun Xiaowu's injury enraged his older sister. The enemy team had attacked them first; they were certainly obligated to act in self-defense!

Fang Yi's eyes gleamed as he launched [Heaven's Judgment]. Streaks of lightning crackled on his spear.

Young Master Long narrowed his eyes. His illustrious background meant that he could identify the grade of the technique instantly.

"No wonder you guys were able to head so deep into the desert. All your techniques are high-grade or above, aren't they?" He smirked.

Sun Xiaowu had used [Adamantine Aegis], a legendary-grade framework, to defend against his blow. If it were any weaker, he might have perished on the spot.

And Fang Yi's pinnacle-grade framework was even better. He had grown into a strong hunter in Zhang Lie's past life; he was growing even stronger in the present. The combination of [Rondo of Wind and Storm] and [Heaven's Judgment] shocked even Young Master Long.

"That defensive technique from just now was at least a legendary-grade technique, and this looks even more advanced! Could it be a pinnacle-grade technique?" His eyes gleamed with greed.

"Leader, should we attack them too?" The other hunters from the Godspath settlement all rubbed their hands in glee as they stared at the hunters of Team Zenith, as if all that the hunters of Team Zenith had would become theirs.

"Of course! Otherwise, Young Master Long will take everything. Charge!" he bellowed, motioning for his subordinates to attack all at once.

The two parties clashed, sending a flurry of golden sand into the air.