

U. Warlord 151

Chapter 151: The Long Clan's Scion

"Hah, do you think you ants can defeat me? All your possessions will be mine! And you, your skin seems rather fair. Once I get rid of your teammates, I'll give you an opportunity to service me!" Young Master Long glanced lecherously at Sun Mengmeng.

"Oh? You and whose army?" Fang Yi called out. As he stabbed forward with his spear, a bolt of lightning shot toward Young Master Long's chest. It was clear to Fang Yi that Young Master Long was the only threat in his party. If they could take him down quickly, this fight would be over.

"You piece of trash!" Young Master Long narrowed his eyes and used his claw attack once more, blocking the bolt of lightning. Neither of them were quite able to injure the other.

As Fang Yi applied [Rondo of Wind and Storm] to his obsidian spear, snakes of lightning darted out of his brow. With a loud shout, he shot forward with his spear. The spear clashed violently against Young Master Long's claws, lightning crackling and wind and sand howling in an explosion of the elements.

The force caused Fang Yi to stumble back; Young Master Long, shocked beyond compare, had to dodge the part of Fang Yi's attack that he couldn't block. Yes, he had to dodge!

"What? Young Master Long isn't attacking head-on?!" Amidst the Godspath hunters' startled cries, Fang Yi's eyes glowed a bright yellow as lightning crashed down all around him.

He pointed his spear at Young Master Long, lightning struck its tip, and then he charged straight toward him with the full force of the lightning at his disposal.

The resulting flash of light was so bright that Young Master Long felt as though he had been struck by lightning himself. He began to tremble, and he felt a seed of fear take root deep within his soul.

What? Why is this damned ant's aura so intimidating?! He regained his senses after a momentary lapse and frowned, a vicious look entering his eyes. "[Dragon's Piercing Howl]!" he shouted. His long hair fluttered in an invisible wind, and a radiant glow enveloped him. The outline of a dragon could be seen amidst the wind and sand. His claws shone like white jade.

"Quick, support Young Master Long!" The Godspath hunters gathered around him and began circulating their genetic energy, but before they could attack, they heard a sudden splash of water as Yang Ze waved his sword in an arc.

His motions reminded them all of [The Boundless Blade], which they had become familiar with after rewatching the footage of Zhang Lie's fight countless times. Water bubbled and burbled as Yang Ze's sword energy shot toward the Godspath hunters.

"Ha! What good could this technique do in the desert?" The leader of the Godspath team threw a punch at Yang Ze with a concentrated burst of earth-attuned genetic energy, instantly weakening Yang Ze's attack.

However, Yang Ze didn't seem at all nervous. Instead, he smirked.

"You're all dead now."

It wasn't difficult for the Godspath hunters to read his lips. They startled as Yang Ze's technique struck toward Young Master Long. The combination of water and lightning instantly caused Fang Yi's attack to grow more radiantly, shooting a ray of destruction in his direction.

"You're all useless!" Young Master Long shouted at the rest of the Godspath hunters. As he stared at the frightening attack heading toward him, his face turned dark. The image of a white dragon gradually materialized.

His eyes turned cold as he began to revolve on the spot, as did with the white dragon wrapped protectively around him.

None of the hunters from the Godspath settlement dared rebuke Young Master Long's words. Instead, using all their genetic energy, they continued launching attacks toward Yang Ze. Even if Young Master Long was affected by Yang Ze and Fang Yi's combination attack, they would be able to wound at least one member of Team Zenith.

However, they had forgotten that there were other members of Team Zenith present as well. A wave of hot air rushed toward the Godspath hunters. As they breathed in the superheated air, they found the heat scorching their throats. Sun Mengmeng, her long hair flowing behind her, readied an arrow burning with purple flame, so hot it warped the very air.

Sun Mengmeng's arrow, along with a wave of heat, flew toward the Godspath hunters. The Godspath hunters felt as though they were approaching an active volcano surrounded by lava. Death looked them in the eye.

The leader of the team stepped forward. He wasn't a weak hunter in his own right; just as the arrow was about to hit him, he yelled out and began to dodge, but before he could move away, he felt his ankles tighten. Green vines that had sprouted from beneath the sand had trapped him! The spiked vines wrapped around his ankles. Where the spikes penetrated skin, he found himself paralyzed.

"Be careful, poison!" he yelled out, but it was already too late.

Although the vines were slender, they were surprisingly resilient to damage and strengthened by the genetic energy running through them.

Zhou Ying smiled. "Don't forget, we're a team."

"No, that's impossible! We're surrounded by the desert. How could you be using wood-attuned genetic energy here?!" the Godspath team leader cried out.

As he looked down, he saw that the desert sand had turned into mud by his feet, answering his own question.

Yang Ze and Fang Yi's combination attack would naturally leave some water where it landed. Not only were Yang Ze's techniques able to augment Fang Yi's lightning-attuned attack, they also manipulated the environment in such a way that Zhou Ying could shine.

All this had happened in the blink of an eye. The Godspath hunters couldn't believe that they had planned all this out, but the truth was right before their eyes.

Just then, Fang Yi clashed with Young Master Long once more. The white dragon rampaged as it howled, shrouding Young Master Long's figure behind a veil of sand.

Fang Yi held his spear with a severe expression on his face, as though he were a god of lightning himself. Whenever he struck, a storm of wind and lightning would rampage the dragon's body, battering it down.

"[Light's Bulwark]!" Li Feng, who had been searching for an opportunity to support Fang Yi, finally found it. The sky and sand seemed to lose their color, leaving only a brilliant white light on the battlefield. Li Feng struck with a simple punch with no accoutrement beyond mere willpower.

The white dragon howled. This attack was the straw that broke the camel's back; even its draconic vitality couldn't keep up with Fang Yi and now Li Feng's attacks. It dissipated as the bolts of lightning honed in on a new target: Young Master Long.

As the Godspath hunters stared openmouthed, Sun Mengmeng's [Black Sun]-fortified arrow struck them.

Two screams rang out more loudly than the wind.

The leader of the Godspath hunters, who had barely managed to escape from the vines at the last second, was still severely injured by the arrow.

Young Master Long's snowy-white armor had been charred black, and the repulsive odor of scorched flesh lingered in the air.

The Godspath leader hurriedly retreated back to his team, clutching his right chest in pain. Although he had avoided a lethal blow, the arrow had penetrated his chest, and the blackened wound was leaking blood and pus all over.

His fellow teammates were all injured, and three or four of them were even losing a limb each.

"Ho-How could this be?!" The Godspath leader's voice was trembling.

Ever since they had entered the Desert of Silence, with Young Master Long's help, they had managed to defeat and overcome all the teams of hunters that they had come across. Now, however, they were the ones being hunted.

Young Master Long was heavily injured, and he was barely able to stay conscious. His bloodshot eyes were wide open as he stared at Fang Yi and Yang Ze, filled with enmity and bloodlust.

"You actually hurt me?!" he howled.

He was a member of the Long clan, a strong hunter in the first realm of the dimensional world! When had he ever been in such dire straits?

Sun Mengmeng and the others didn't dare relax. Although they now had the upper hand, the battle wasn't yet over.

"Hurt you? Why, I can even kill you!" Just as Young Master Long was struggling to stand up, an icy-cold voice shook him to the core from behind.

His heart palpitated; a sudden sensation of imminent death overwhelmed him. He felt as though a reaper's gaze had landed on him. His feet were sluggish, and it almost felt as though hands had risen from deep within the sand to pull him down. He had never experienced such a chilling sensation of death. Just who had shown up?

Before he could turn around, a fluctuation of genetic energy came from behind him. Seeing a violet arc, Young Master Long felt a chill in his chest, and his expression turned pale. As he glanced down to see the violet shortsword penetrating his body, his throat gurgled, blood filled his mouth and dripped down his lips, and he knelt down on jellied feet.

It was only then that he saw his assailant, whose face was cold and somehow familiar.

"Zhang Lie?! You're the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie?!" Young Master Long trembled uncontrollably.

It was one thing to speak of him, and another to meet him in person.

A majestic pressure emanated from Zhang Lie, forcing the Godspath hunters to cower. This was a truly strong hunter, one far too strong for them, strong enough to leave them panting for breath!

He hadn't even activated a single technique; this was all just spiritual pressure. Was he really a first-realm hunter?

Chapter 152: Pay Up or Die

As his fresh blood dyed the sands red, Young Master Long was forced onto the sands by a foot to his back. An ominous purple flush had quickly spread through his skin from the wound: a sign of the venombane scorpion's poison.

Young Master Long opened his eyes wide. "This sword... is poisoned!" The skin by his wound had festered, turning a deep purple as it did so.

"Too easy a death for you," Zhang Lie spat out.

"Don't, please! I surrender!"

"Do you recognize me, then?" Zhang Lie gave him a chilling smile.

"Do you really intend to kill me? In that case, are you prepared to face the wrath of the Long clan from the Godsbane settlement?!" Young Master Long gritted out. His fury at his helplessness turned his eyes red, and his body spasmed from the corrosive nature of the poison. From his perspective, although Zhang Lie was a strong hunter, he wouldn't be foolish enough to try to start a blood feud with the Long clan by killing him.

"Oh? Sounds frightening." Zhang Lie's eyes narrowed as he recalled what he could about the Long clan. It was even stronger than the five major clans of the capital, and its scions seemed to be unusually talented. The signature framework of the clan was also quite potent.

But so what? Zhang Lie wasn't the one who had instigated this affair! The Long clan might not have been an easy target, but what about Zhang Lie? This was the dimensional world, after all, where strength trumped all else. Even military hunters had to obey this law of the jungle, let alone the Long clan.

"How much stronger do you think the Long clan is compared to the Li clan?" he asked coolly.

The Godspath hunters' eyes widened. Yes, the Li clan might have been weaker than the Long clan, but not by much. The day of the Zenith Dojo's opening ceremony, Zhang Lie had killed the son of Clan Head Li right in front of his face. In other words, if he was willing to kill a scion of the Li family under public scrutiny back on Earth, what was stopping him from doing so now, without any eyewitnesses, in the dimensional world?

"He's going to kill us! Flee!" Young Master Long shouted. The Godspath hunters began to move, but far too late.

They shot attacks toward him as they turned to run, but Zhang Lie only glanced at them disdainfully as he waved Venombane.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" Dark genetic energy formed a pitch-black river that annihilated everything before it, sweeping the Godspath hunters up.

The river raged; its waters seemed to be formed of sword energy, causing the Godspath hunters to feel excruciating pain every second they were immersed in it. After a moment, when the river faded away, the bedraggled form of the Godspath hunters could be seen splayed in the mud. They all seemed to have suffered some grotesque torture, with no piece of their skin left intact, like bags of bloody flesh.

"Do you think it's that easy to run? Aren't you a young master of the Long clan? Didn't you want one of my teammates to serve you? Well? Are you pleased with my service? Would you like to bet that I can kill you without the Long clan daring to make a fuss about it?" Zhang Lie whispered. His tone was relaxed, but his words sent a chill down the hunters' backs.

"You..." The heavily wounded Young Master Long widened his eyes. He knew that Zhang Lie wasn't joking; someone like him had no need to worry about the Long clan.

"Any last words?" Zhang Lie smirked.

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, you're already enemies with the Li, Qin, and Wang clans. Are you sure you want to add the Long clan to the mix? This won't be a smart decision, I assure you." Under threat of death, poison flooding through his body, struggling for his last breath, Young Master Long nevertheless calmed down and displayed some semblance of his upbringing.

"Should I care?" Zhang Lie grinned, and the tip of his sword dropped to his neck.

"No, no, please! Zhang Lie, please forgive us, please forgive us all!" the Godspath hunters' leader interjected before Young Master Long could speak. He moaned at how unlucky he had been to chance upon Zhang Lie's team out here in the Desert of Silence, but that wasn't the worst part of it. He had to ensure that Young Master Long didn't die; if he were to die, their whole team would be killed to accompany him!

The Long clan was proud and domineering. Even if Zhang Lie let them go and not Young Master Long, the Long clan would surely take revenge on them! He had no choice but to speak up then.

"Let you go, so you can menace other hunters? No, I think not." Zhang Lie didn't think that any of the Godspath hunters would dare interrupt the conversation between him and Young Master Long.

"No, no, of course not! As long as you're willing to let us go, we'll swear never to hunt other hunters ever again!" The Godspath leader immediately pledged to turn over a new leaf. Of course, he was the only one who believed his words.

Zhang Lie stared at them all. "It looks like you all value your lives very much, don't you? If you want me to spare you, hand over all your soulshards!"

"What? Soulshards, all our soulshards?!" the Godspath hunters cried out.

If they had to give up all the fruits of their labor these last few days, and even lose the soulshards that they originally had as well...

On the other hand, the eyes of the hunters from Team Zenith gleamed. They had yet to obtain any soulshards from their excursion into the Desert of Silence, but now they could get a huge haul in one fell swoop!

"Well? Don't you value your life?" Zhang Lie swung Venombane in small arcs as he waited for the Godspath hunters' response.

Young Master Long sighed. No one would risk their lives for material possessions, and Young Master Long was certain that, as long as he could live, he'd be able to get back these soulshards one way or another. Gritting his teeth, he spilled his soulshards all over the desert sand.

The gems caught the sunlight and glowed in all colors: as expected of a young master of the Long clan, most of his soulshards were superior-grade.

"We'll hand ours over too!" With Young Master Long as an example, the other hunters quickly followed suit, spilling their soulshards on the sand. Although their collections weren't as lavish as Young Master Long's, they did have quite a few superior-grade soulshards as well.

"Will you let us go now?" Young Master Long asked once more. At this point, he just wanted to preserve his life. Given the extent of their injuries, if they didn't perform any first-aid, they would die without Zhang Lie making a move.

Once Sun Mengmeng and the others had stored all their loot, Zhang Lie grinned. Would he allow these hunters to live and continue their life of crime? Of course not! Furthermore, even if others feared the Long clan, the same couldn't be said for him.

"In that case, I'll spare your lives."

The Godspath hunters saw an arc of violet light, then felt a chill in their chests. As they howled in pain, they stared angrily at Zhang Lie.

"You've... stripped us of our genetic cores?!" Young Master Long cried out.

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, you've gone back on your word! I curse you, I curse you with my life!" the Godspath leader spat out angrily.

"Have I gone back on my word? Really? All I said was that I'd spare your lives, not that I'd avoid attacking you."

Zhang Lie marshaled the rest of Team Zenith away without looking back at the fallen hunters.

"Zhang Lie, I'll kill you! I swear I'll kill you!" Young Master Long howled at his back.

Zhang Lie ignored him. The moment before he vanished from sight, he turned around and smiled. "Tell me that when you make it out of the desert alive."

Making it out alive would be far harder than it sounded. To be crippled and bleeding to death deep in the Desert of Silence was tantamount to a death sentence. In the best-case scenario, they would die of blood loss; if they were unlucky, the last thing they saw would be a beast's maw.

After all, the blood they were giving off would surely attract lifeforms from all around the desert. Although Zhang Lie wasn't going to kill them, he had blocked off any chance of survival.

Not long after Team Zenith left the scene, a few lifeforms began scouting out the scene.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Captain." The hunters of Team Zenith all seemed a little despondent that Zhang Lie had to come save them; it seemed as though, from their very first meeting, they had been dragging him down.

"What're you talking about? All of you were handling it well enough even without me."

Indeed, Fang Yi and Yang Ze's combination attack had grievously wounded Young Master Long, and the remaining Godspath hunters were about to be subjugated by the rest of the team.

"Really?" Sun Mengmeng glanced skeptically at Zhang Lie. He had always dominated his opponents in so overwhelming a fashion that they paled in comparison.

It was then that Zhang Lie realized he had to let the other members of Team Zenith overcome a few obstacles by themselves so that they could understand their own strength.

"Right, did you all have any luck with soulshards?" Zhang Lie asked.

"Unfortunately not. We were steadily going deeper into the desert, but nothing we hunted dropped the soulshards we were aiming for," Sun Mengmeng sighed.

The Void Cup was just about to begin, and if they couldn't find appropriate soulshards, then they wouldn't be able to grow any stronger.

"So? We've just gotten a generous gift from a few anonymous donors, haven't we?" Zhang Lie patted the pouch into which they had packed the spoils from the Godspath hunters.

Everyone's faces brightened: indeed, they had received a veritable heap of soulshards!

The Godspath hunters had stolen quite a few soulshards from other hunters, and all their spoils had now gone to Team Zenith. Young Master Long's soulshards were particularly appealing: he was the scion of a large, rich clan, and the soulshards that he kept on his body were surely the best of the best.

"We really do have to thank them for their generosity!"

Sun Xiaowu waggled his fingers as he dug into the pouch, glancing at the soulshards of various shapes, colors, and textures as he did so.

"Wow! This is from a superior-grade rampaging rhinoceros. It's a defensive-type soulshard that covers your body in a thick hide, conferring as much defense as you'd expect from such a sturdy lifeform!" His eyes shone. Without a question, this soulshard was most suited to someone like him, whose framework was defense-focused.

The others also found quite a number of soulshards to their liking; Fang Yi had acquired one that would grant him short-term explosive strength, whereas Li Feng identified a superior-grade radiant beetle soulshard that could transform into a winged suit of armor. Sun Mengmeng picked up a superior-grade firebird soulshard, which enhanced her already-potent flames even further.

However, despite the thirty or so superior-grade soulshards they had acquired, neither Zhou Ying nor Yang Ze found ones that were perfectly compatible with their frameworks. They had no choice but to choose more general soulshards for temporary use.

Chapter 153: Unrelenting Investigation

"Don't worry. Before the Void Cup begins, I'll make sure to find both of you an appropriate superior-grade soulshard." Zhang Lie patted both Yang Ze and Zhou Ying on the back.

After dividing up the soulshards, the hunters of Team Zenith hurriedly left the Desert of Silence. As for Young Master Long and the others, they sensed three skulking lifeforms approaching their bodies with despair before ultimately perishing.

In the afternoon, in one of the Long clan's inns in the Godspath settlement, a red-haired youth with thick brows and large eyes frowned as he drummed his knuckles against a table.

"What's going on? Long Fei's been out for almost the entire day. Why haven't we heard back from him yet?" His face was cold.

"Young Master, your brother's rather experienced with hunting down these stray hunters by now, so I'm sure he's fine. If he hasn't returned or sent any news, I'm sure he must have his hands full enjoying the spoils from his hunt," his thin, slender companion replied casually.

"Is that so? But they've gone to the Desert of Silence this time, and no one would want to stay there overnight if they can help it. The closest settlement to it is Godspath, so they should have returned. No, I have to take a look personally!"

After a moment's thought, he summoned his team and made a beeline toward the Desert of Silence. The sun had yet to set, so if Long Fei had encountered some danger in the Desert of Silence, he would be able to save him.

"Where's Long Sheng going with his team?"

"Probably to the Desert of Silence. Long Fei left bright and early in the morning, and he still hasn't returned. Could he have encountered some trouble?"

"What? You think others could trouble him? More likely than not he's the one causing trouble for them! If he still hasn't returned, he must be robbing even more hunters of their spoils."

The hunters of the Godspath settlement began to gossip with each other. Long Fei was notorious in the settlement. Most of the ordinary hunters there hated him for what he did, but were powerless to stop him.

As Long Sheng and his team entered the Desert of Silence, they followed his trail and finally found a trace of his body right before sunset. Sand had caked into mud, then cracked apart under the sun. Remnants of genetic energy hung thickly in the air. Massive footprints could be seen in the mud, a sign that a few of the superior-grade lifeforms for which the desert was known had been present.

Blood and entrails littered the sand, the corpse stench soiling the air. Long Sheng glanced around and saw, to his surprise, a familiar body. He strode forward with a grave premonition.

"Long Fei!" When he approached the body more closely, his face turned grim. Although it was little more than a hand and a torso, the ring on the hand made the body's identity clear. This was his brother's corpse—no, a piece of his corpse.

"Who did this?!" His eyes red, Long Sheng howled as he surveyed his surroundings.

The members of this team immediately fanned out and began searching for any hints as to what might have killed Long Fei.

"Young Master, I believe this was caused by a superior-grade lifeform," the team's deputy suggested, having walked over to Long Sheng's side and hesitated for a long moment before he spoke.

"Chewed to death by a superior-grade lifeform?!"

Long Sheng's eyes flared with killing intent, causing even his teammates to shudder. The genetic energy in the area began to fluctuate wildly, and his teammates couldn't help but think that Long Sheng was going to take out his anger on them.

"Inform the clan immediately. Furthermore, dispatch a few hunters to search this and the neighboring area. No grain of sand must be left unturned!"

Long Sheng calmed down; no amount of rage would help his brother now. From the scene, it looked as though Long Fei had indeed been bitten to death by a superior-grade lifeform, but Long Sheng was certain that, with Long Fei's skill, he wouldn't have perished to a superior-grade lifeform unless he ventured deep into the desert. Furthermore, the air was filled with remnants of sword energy, and neither Long Fei nor the team he had been with had any sword users.

As such, Long Sheng surmised that someone, perhaps a swordmaster, had crippled Long Fei and left him to die to the superior-grade lifeforms roaming the desert.

Long Sheng's conjecture was surprisingly close to what had happened, but the Godspath settlement was so large that there were quite a few swordmasters in the area. Trying to identify the culprit based on this conjecture alone would be near-impossible.

In the real world, the Long clan, situated in Lingnan, also quickly received the news. The Long clan head, Long Xiaotian, was furious, the wrinkles on his face trembling as he exuded genetic energy from his body. The other members of the clan that were present lowered their heads, unwilling to meet his eyes.

What father could bear to lose his son?

"No, that can't be. Long Fei isn't a weak hunter, so how could he have perished like that in the first realm?!" Long Xiaotian howled. He could barely believe the news of his son's death.

"I mourn for your loss, Head," the first elder of the Long clan commiserated.

Long Xiaotian sucked in a deep breath and forced himself to remain calm as he glanced at the first elder of the clan. "Investigate his death. Send more men to the Desert of Silence. Don't ignore even the smallest clue of what could have happened. I want to know just who from the Godspath settlement has entered the Desert of Silence within the last two days— no, not just the Godspath settlement, but all settlements within three thousand kilometers of the Desert of Silence.

"Spare no expense. If nothing else, my son's death can't remain a mystery!" Long Xiaotian declared.

"Just what happened in the Godspath settlement? Why are they sending hunters over here?"

"Don't you know? Apparently, the Long clan's second young master was found dead in the Desert of Silence, consumed by superior-grade lifeforms!"

"The Long clan's second young master? Someone dared to attack him? They really don't fear death, do they!"

"There've been countless hunters entering the Desert of Silence on the eve of the Void Cup. How will they be able to identify the culprit? And you know what? Good riddance to him! You all know what he's done!"

"Shh, be quiet! Don't let anyone suspect that you're responsible. You know what the Long clan's like!"

"According to a rumor I heard, the fellow who killed the Long clan's second young master was a swordmaster!"

The Long clan had made such a fuss that there was more gossip about the sudden death than even the Void Cup itself. Chu Feng and Yun Bing naturally overheard the news.

"What should we do now?" Chu Feng sighed. He had followed Zhang Lie into the Desert of Silence, but Zhang Lie had been so fast that the two of them had been unable to pursue him. Subsequently, news of Young Master Long's death began to spread.

Just who was responsible? Chu Feng and Yun Bing were certain of the culprit

"The Desert of Silence is a large place indeed, and Long Fei was devoured by a few superior-grade lifeforms. There's no evidence to hold the culprit accountable, and it shouldn't be possible for them to lay the blame on Zhang Lie," Yun Bing analyzed.

However, she had neglected the Long clan's temper. Their exhaustive search, fueled by almost half the clan's manpower, had actually narrowed down the potential suspects. Furthermore, some testimony from teams of hunters that had been nearby meant that the Long clan was drawing ever closer to the truth.

The instigator behind this whole affair was currently sitting cross-legged in his room in the Blacksteel Inn, contemplating the mysteries of [Eclipse], while the hunters of Team Zenith were training avidly to get used to their new soulshards.

They had yet to discover the commotion that was disrupting the entirety of the Blacksteel settlement, and Zhang Lie had warned them not to use their newly acquired soulshards in public unless they had no other choice.

Deep in the night, Zhang Lie opened his eyes, his gaze seeming even more piercing than before. He released a breath. It had been a day since he returned from the Desert of Silence, and he had focused almost completely on Eclipse during that time. He was growing more and more familiar with the technique, but it was still temporarily impossible for him to combine it with [Ninecarp Transformation] completely.

He stood up and stretched, then headed to Team Zenith's communal training room to check on them. "Well? Are you used to these soulshards yet?"

After they returned from the Desert of Silence, the hunters had only taken a short break before starting their training in earnest once more.

"Yes, Captain, we are! I'm sure we'll be able to put on a good performance during the Void Cup at this rate," Sun Xiaowu exclaimed happily.

"Yes, Captain!" the other hunters also chorused, though Yang Ze and Zhou Ying's voices sounded a little strained.

Everyone else noticed.

"Captain, while there's still some time left, why don't we hurry up and acquire soulshards for Yang Ze and Zhou Ying?" Sun Mengmeng suggested.

Zhang Lie smiled. "We will, but not today. The dimensional world's too dangerous at night. Tomorrow, we'll hunt them both soulshards."

"Great!" Sun Mengmeng exclaimed. Yang Ze and Zhou Ying both smiled and bowed their heads, grateful for the thoughtful gesture.

Zhang Lie had them sleep early to prepare for the grueling hunt tomorrow as he took over the training room. After meditating on [Eclipse] for so long, it was past time to give his body a workout. With a shout, dark genetic energy began spilling from him. Zhang Lie punched forward with [Fists of the Silent Sea], sending ripples into the air.

Engrossed in his training, he didn't know that the Long clan was heading his way.

Within an inn in the Godspath settlement, Long Sheng glanced at the woman in front of him with a malevolent expression on his face. "You're sure he attacked this so-called Team Zenith?"

His question was more like an assertion, one bundled with a thick layer of killing intent.

"Y-Yes! I was nearby at the time, and I saw Young Master Long's team heading toward Team Zenith. I saw no trace of him afterwards!"

The killing intent emanating from Long Sheng caused this hunter from the Blacksteel settlement to quiver, but she quickly controlled her body and explained what she had seen.

"Team Zenith? Whose clan does that team belong to, and what's its background in the Blacksteel settlement?" Long Sheng continued questioning her.

"Young Master Long, Team Zenith is associated with the Zenith Dojo in Ning—"

Long Sheng's eyes narrowed. "You mean, the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie?!"

Chapter 154: A Planned Ambush

Zhang Lie's name had spread far and wide across the first realm of the dimensional world, and he was known to just about every hunter.

"The same Zhang Lie who rose to fame during the Kez invasion of the capital, and who killed the Li clan head's two sons?" Long Sheng narrowed his eyes, barely suppressing a quaver in his tone.

"Yes, that's him!" The hunter nodded.

Long Sheng grimaced. His brother's killer would be harder to deal with than he expected.

First, Zhang Lie had monopolized the entire stock of white-grub cores, and if the Long clan were to stand against him openly, it would only end up like the Li clan. Second, if Zhang Lie chose not to leave the Blacksteel settlement, even the Long clan wouldn't be able to do anything about him. Third, Zhang Lie was simply too strong. It would be near impossible to kill him within the dimensional world.

But even so, how could he afford not to avenge his brother's death? Otherwise, how would he be different from that cowardly Clan Head Li?

"Young Master Long, it's possible that only the hunters of Team Zenith were involved. The Dragonwolf Zhang Lie might not have had anything to do with it," the hunter suggested.

"Whether or not Zhang Lie was part of it is unimportant. Would he stand idly by if I were to attack his team? What's Team Zenith up to at the moment?"

"They've been cooped up in the Blacksteel Inn ever since their return from the Desert of Silence. However, I learned that they were planning to head out tomorrow to hunt some superior-grade lifeforms," the hunter replied, having a surprisingly clear grasp of Zhang Lie and his team's whereabouts.

Long Sheng's eyes gleamed. "Is that so? How arrogant they must be to not lie low after killing someone from the Long clan! Help me find out where they're going. I'll pay you ten times the usual amount," Long Sheng instructed. Indeed, he planned on dealing with Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith at the earliest opportunity.

"I'll let you know immediately!" The hunter's eyes lit up with greed upon hearing Long Sheng's offer. The next moment, she vanished in a puff of smoke.

The next morning, Sun Mengmeng eagerly asked, "Captain, are we returning to the Desert of Silence?"

"No. We'll be heading to the Runic Forest this time."

By now, there were so many hunters in the Desert of Silence that even the superior-grade lifeforms were starting to retreat closer toward the heart of the desert. Unless they were to go deeper into the desert, they would barely find any prey, but it would be too unsafe to go too far in. As such, the Desert of Silence wasn't Zhang Lie's preferred hunting ground.

"The Runic Forest?"

"Yes. As you can tell from its name, there are likely more wood-attuned lifeforms there, and it'll be more suited to Zhou Ying."

"Thank you, Captain." Zhou Ying's eyes turned misty. She wasn't a particularly strong hunter within the group, and because of her personality, she didn't really stand out. As such, she hardly expected that Zhang Lie would direct everyone to the Runic Forest just to get a soulshard for her.

"In that case, we'll have to leave soon. It's rather far from the Blacksteel settlement," Fang Yi advised. "And there's more. The Long clan seems to be trying to figure out our whereabouts, so we may need to be wary of them as well!"

"No matter. Let them come: if they're anything like that Long hunter, they might even save us some trouble." Zhang Lie's face turned cold; to him, the hunters of the Long clan were nothing more than walking sacks of soulshards.

The other hunters blinked, then smiled dryly as they prepared to head toward the Runic Forest.

"The Runic Forest? It's a sparsely populated hunting ground—Zhang Lie's really asking to be ambushed."

A skulking shadow, trailing Team Zenith from a distance, began to make a move. She was the female hunter that Long Sheng had been talking to. After tracking Team Zenith for some time, she deduced their final destination by process of elimination.

"The Runic Forest? Dispatch all Long teams to that location. We'll leave immediately!" Long Sheng commanded.

Following his command, the Long clan's hunters set off toward the Runic Forest. They caused such a commotion that even the Blacksteel settlement learned about the news.

Li Sheng sat in a pub. Turning to the person beside him, he whispered, "Are you certain that the Long clan's destination is the Runic Forest?"

"Yes, sir. Before that, we've had a few reports that Zhang Lie's Team Zenith also seems to be heading in that direction," his subordinate reported.

"Hoh, interesting." Li Sheng narrowed his eyes. He believed that Long Sheng wouldn't lead an expedition there for no reason, so his objective must have been Team Zenith.

And if he were bringing so many hunters with him, then he had to have ascertained the culprit behind Long Fei's death.

"As expected of that fellow," Li Sheng murmured to himself.

Zhang Lie had killed or harmed quite a few scions of the major clans: Qin Xiao and Li Hong, then Li Jin and Li Xin. Their backgrounds were all relatively illustrious, and no one had dared to stand up to them, no one but Zhang Lie.

"Does the clan have any instructions for me?" Li Sheng asked.

"The clan head has designated Zhang Lie as a mortal enemy, one whom we have to kill at any cost!" Li Sheng dismissed the hunter and bade him send word back to the real world.

Indeed, the Li clan would try to kill Zhang Lie at every opportunity. If the Long clan were going to attack him, then the Li clan could well take advantage of the opportunity to do the same. Once Zhang Lie died, not only would Li Jin and Li Xin be avenged, his monopoly on white-grub cores would also be no more. With the Long clan as scapegoat, the Li clan wouldn't even have to fear judgment from the military or world federation.

"Advance." Li Sheng himself led a team of Li elites out of the Blacksteel settlement.

The commotion caused by the two clans was far too large to have gone unnoticed by the other hunters.

"This—they're all planning to kill him, aren't they?"

"It looks as though Zhang Lie and his Team Zenith are going to perish in the Runic Forest!"

"What a shame! They won't even be able to participate in the Void Cup."

"Don't you know how strong Zhang Lie is? I think there's a chance that Zhang Lie might slaughter them instead!"

"Hah! This is the dimensional world. No matter how strong Zhang Lie is on his own, do you really think he can defeat the combined might of two major clans?"

Many of the Blacksteel hunters, eager to find out just what would happen, also began heading to the Runic Forest.

The Wang, Qin, Zhou, Qian, and He clans didn't make a move; it seemed like an opportune time to strike, but they were rational enough not to do so.

On the other hand, the Yun and Chu clans, who were sorely hoping to establish a cordial relationship with Zhang Lie, naturally dispatched a few reinforcements toward the forest as well.

This was a perfect opportunity to demonstrate their resourcefulness as would-be allies.

Furthermore, within the dimensional world, Chu Feng and Yun Bing were essentially in charge of their respective clans' forces. After sending word to their clans in the real world, they hurriedly led a delegation of elites toward the Runic Forest.

The hunters of Team Zenith had no clue just what sort of commotion they had caused within the dimensional world.

Within the forest, they saw countless trees reaching for the skies, surely decades or centuries old at the very least. Their thick branches were intercrossed and leafy, shrouding the forest underneath a canopy of green. The trees within the forest, unlike those found outside, all seemed to have runic inscriptions running the length of their trunks, giving rise to the name of the forest.

The forest seemed as quiet as a ghost town.

"Captain, is this the Runic Forest?" Sun Xiaowu swallowed a gulp of saliva.

If the Desert of Silence, scoured by wind and sand all day long, were like the sea during a thunderstorm, then the Runic Forest was a calm, unperturbed lake. The surface of the lake was smooth and placid, but beneath it hid startling danger.

"Yes, we're at the Runic Forest," Zhang Lie replied. According to his past memories, even though the Runic Forest wasn't as well-known as the Desert of Silence, it was similarly dangerous.

Many of the lifeforms who made this forest their home were extremely skilled at disguise. There was little light in the forest, much of it having been reflected by the canopy, and a hunter could easily be caught unaware.

"Let's go," Zhang Lie instructed, stepping forward as he sucked in a breath.

Fireflies danced up from where he strode, lighting up the patch of ground surrounding Team Zenith.

From a distance away, however, the entrance to the Runic Forest looked like a gaping maw, swallowing up Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith.

Soon, all they could hear were their own footsteps. However, the silence wasn't destined to last long. Amidst a series of hurried footsteps, Long Sheng appeared over the horizon.

"Young Master Long, we've arrived at the Runic Forest," one of his troops reported.

"Team Zenith's likely already inside. We'll set up an ambush for them out here," Long Sheng commanded.

By the time Team Zenith left the forest, they would be weary and fatigued. That would be the best time for Long Sheng and his troops to strike; even at his full strength, it was unlikely that Zhang Lie could survive such an ambush, let alone when he was weakened.

The Long troops followed Long Sheng's command.

Li Sheng and the other hunters of the Li clan approached the Runic Forest from another direction. They were even more careful than the Long clan, hiding amidst the trees and bushes a fair distance away from the entrance to the forest.

The spectators arranged themselves even farther away from the forest, some even climbing up a nearby tree or two to have a better vantage point. The Long clan was waiting for Team Zenith to leave the forest, whereas the Li clan was waiting for the Long clan's ambush.

Chapter 155: The Runic Forest

Deep in the Runic Forest, the only illumination came from fireflies.

Sun Mengmeng took the lead with an orange fireball above her head. As the only fire-attuned hunter in the team, she was naturally tasked with providing illumination. She didn't make the fireballs as bright or as large as she could; under these conditions, even the weakest light could still draw a variety of lifeforms toward them.

If the light were too bright, it might attract more lifeforms than they could handle. The hunters weren't too afraid of such a scenario, but it would certainly sap them of their genetic energy and deter them from their goal.

"We're almost there. At our current speed, we'll be deep within the Runic Forest within two minutes. Be careful!" Zhang Lie warned everyone.

The hunters nodded.

Zhang Lie was far more familiar with the Runic Forest than the Desert of Silence, having released a detailed map of the former in his past life. As a result, despite the weak illumination, he was able to judge their rough location from the greenery that he identified.

Just then, Yang Ze accidentally stepped on a dry branch, which let out a sharp crack.

"Be careful!" Zhang Lie hollered. Yang Ze felt his back turn cold as killing intent latched onto his back, and he sensed motion to his left.

Sun Mengmeng moved her fireball closer, and everyone could see a speckled python opening its jaws wide, its forked tongue poking straight out like a stiff sword. Its sharp fangs caused everyone to shudder.

"[Baptism of Hellfire]!" Sun Mengmeng shouted. A series of purple flames erupted down the length of her longsword, which she directed right into the python's jaws.

With a shrill scream, the python's jaws burst into flames. It immediately gave up on its attack and vanished deep into the greenery of the forest.

Yang Ze exhaled. In that moment, he felt as though he had looked death in the face.

"Be careful. The Runic Forest isn't any less dangerous than the Desert of Silence," Sun Mengmeng reminded him.

"Yang Ze, perk up! You can't afford to slack off or lose concentration here," Zhang Lie added. Under such circumstances, every lapse of attention could lead to injury—or death.

"Yes, Captain," Yang Ze replied somberly.

If Zhang Lie weren't mistaken, that python was a superior-grade lifeform he recognized, with a rather valuable soul shard. However, it was skilled in stealth and deception, and Zhang Lie wouldn't dare go chasing after it in an unfamiliar environment. Furthermore, they had already designated a target before the start of the expedition, and he didn't want to derail them.

"Captain, we're entering the territory of the arboreal mantis!" Sun Mengmeng suddenly whispered.

Zhang Lie stopped. The arboreal mantis was a superior-grade lifeform particularly skilled at camouflage, with chameleon-like skin that could adapt to its surroundings.

The term 'arboreal' derived from its preference of hiding amidst branches and leaves as it waited for prey to appear. Just encountering one such superior-grade mantis was troublesome enough, but in this part of the forest, there could be a mantis lying in wait everywhere they looked.

"The arboreal mantis is small but deadly, and its poison can kill a victim in minutes. Everyone, be careful!" Zhang Lie warned.

The gnarled wood and twisted branches of the trees in this region were rather ominous, and there were countless nooks and crannies in which a mantis could be hiding. A path strewn with branches lay before them, with dry leaves hiding what was underneath. Who knew what nastiness they would have to wade through?

"Let's go." Zhang Lie stepped forward. The leaves cracked into pieces; where the forest floor was damp, the stench of rot emerged.

Zhang Lie frowned. What could be the source of that stench? He felt as though he were wading through a muddy swamp.

"Watch out," he reminded the others again, treading carefully forward. The others followed suit.

Suddenly, a dull thump seemed to come from underneath them. Halfway to their destination, the ground began to shake, and the gnarled trees on both sides began waving their branches as if they had come to life.

"Those runic trees are... moving?!" Yang Ze widened his eyes in shock.

"There's a superior-grade lifeform here!" Zhang Lie said. The dry leaves on the ground were brushed aside as it suddenly parted.

"Captain, we're stepping on the roots of these runic trees!" Sun Mengmeng shouted, uncovering the truth. Countless roots had emerged from the ground and were rushing toward the hunters of Team Zenith.

Zhang Lie frowned. Circulating his genetic energy, he summoned Venombane to his hand.

Around Zhang Lie rose the sound of running water. "[The Boundless Blade: Expulsion]!"

Giant waves of sword energy emanated from Zhang Lie, sweeping toward the roots of the runic trees that were coming for the hunters of Team Zenith from all directions. The seemingly sturdy roots were nevertheless like papier mache against Zhang Lie's piercing sword energy, and they were easily torn apart.

Sun Mengmeng and the others also activated their own genetic techniques, forcing the roots back or destroying them entirely.

The ground shook. The roots leaked purple fluid into the ground.

Zhang Lie activated his galewolf soulshard as he jumped into mid-air. As he landed, the two closest runic trees began to move toward him, causing the ground to quake even harder than before, as though a ferocious beast were about to emerge from underground. The trees' roots spiked up, twining into two pillars that supported the trees' massive bulk.

"So what if you're superior-grade lifeforms? [Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Zhang Lie combined [Fists of the Silent Sea] with [Three-Wave Crescendo] in a rapid attack.

With a shout, Sun Mengmeng loosed an arrow, sending a flaming purple arrow toward the runic tree.

The hunters of Team Zenith, their cooperation honed from months of training together, avoided the trees' roots and began their counterattack.

The two runic trees screamed shrilly. Under concentrated fire from the hunters and Sun Mengmeng's particularly effective flames, they quickly turned into heaps of ash.

"What's going on? Why can these trees move?!" Yang Ze asked once the battle was over.

They were deep within the Runic Forest, and there were runic trees surrounding them all. If the trees could all move, wouldn't the hunters of Team Zenith be trapped deep within enemy territory?

"No, these two aren't just runic trees—they're runic treemen," Zhang Lie explained.

These treemen were a class of lifeforms in their own right. It was likely that the reason they had seemed to transform into runic trees was because of how long they had remained in the Runic Forest.

"Aren't these treemen a little too large?" Li Feng commented idly.

Usual treemen were generally only the height of two adult hunters, but these two treemen were the size of small mountains. If not for how well the hunters of Team Zenith cooperated, by the time the two treemen extricated themselves from the ground, they would likely have become far more dangerous foes.

"They must have blended into their surroundings and killed quite a fair bit of prey, or they wouldn't have been able to grow so tall." Fang Yi swept aside some of the leaves remaining on the path, revealing bones scattered among them. Some of the bones seemed a little fresh, with a bit of bloody meat still on them.

Unfortunately, neither of these runic treemen dropped the hunters any soulshards, or they would have been quite compatible with Zhou Ying.

After a momentary pause, the hunters forged onward, each of them more alert than the last. Even the runic trees on either side of the path could well be enemies, and they had to focus to prevent any potential ambush.

The hunters walked out into a clearing, so quiet that they could all hear each other's breathing.

"This should be where the arboreal mantises are located," Zhang Lie murmured, glancing all around him.

However, something seemed to be wrong: it was simply too quiet where they were. They should have been targeted by the arboreal mantises long ago. Why hadn't they been attacked by any other lifeforms other than the treemen yet?

"Fresh blood! That's a superior-grade lifeform's carcass!" Sun Mengmeng was glancing at a puddle of blood in front of her.

About ten meters in front of the party, there was a pool of green blood surrounding an unmoving lifeform. The lifeform had dark gray skin, a triangular head, two barely visible feelers, and a pair of black pincer-like arms.

"A superior-grade arboreal mantis!" Upon seeing this arboreal mantis' carcass, Zhang Lie frowned. In general, such mantises were highly territorial, and each territory would only be led by a single superior-grade mantis.

The superior-grade arboreal mantis in this territory had become a carcass, and there was no sign of any other such mantises around. The most likely hypothesis was that the territory had recently been taken over by some other superior-grade lifeform.

"The blood's still very fresh. Everyone, be careful!" Sun Mengmeng whispered.

The hunters all looked around them. Any superior-grade lifeform that was able to kill a superior-grade arboreal mantis would be a difficult target indeed.

Just then, a gust of wind began to blow in the clearing.

Zhang Lie's breath hitched. Where could the wind be coming from?

Sun Mengmeng and the others also noticed this oddity. However, except for the sudden wind, nothing seemed to be amiss.

"Ah, what's going on? Why is there a pleasant scent in the air?" Sun Xiaowu took a deep breath and felt his mind become disoriented.

Chapter 156: The Devil-Face Spider

"Be careful, there's poison!" Sun Xiaowu croaked out. Before his warning, however, the hunters had already sensed something amiss.

Why would there be a sweet scent in the air? After all, they were in the Runic Forest, shrouded in eternal darkness! Sun Xiaowu was the only one who had fallen prey to the intoxicating scent because he was the only one daring enough to smell it. The other hunters had instantly stopped breathing the moment the wind began to blow.

Sun Xiaowu stumbled as he walked, as though he would fall down at any moment. Sun Mengmeng hurried back to him and supported his body, while Zhang Lie put two fingers by his nose and began circulating his genetic energy. As he did so, a small ball of poisonous mist was sucked out of Sun Xiaowu's body. Sun Xiaowu felt a lot more clear-headed after that, and Zhang Lie breathed a sigh of relief.

Just then, however, a series of crackling noises came from above their heads. Zhang Lie darted to the side near-instinctively, and the other members of Team Zenith belatedly followed suit.

After dodging, they glanced up to see a massive spider hanging right over their heads. The spider's carapace looked like a devil's face, and its eight long legs, like bamboo poles, were covered with white fur. They were currently erect and stiff like steel rods.

As the spider moved, the markings that formed a face on the back of its carapace seemed to laugh, causing the hunters to jerk back in alarm.

"This is a superior-grade devil-face spider!" Sun Mengmeng identified immediately. This species of spider was relatively large, but well-versed in disguise. Its carapace was covered with sharp hair, and it was tough and resilient. There were essentially no weak points to be found.

Furthermore, it could travel rapidly among the trees of the Runic Forest with its eight poled legs, and it could spit out a highly corrosive poison. Before it hunted, it would spin a web and release a sweet-smelling poison so as to paralyze its prey. Even the web it wove was poisonous; it wouldn't be easy prey at all.

Based on the state of the arboreal mantis' carcass and the unusual scent in the air, it was likely that this devil-face spider had just taken over the mantis' territory and killed the superior-grade mantis there. Just as the spider was about to enjoy its prey, the hunters of Team Zenith had appeared.

The devil-face spider let out a shrill screech. Wind rose around them, and the spider retreated. As it did so, the web it had prepared enveloped Zhang Lie and the others.

"This bastard's been laying a trap for us!" Sun Mengmeng cried out. The other hunters glanced at their foe grimly; the spider would be even harder an opponent than the mantis.

However, Zhang Lie was quite excited. The devil-face spider possessed an extremely strong poison and ability to disguise itself. If they could obtain its soulshard, it would be a big boon for Zhou Ying.

Of course, not having found a mutated-grade lifeform of the same species, Zhang Lie couldn't guarantee a drop.

"Destroy the web!" Zhang Lie commanded.

Sun Mengmeng circulated her genetic energy. Her hair drifted in immaterial wind, and hot air gusted from her bow. She launched [Lunarflame Shot]. The arrow shot toward the spider with a whoosh of sound, purple flames trailing behind it, her genetic energy giving it the impression of a flamboyant phoenix.

It sliced through the spiderweb with wisps of smoke, burning it to cinders.

When the spider saw its web so easily destroyed, it screeched again as it glared at Sun Mengmeng. Its mouth suddenly opened as it shot a few dark purple streaks of venom toward her, almost as fast as a gun's bullets.

"Be careful!" Fang Yi cried out.

Sun Mengmeng responded calmly. The moment the spider launched its attack, she had begun moving to the side.

The venom shot a runic tree, and green smoke began to rise where the venom landed. A hole had been corroded all the way through the tree's bark, and the hunters present were all shocked by its potency.

Seeing that its attack had failed again, the spider went on a rampage and began to screech into the air. As it did so, countless beady red eyes emerged from the darkness surrounding the clearing.

Trouble was approaching: devil-face spiders lived in swarms, so after sensing dangerous prey, this superior-grade spider quickly summoned its peers. At the same time, it shot back up the trees as it retracted its legs.

Zhang Lie activated his galewolf soulshard and clutched Venombane tightly in his hand. Devil-face spiders were very agile, and if he were to let it escape into the canopy, it would be even harder to deal with. Zhang Lie commanded the other hunters to form a defensive perimeter around the clearing so as to prevent the swarm of devil-face spiders from attacking.

The trees around the clearing suddenly began to quiver.

"It—these aren't runic treemen, are they?" Sun Xiaowu asked in fright.

"No, the shaking's caused by the devil-face spiders. They live in swarms!" Fang Yi shouted. It was apparent that he had studied the manual that Zhang Lie had given them all very closely.

If the runic trees here were actually all treemen, they would long since have attacked, and this clearing wouldn't have ended up as the arboreal mantises' territory.

Leaves rustled all around them, disrupting their sense of hearing. The hunters couldn't identify where the sound was coming from and were glancing all around suspiciously when two streaks of spider silk shot toward Sun Xiaowu.

His body still had trace amounts of the devil-face spider's poison, and the spiders clearly considered him a priority target.

"[Adamantine Aegis]!" Sun Xiaowu shouted. Golden light spiraled around his body as it turned to radiant gold.

The spider silk landed on Sun Xiaowu's body with a dull thump and so much force that even he had to take a few steps back. Where the spider silk struck the gold, it began to tarnish.

The hunters gaped at the sight: the devil-face spiders' silk alone was so poisonous that it could corrode the genetic energy sustaining his technique! He could barely sustain [Adamantine Aegis] much longer given the additional pressure from the poison.

The next moment, a veritable sea of devil-face spiders emerged from the darkness, strands of spider silk raining down on them all like rain. Luckily for them, the spiders that had emerged were only mutated-grade.

"[Heaven's Judgment]!" Fang Yi struck with an obsidian spear crackling with lightning as he dashed into the rain of silk. He pointed his spear straight up as lightning crackled all around him, destroying the silk in a large circle around him. Countless trees near the clearing were scorched black, and rays of light shone into the forest for the first time in years.

The spiders let out shrill shrieks as Fang Yi drew back his spear, splotches of green blood sully the spearhead. They jumped around the clearing as they deftly wove a gigantic web around all the hunters.

Under the sunlight, the white silk glimmered with the green of intense poison. Many of the runic trees began to smoke, their bark being corroded away by the spider silk.

Zhang Lie frowned. Wasn't these spiders' venom far too toxic? It was almost comparable to Venombane!

The web quivered and trembled like violin strings as countless mutated-grade spiders dropped into the clearing from above. Streaks of venom shot toward the hunters of Team Zenith. There were so many spiders attacking that it wouldn't be possible to avoid the venom.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!"

"[Golden Divide]!"

"[The Boundless Blade]!"

"[Arclight Dragon's Imprint]!"

"[Storm of Leaves]!"

If they couldn't avoid the attack, then they would have to defend against it. The hunters of Team Zenith launched all sorts of attacks at their disposal toward the rain of silk, creating multicolored explosions in the air.

As hunters who had maxed out their gene capacities, they easily overcame the mutated-grade devil-face spiders, tearing a wide opening in the web that they had constructed.

Zhang Lie's eyes turned cold. As he circulated his genetic energy, a dark serpent materialized around him. He climbed on the serpent, which uncoiled and lifted him out of the web. Coldly, he glanced at the superior-grade devil-face spider directing all this from afar.

When the spider sensed Zhang Lie's malicious stare, it screeched in fright. From Zhang Lie's body, it could sense life-threatening danger. A superior-grade lifeform's intelligence was no worse than a human's, and it knew that it had no chance of winning against Zhang Lie.

As the queen of this swarm, her perishing would mean the swarm's perishing. As a result, after glancing at Zhang Lie, she hurriedly released dark-green genetic energy as she skittered away.

Would Zhang Lie let her escape? Of course not! If this spider were to produce a soulshard, it would surely enhance Zhou Ying's abilities.

As he continued feeding energy into his [Ninecarp Transformation], the serpent underneath him suddenly opened its eyes wide as it let out a shrill cry.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Zhang Lie punched forward with his right arm, and the serpent launched itself at the spider queen.

Chapter 157: Vengeance in Blood

The serpent's corrosive genetic energy caused the runic tree on which the spider queen was located to crash to the ground. Despite wrapping itself up in its silk and deploying all its genetic energy to form a shield, the spider queen was nevertheless unable to survive the blow. The serpent devoured it whole.

The huge commotion could be heard even from outside the Runic Forest.

"Young Master Long, it sounds like a fight's broken out within the forest!" one of his subordinates whispered.

"That's normal. With Zhang Lie's skill, however, there's no way he'd die to a superior-grade lifeform," Long Sheng replied.

After all, none of the superior-grade lifeforms in the dimensional world could be compared to the Kez's three-star black-tipped scarab. Zhang Lie had even overcome the latter, so how could the former pose any threat?

By the outskirts of the Runic Forest, Li Sheng and the others were likewise startled by the commotion.

"That noise seemed to have come from within the Runic Forest. Who could have caused such a large explosion? Could it be Zhang Lie?" Li Sheng frowned.

"Except for them, no other hunter has gone inside the Runic Forest today," one of his subordinates volunteered.

At the same time, the random unaffiliated hunters who had gathered by the forest for entertainment also began to chatter to each other.

"As expected of the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie! I bet he just encountered some dangerous foe."

"So what? With his strength, I doubt any superior-grade lifeform will be able to do anything to him."

"On the other hand, do you guys see what the Long clan's doing?"

"Heh, I'm glad someone's finally putting Zhang Lie in his place! I can't watch him flaunt his wealth any longer."

The spider queen's carcass dropped to the ground. Surrounded by dense genetic energy, a deep green soulshard condensed from the ether.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade devil-face spider and obtained its soulshard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade devil-face spider, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

The dimensional world's announcement shook the hunters.

"A soulshard!" Sun Xiaowu shouted, and everyone rushed forward.

The death of the spider queen caused the swarm to scatter and flee. Everyone stared at the dark green soulshard that lay over the spider's carcass. The chance of condensing a soulshard was minute, but Zhang Lie seemed to trigger it far more often than not.

Zhang Lie himself was a little surprised. He had intended on obtaining an arboreal mantis soulshard for Zhou Ying, but was lucky enough to get the even better superior-grade devil-face spider soulshard instead. An exquisite spider-silk armor could be seen within the soulshard, marking it as defensive-type.

"What opportune timing! What are you waiting for, Zhou Ying?" Zhang Lie smiled at her.

Zhou Ying sucked in a deep breath as she picked up the soulshard, her hands trembling out of excitement. "Thank you, Captain!"

"It's only expected of me, after all. Alright, we should head back now. After the aura I released, the superior-grade lifeforms nearby are likely all hiding away, so we'll have to find a new hunting ground," Zhang Lie sighed, glancing at the devil-face spider queen's corroded carcass.

They had come to the Runic Forest for Zhou Ying, and now that she had obtained a soulshard, there was no need to waste more time here. They left along the same route they came.

As they returned to the entrance of the Runic Forest, from which some rays of sunlight could be seen, Zhang Lie suddenly motioned for them to halt.

"What's the matter, Captain?" Sun Mengmeng asked curiously.

"Nothing. I just discovered the traces of a few rats." Zhang Lie smiled as he continued walking forward, followed quickly by the other members of Team Zenith. As they walked out of the forest, they covered their eyes against the suddenly disorienting sunlight.

Just then, before the hunters could react, projectiles suddenly shot toward them from afar. The hunters were startled, but not flustered. Zhang Lie's advance warning allowed them to react quickly, and Zhang Lie repelled all the projectiles with a wave of his sword.

However, another set of projectiles quickly shot toward them,

accompanied by a few figures who darted out from the nearby brush. They were all wearing uniformed white armor and staring coldly at Team Zenith.

After Zhang Lie had defended against the first wave of projectiles, the other members of Team Zenith had sensed these ambushers even before they appeared. As all the hunters present began circulating their genetic energy, the two factions faced off against each other.

"So you're the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, and this is Team Zenith. I must say I'm impressed." One of the ambushers strode forward, brandishing a polearm shining with light. His red hair caught the eye; he seemed like a walking torch. His glare, however, was malevolent and cold, and his eyes filled with killing intent.

"Long clan, from the Godspath settlement," Sun Mengmeng deduced, glancing at their armor.

"You recognize the Long clan of Godspath? In that case, just what gave you the courage to act against a member of the Long clan?" Long Sheng's face turned dark.

Given their response to the ambush, it seemed as though the members of Team Zenith were still filled with vitality, and their combat ability hadn't been weakened. In other words, Team Zenith was far stronger than a regular team of hunters, and they would be difficult to defeat.

"Hoh, if you're from the Long clan, are you here to seek revenge for that Long hunter we defeated?" Zhang Lie chuckled, his tone filled with disdain, as though the Long elites arrayed before him were nothing more than trash.

"Any who dares challenge the might of the Long clan must die. You, your family, your friends, your team, and even your dojo—the Long clan will seize them all!"

"Oh? You mean that we should have allowed that Long hunter to kill us just because he wanted to? What impressive arrogance!" Zhang Lie laughed mockingly.

His words shocked the gathered hunters; who else could remain so calm when surrounded by hundreds of elites?

"Ha! The Long clan has been a loyal vassal of the country for centuries, and we've produced many great warriors and hunters. So what if we were to seize some soulshards for our use? Compared to leaving them in the hands of wastrels, the Long clan could make far better use of them!" Long Sheng was the epitome of an arrogant young master.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes and raised his sword. They had made their stances clear; there was no further need for words. The two of them shouted as they released their genetic energy, but before they could exchange blows, Long Sheng suddenly retreated, and a colored mist began spreading out from his hands.

"Zhang Lie, I have to admit that you're a strong fellow, but I came prepared!"

As the colored mist diffused into the air, everyone's genetic energy suddenly began to drain away, causing a momentary halt to the fighting.

Zhang Lie was deep in thought, having recognized the mist almost immediately. He gathered the other hunters of Team Zenith beside him.

The Li hunters were unwilling to wait any longer.

"Young Master Li, Long Sheng's already starting to make his move. Zhang Lie's sure to perish today!" a Li scout reported to Li Sheng.

"Indeed?"

This was exactly what Li Sheng had been waiting for. With the elites from both the Li and Long clans, along with a few treasures, they would certainly be able to prevent Zhang Lie and his team from escaping.

"Yes, Young Master! The Long clan's even using their secret concoction!" The scout's voice quavered with excitement.

"Haha! In that case, Zhang Lie will surely perish today!" Li Sheng raised his head to the skies and began to laugh. Once Zhang Lie died, he would no longer have a monopoly on the white-grub cores, and the Li clan would be saved, the deaths of Li Jin and Li Xin avenged!

"Let's go! We'll surround Zhang Lie from behind. I want to kill him myself!" Li Sheng's eyes turned cold. On his command, hundreds of Li elites emerged, causing the gathered onlookers to chatter away once more.

"Even the Li clan's making a move? They must both want Zhang Lie dead quite badly."

"A pity, a pity indeed! Zhang Lie will surely fall today."

"Do you think there's a chance we can get something good from their clash?"

"Well, it depends on how quickly we act." Some of the onlookers glanced at the scene greedily.

By the entrance to the Runic Forest, the fighting had temporarily stalled. It seemed as though all combatants had lost whatever reserves of genetic energy they possessed.

Zhang Lie and Long Sheng faced off against each other once more, and the hundreds of elites from the Long clan fanned out and surrounded Team Zenith.

"Ha! Today's your death, Zhang Lie!" Just as tensions were rising and the two factions prepared to clash, a shout came from the distance. Everyone turned to see Li Sheng, leading a team of elites, toward the battlefield.

Zhang Lie frowned: it looked as though this ambush had lured out many of those who were against him, but of course he wouldn't turn down an opportunity to get free soulshards.

Seeing the Li elites arrive, some of the onlookers also rushed forward, hoping that their participation would entitle them to some of the spoils from Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith.

Almost a thousand combatants surrounded Zhang Lie. With a group of this size, they could easily venture deep into the Desert of Silence, but this formation was used against just one man: Zhang Lie!

Everyone expected that this was to be Zhang Lie's demise; otherwise, the Li clan wouldn't have dared to stand up against him once more.

"It looks as though the Li clan's begging to be decimated," Zhang Lie murmured.

Li Sheng paused. Indeed, Li Mo's two children had both died to Zhang Lie, and one of them had even been groomed as the Li clan's next successor. Zhang Lie was clearly threatening to do the same to him.

He raised his head and looked Zhang Lie in the eye. Despite their overwhelming numerical advantage and imminent victory, he suddenly felt overcome by fear.

"Young Master Li, you aren't afraid, are you? If you are, go home and suck on your mother's teat! The Long clan doesn't need your help," Long Sheng mocked.

"Of course not! Zhang Lie must perish today!" Quashing his distress, Li Sheng made his stance clear. He firmly believed that Zhang Lie wouldn't be able to escape under such circumstances.

However, Long Sheng corrected him with a sly smile, "No, no! How could we let him die so easily?"

"If you think you can defeat me, feel free to step forward. I'm interested to see just what sort of entertainment you've prepared for me today," Zhang Lie interjected, a faint smile on his face. He didn't look like someone surrounded by enemies.

"Zhang Lie, you'll regret what you've done to my brother!" Zhang Lie's unruffled expression enraged Long Sheng even further. "Go on, keep pretending you have everything under control! [Hundred Dragon Art: Howl]!" he yelled out, the genetic energy in his body breaking out of its stasis.

All the combatants in the field felt a dragon howling into their ears. A gust of wind started to blow, and golden sound waves, made visible by genetic energy, rapidly struck Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith.

"[Golden Destruction]!" At the same time, Li Sheng pointed a finger and shot a ray of light toward Zhang Lie.

However, struck by the effects of the Long clan's mysterious concoction, Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith were still temporarily unable to use their genetic energy.

Surrounded by enemies from all fronts, Team Zenith seemed to be in grave danger.

Chapter 158: Undefeated

Despite the attacks coming at Team Zenith, Zhang Lie stood still without moving. Long Sheng and Li Sheng both began to smile: without this genetic energy suppressed, it seemed as though Zhang Lie wasn't fast enough to react to their attacks.

However, their hopes were quickly dashed. Right before the attacks were about to hit, Zhang Lie smiled. The Long clan's secret concoction didn't seem to have any effect on Zhang Lie. The moment he smiled, his body seemed to recover to normal, and he quickly launched a counterattack.

With an explosion of genetic energy, his black serpent materialized at his back. Their eyes turned to Long Sheng and Li Sheng, and Venombane gleamed in Zhang Lie's hand.

As Zhang Lie used [The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave], sword energy rushed toward the two hunters as waves lapped by his feet. It clashed against [Golden Destruction] and [Hundred Dragon Art] as the winds rose and the ground quaked.

Once the dust had settled, it was evident that Zhang Lie's [The Boundless Blade] had won out. He had overcome both Long Sheng and Li Sheng's joint attacks; they felt blood rise up their throats as the force of the explosion knocked them flying.

Long Sheng, who was further ahead of Li Sheng, spat out a mouthful of blood, clearly having sustained heavy injuries from the attack. The two of them were intending to kill Zhang Lie before he could do anything, but they had severely underestimated his abilities and their own strength.

"No, that's impossible! How could you—"

Long Sheng struggled to stand up as blood seeped out of his mouth once more. He clearly hadn't expected that Zhang Lie would be able to overcome the effects of the Long clan's special concoction.

"Surprised, are you? The effects of this Long poison aren't bad, but it's not as if an antidote doesn't exist," Zhang Lie mocked, as if expecting Long Sheng to try something like this.

Both Long Sheng and Li Sheng gaped at him, particularly Long Sheng. The reason the Long clan had dared to ambush Zhang Lie was because of this concoction, which could temporarily suppress the genetic energy of all living beings within a given region. They had expected that Zhang Lie would easily die after losing access to his genetic energy, but it had become clear that he wasn't restricted by the concoction at all.

In other words, their trump card was meaningless against Zhang Lie, and they were the ones in danger instead.

Long Sheng knew very well that, in a contest of strength, even ten of him wouldn't be able to overcome a single Zhang Lie. He circulated his genetic energy, and a dragon's howl seemed to be heard from afar. Long Sheng had only one objective left: to escape with any means possible.

"Look, Long Sheng's going to make a move!"

"It looks like we're about to get a good show!"

The onlookers nudged each other as they watched the fight intently.

Following Long Sheng's command, his elites began to rush toward Zhang Lie. Zhang Lie frowned in disdain, looking at the charging hunters as though he were staring at a bunch of clowns.

Li Sheng, who had just recovered from the blow, commanded his subordinates to do the same. However, even as their hunters charged forward, the two young masters began to retreat.

"Li Sheng, hurry! It's the Li clan's turn to launch an attack!" Long Sheng cried out, licking his parched lips as he took a few steps back.

"I do have a killing blow, but I'll need some time to prepare for it!" With a few leaps, he flew toward the back of the troops, a jade-white bone spear in his hand.

Everyone from the Long clan stilled, not expecting that the Li clan would be willing to spend such a valuable resource on Zhang Lie.

"A soulstealing spear!" Long Sheng exclaimed in shock.

Despite all the hunters charging at him, Zhang Lie was more worried for his teammates than himself. After all, no matter how much he disdained them, they were still elites from the Li and Long clans, and in such large numbers as well.

However, just as he turned to look back at the rest of his teammates, Sun Mengmeng and the others called out,

"Don't worry about us, Captain! Leave the small fry to us!"

"Right, Captain, go get their leaders first!"

Zhang Lie turned and rushed forward without any hesitation. "Hold on tight, I'll be right back!"

"Ha, does Zhang Lie think that he can handle all those hunters on his own?"

"Is he that arrogant? There must be a thousand or so elites charging toward him!"

Several more of the onlookers stepped forward, tempted by the possibility of obtaining some spoils from his defeat.

The battlefield had turned into a complete mess, with quite a few famous hunters scattered about the ranks of those charging toward Zhang Lie.

Standing in the middle of the battlefield as the enemy hunters closed ranks around him, Zhang Lie stopped and smirked. "[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" A river of the Underworld poured forth from Zhang Lie's sword, destroying everything it touched.

"Not good—block him for me, hurry! Quick, quick!" Li Sheng's subordinates set up an array all around him, each activating their strongest defense. Long Sheng, who was planning on running away, chose to temporarily help Li Sheng due to the bone lance in his hands. Thus, as the underworld river swept toward Li Sheng, Long Sheng mitigated the blow with his own guards.

A huge explosion dyed the battlefield in a rainbow of colors. The color that shone the brightest was the black of Zhang Lie's underworld river, which broke through all the obstacles in its way as it crashed into Long Sheng and Li Sheng's defensive formation.

Unfortunately, after spending much of its momentum to batter down everything else in its way, it was ultimately unable to break through the formation.

At the same time, Li Sheng's bone lance began to glow with white light. Underneath the light, a strange dark mist seemed to rise from all the corpses on the battlefield, as though it had turned their souls visible.

During the last century, mankind had confirmed the existence of souls, and there were even specialized techniques and treasures for utilizing spiritual power. Li Sheng's soulstealing spear was a weapon specialized for attacking souls. It required the vertebrae of a certain spiritual-type superior-grade lifeform, along with countless rare metals and alloys. Of course, such a weapon would be costly beyond all measure, and it was so pricey that no ordinary clan would be able to afford it.

Even the Li clan had spent much of its resources in order to have one be constructed so quickly. It seemed as though the deaths of Li Hong, Li Jin, and Li Xin had caused the Li clan to be willing to do everything in its power to get rid of Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie sucked in a deep breath and began circulating his genetic energy. The soulstealing spear would be difficult to deal with, but it would have to amass enough souls first to have any impact. He would have to end this match quickly, or he would be the one to suffer defeat.

He took a deep breath and turned seriously to Long Sheng and Li Sheng. Perhaps now would be a good time to show off what he had accomplished with [Eclipse].

Activating his forest wolfman soulshard, Zhang Lie transformed into a green wolfman with a howl. At the same time, as he furiously circulated his genetic energy, his black serpent materialized behind him.

The light all around the entrance to the forest seemed to turn dark. A starry sky shrouded all the combatants on the battlefield. A radiant moon quickly appeared in the hunters' midst.

"Is this [Eclipse]?!" Long Sheng cried out. He dashed away in a hurry, activating whatever reserves of genetic energy he had left for a last boost of speed, but it wasn't enough. As the moon glowed, huge spiritual pressure descended on the gathered hunters, and they all felt as though a mountain had crushed their bodies.

They could feel the genetic energy being drained from their bodies, which were growing heavier by the second.

"No, no!" Li Sheng cried out, sensing how quickly the energy was leaving his body. More importantly, the rate at which his soulstealing spear was charging up was greatly reduced.

"We have to beat him quickly, or he'll exhaust us all with his domain!" one of Li Sheng's subordinates cried out. Indeed, the rate at which their energy drained would only grow the longer they remained in his domain.

Li Sheng stopped talking and began concentrating on the soulstealing spear, inducing it to charge faster with all that remained of his genetic energy.

However, Zhang Lie gave him no chance to do so. He activated his superior-grade blood ant soulshard, dyeing the genetic energy surrounding him red. The shining moon in the middle of [Eclipse] likewise took on a red cast, and the tremendous pressure that the hunters were already feeling increased threefold.

Everyone but Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith was forced to their knees.

At the same time, as Zhang Lie waved Venombane, three red dragons, manifestations of his genetic energy, wrapped themselves around the blade. "[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!"

The ground trembled as a veritable torrent of genetic energy shook the battlefield. Even before the howling dragons drew close, Li Sheng, Long Sheng, and the others could feel their genetic energy draining at a faster and faster rate. They had no choice but to muster up what reserves they could to launch their attacks at Zhang Lie.

"Die!" Long Sheng shouted.

As he did so, he activated [Draconic Tempest] to its utmost. In an outburst of genetic energy, he himself transformed into a silver dragon. His eyes turned cold. The silver dragon roared as its scales gleamed with resplendent light, then launched an attack at Zhang Lie.

Li Sheng did the same as Long Sheng.

Clutching the spear with both hands, he forced himself to stand up, blood seeping out of his orifices as he did so. He knew very well that, if the soulstealing spear in his hands couldn't end Zhang Lie, then he would die.

He drew his arm back, and, with his final reserves of strength, threw the spear toward Zhang Lie. However, the spear had yet to charge up to its fullest extent, and its power was greatly reduced as a result.

The spectators within the trees had their mouths so wide open that quite a few flies had flown inside. After all, Zhang Lie's strength and aura were far too daunting. Everyone looked toward him as though they were looking at a monster.

The elites of the two clans, suffering from the spiritual pressure, forced an attack out of their bodies.

"[Desolate Silence]!"

"[Heavenly Tribulation]!"

the hunters cried out. They only had one objective in mind: to break out of Zhang Lie's domain and flee for their lives.

After seeing Zhang Lie fight at full strength, they didn't think they would be able to kill him at all—no, none of them had any chance! If Zhang Lie wasn't the top hunter in the dimensional world, he certainly wasn't very far from it.

Despite the attacks that they all launched in succession, a rampaging blood dragon lashed out at them all, not only deflecting much of their attacks but even sending all of them flying into the distance. They were knocked out of [Eclipse] and into the trees surrounding the battlefield. After hitting the trees, they fell to the ground and lay there slumped like dead dogs, without any ability to move at all.

Among the hunters who were knocked out in this fashion were Long Sheng, Li Sheng, and many of their strongest subordinates.

Soon, the spectators could only hear the sound of wind rushing through their ears.

As the domain of [Eclipse] vanished, Zhang Lie stood alone on the battlefield, the soulstealing spear in his hands.

"Well? Not even your ambush could do anything against me. This isn't a bad spear—I suppose I'll have to thank you for the gift!"

Li Sheng, who had just barely recovered from the blow, sprayed out a mouthful of blood. His face was deathly pale, as though he would die at any instant. He glanced at the hale and hearty Zhang Lie with fear in his eyes. The soulstealing spear had been his last resort, something that the Li clan had constructed at great expense. It was one of the only means of launching an attack beyond the limit of what even the first realm of the dimensional world itself was equipped to handle.

However, Zhang Lie had somehow managed to dispel the blow easily.

This wasn't an outcome that Li Sheng could easily accept, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. Countless strong hunters had fought together in an attempt to crush Zhang Lie, but they had all dropped like flies. The hunters had been decimated; there were at most a hundred or so left alive, and most were grievously wounded.

After this showing, none of them could doubt Zhang Lie's strength any longer—what they had witnessed was far too shocking! Were there still any opponents that Zhang Lie couldn't defeat in the first realm?

As the dust settled, Zhang Lie slowly emerged from the clearing. The hunters of Team Zenith followed behind him, staring at their captain as though he were a martial god.

"Damn it!" As Zhang Lie approached, Long Sheng tried to get up, but the moment he raised his head, he spat out a mouthful of blood.

Beside him, Li Sheng's face was ashen, as though he had accepted his death. His last thoughts were for the Li clan: how would they survive against such a horrifying enemy? Just what would Zhang Lie's retribution be like?

"Zhang Lie!" As Zhang Lie stepped in front of Long Sheng, two cries came from the distance: Chu Feng and Yun Bing had arrived belatedly with their respective delegations.

When they saw the scene in front of them, their eyes bulged.

Long Sheng and Li Sheng were splayed on the ground, their elites' dead bodies gathered around them. It was clear that the Long and Li clans had both suffered a terrible defeat.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing knew that Zhang Lie was strong, but they didn't realize the extent of his strength.

After all, ignoring the Li clan for the moment, the Long clan was surely as strong as their clans were. Furthermore, they had even prepared to ambush Zhang Lie; this was an unfair battle from the beginning! But despite their advantages, the two clans had lost miserably.

If the Yun and Chu clans had opposed Zhang Lie, then what happened to Long Sheng and Li Sheng would have happened to them.

That very moment, they were both extremely relieved that they had developed a relationship with Zhang Lie, but at the same time, they were a little frightened by what would have happened if their clans had chosen to work against him instead...

Chapter 159: The Vicious Zhang Lie

Chu Feng and Yun Bing didn't dare continue imagining what would have happened if they had been enemies of Zhang Lie.

"Young Master Chu, Miss Yun!" Zhang Lie welcomed them and their delegations with a smile. He was glad that they had come to support him, even if that help turned out to be unnecessary.

"Ah, here I thought I'd be of use! But it seems as though I've come all this way for nothing," Chu Feng muttered, a tinge of disappointment in his tone.

"Zhang Lie's growing far stronger than both of us, indeed," Yun Bing acknowledged. He was a miracle that they'd seen develop over the course of just a few months, a miracle that had budded from the weeds of the slums.

"You overpraise me, Miss Yun. Give me a moment and let me handle this pile of trash first. We'll talk later!" Zhang Lie smiled. He turned toward Long Sheng and the others.

As he watched Zhang Lie draw closer, Long Sheng found his mind and body in turmoil: Zhang Lie's gaze was filled with killing intent.

"Well, Long Sheng? What happened to your domineering attitude?"

Long Sheng didn't speak, but his twisted features turned even more twisted.

"Oh, you're not speaking? It looks like you have some backbone. In that case, I'll start with you!"

Zhang Lie summoned Venombane to his hand.

"What do you intend on doing? Surely you aren't going to kill us all?" Long Sheng shouted.

Many of the hunters still alive were from large clans, and if Zhang Lie were to kill them all, he would make countless enemies. He was certain that any clear-headed hunter wouldn't be willing to rouse so much ire from so many factions at once.

"Zhang Lie, I'm the young master of the Long clan!"

"I'm a disciple from the Thunderous Stomp Dojo!"

"I'm from the—"

The hunters all reported their identities in hopes that their background would shield them from certain death. If Zhang Lie were to kill them all, he would surely anger the various factions from which they came. Even the major clans of the capital would have to think twice before considering such an attack, but Zhang Lie didn't even frown.

"Do you think I'll let you leave without paying a toll, regardless of your background?" Zhang Lie smiled thinly, but those who lay paralyzed on the ground shuddered to see it. Nevertheless, they calmed down, because they could sense a hint of greed in his eyes.

In truth, what they were worried about was Zhang Lie wanting their lives, not their wealth.

"What do you want?" Long Sheng asked.

He was expecting that Zhang Lie would ask for them to drop the matter and stop targeting him, and then to hand over a large quantity of points, but Zhang Lie's icy tone shook him to his core.

"Hand over all your soulshards!"

Soulshards! He wanted their soulshards?! Indeed, a hunter would prize soulshards over everything but gene fragments, frameworks, and techniques, which was why soulshards were such a hard thing for these defeated hunters to give up. If they were to hand them all over, then their strength would drop tremendously. They wouldn't be able to do well during the upcoming Void Cup, and their position in their respective clan or dojo would drop as well.

"You have ten seconds to make a decision."

Zhang Lie glanced at his subordinates, who had already drawn their weapons and were prepared to kill any of the downed hunters at any time.

"Zhang Lie, you—" Long Sheng's face flushed red. Would he have to barter for his life at the expense of his soulshards?

"Time's ticking," Zhang Lie murmured lazily. The hunters of Team Zenith approached a few nearby hunters.

By that time, Long Sheng's arms had lost any sensation, and the violet venom from Zhang Lie's attack was quickly approaching his shoulders. He knew that he had lost, that he had lost completely. As the young master of the Long clan, he was the best hope for the Long clan in his generation, and the soulshards and resources he had in his possession were the best of the best.

It was hard for him to give it all up.

On the other hand, beside him, Li Sheng sucked in a deep breath. Gritting his teeth, he cried out, "I'll hand them over!"

Zhang Lie's words were clear: if he handed his soulshards over, he might be able to avoid death, but if he didn't, he surely wouldn't! His life was far more precious than any material possession he owned.

Li Sheng extracted all the soulshards from his soul space, over thirty glittering gems in all. Of those thirty, most were superior-grade soulshards.

"As expected of the new young head of the Li clan—what a shocking amount of resources!"

"If Li Sheng alone has this many soulshards, I wonder just what the haul from Young Master Long would look like?"

"Don't you know just how wealthy the Long clan is? I'm sure Young Master Long would have far more, and of even higher quality!"

The spectators watching the affair from a distance began chatting away again, glad that they hadn't been so foolish as to join in the fight. A few of the Chu and Yun hunters glanced at Zhang Lie with envy.

"I'll hand mine over as well!" Following Li Sheng, the paralyzed elites on the ground each did the same, having come to the same conclusion regarding how precious their lives were. More and more soulshards began to glitter on the ground. Just about everyone chose their lives over their material possessions, with Young Master Long being the only holdout.

"Young Master Long, your life's more important than your wealth," Li Sheng advised, as Zhang Lie looked toward Long Sheng again.

Long Sheng's body shook. His pride and arrogance were slowly being eaten away. Was he to hand over his soulshards, or not?

"It looks like you're not very interested in your life!" Zhang Lie walked closer, as if to pressure him into making a decision.

Everyone turned toward him.

"I-I-I'll hand them over!"

As he looked death in the eye, even Long Sheng backed down. Light shone so brightly by his prone body that the other hunters blinked their eyes in surprise.

"Damn, they're all superior-grade soulshards!"

"No wonder Long Sheng was undefeated in the Godspath settlement!"

"Zhang Lie's really made a fortune, hasn't he?"

"So what if he's got a fortune? He still needs to be alive to use it all up—the Long clan will surely make him suffer for what he's done!"

"Hah! That's what you said when he offended the Qin, Wang, and Li clans, and look at what happened to them!"

The crowd was of two minds about Zhang Lie's sudden wealth.

If Long Sheng were still able to sense his two arms, he would surely be clenching his fists tightly. This was the gravest insult he had suffered his whole life, and his self-confidence had been grievously wounded.

Of course, Zhang Lie didn't care for any of that—regardless of whether it was the Li clan or the Long clan, he hadn't provoked the other party first.

"Not bad, not bad, Young Master Long! The quantity and quality of your soulshards really are commensurate with your position."

The hunters of Team Zenith rushed over and scooped them all up.

From the distance, Chu Feng swallowed a gulp of saliva as he whispered to Yun Bing. Despite knowing Zhang Lie for quite a while, he hadn't yet seen any of Zhang Lie's enemies live after being defeated by him. "Do you think Zhang Lie will let him go?"

Yun Bing laughed lightly at him. "Is this your first day interacting with Zhang Lie? Don't you understand his personality by now?"

Yun Bing viewed Zhang Lie as a decisive, vicious man. In truth, she admired his personality—regardless of whether he killed hunters or stole their soulshards today, neither the Long nor the Li clan's stance toward him would change, and they would surely remain enemies.

Li Sheng and Long Sheng felt a pang of pain as they saw their soulshards being stored by the hunters of Team Zenith.

"Zhang Lie, can you hand us the antidote to this poison now?" Long Sheng asked.

"Antidote? Have I ever agreed to that?" Zhang Lie tilted his head.

The gathered hunters all froze. Was Zhang Lie going to take their possessions and leave them all to die?!

Chu Feng made an 'ahh' sound as Yun Bing nudged him.

"Y-You, you've broken your promise!" Long Sheng cried out, glaring at Zhang Lie.

Li Sheng's face turned pale. Zhang Lie wasn't going to spare any of them, and it didn't seem as though he cared about their background at all. In truth, if their positions were swapped, he would likely do the same.

"What do you mean, Young Master Long? I'm as trustworthy as I claim to be. I've let you go, but I'm not the only hunter you've tried to target, am I?"

The hunters of Team Zenith, understanding their captain's intent, immediately raised their weapons.

"Zhang Lie, you scumbag, you bastard! Just you wait for retribution from the Long clan! You and your whole family shall perish! And not just you—your team will suffer for what you've done today!"

"The Long clan? Have them send people my way if they dare!" Zhang Lie didn't seem to care about how many enemies he made. And why would he? There were few that he had to fear within the first realm of the dimensional world. He wasn't the king of the slums; no, he could well be the top hunter of the first realm! He was yet undefeated, and given his firm backing on Earth by the military of Ning, he had nothing to fear in all of China.

It was for this reason that he was daring enough to kill these hunters in plain sight.

Anyone who had attacked him and his team within the domain of [Eclipse] suffered the same fate: all would perish at the hands of Team Zenith.

The battlefield grew so bloody that the spectators, even from afar, shuddered at the sight. They swore never to provoke Zhang Lie at any cost; he was simply too frightening! Indeed, after this massacre, no faction in the first realm would dare try something like this again.

Once the battlefield was cleaned up, Zhang Lie exchanged a few words with Chu Feng and Yun Bing, then departed with Team Zenith. Chu Feng and Yun Bing glanced at his back with complicated expressions on their faces. Although their relationship with Zhang Lie hadn't changed, they knew that Zhang Lie's friendship didn't extend to either the Yun or Chu clans.

Chapter 160: Return to the Blackwind Fort

The outcome of the battle at the runic forest spread through the dimensional world at a crazy rate, and even to the real world.

Within Lingnan, at a manor right in front of a waterfall, a wizened old man in a long robe stood above the waterfall, glancing down at his surroundings.

"The Dragonwolf Zhang Lie has killed two promising members of my clan's younger generation, my clan's future."

"Head, this blood feud—" a guard by his side began.

"Wait!" the old man muttered, then turned to leave without saying another word.

The guard swallowed a gulp of saliva upon seeing the old man's cool expression. A small crack extended where the man's feet had been, one that affected the flow of the waterfall down below. The old man's features gradually distorted as he walked away, his weathered face seemingly transforming into that of a malicious demon, filled with endless hatred.

"I'll make you pay for this!"

At the same time, when Li Mo heard that even Li Sheng had been killed by Zhang Lie, he barely avoided going insane. He began tugging on his own hair, his face filled with rage and madness, his eyes bulging and turning red.

"Head, for the sake of the clan's future, I advise that we stop provoking the Dragonwolf."

"Yes, Head, not only should we stop provoking him, we should let bygones be bygones and apologize to Zhang Lie instead. Otherwise, the future of our clan will be in danger!"

The elders were, incredibly, all in agreement about this point.

"Is that so? As hunters of the Li clan, have you all no shame?!" Li Mo glared at the elders with bloodshot eyes. He had lost both his sons to Zhang Lie, and now even his nephew! Was a blood feud something that could be dropped so easily?

When the elders saw that Li Mo was unrepentant, they had no choice but to take action.

"Li Mo, you alone do not speak for the clan!" the first elder of the Li clan spoke up in a threatening tone.

Li Mo turned to the first elder. Indeed, his position in the clan had become extremely insecure given setback after setback. The Li clan had suffered in his leadership, and the contentious issue regarding the white-grub cores had dramatically lowered his status in the clan. It looked as though he would be stripped of his position if he were to continue insisting on enmity against Zhang Lie.

"I understand." After inhaling deeply, Li Mo gave a response that the elders were satisfied with—however, despite his verbal agreement, his eyes were as red as ever.

A few of the elders began to console Li Mo. Li Mo nodded at the elders' words, but unbeknownst to them, he was muttering to himself as he did so. You weren't the ones who lost your sons. What could you understand?

The other clans that had made enemies of Zhang Lie were reacting similarly after hearing the news. Within the Qin clan, many Qin elders were cautioning Qin Zongming against his folly.

"Head, from now on, please stop all plans targeting the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Hoh? In that case, who was it that supported my killing Zhang Lie?" Qin Zongming rebuked.

"That was in the past, Head! Zhang Lie's not a hunter we can touch at present."

"Please calm down, Head. We can't let the Qin clan end up like the Long or Li clans," the elders persuaded.

Qin Zongming faced as much pressure as did Li Mo, and in the end, he had no choice but to accede to the elders' pleas and temporarily halt all his plans.

In the Wang clan, Wang Han faced much the same situation.

After what had occurred within the Runic Forest, many elders had changed their minds about Zhang Lie. Almost as one, they decided that Zhang Lie wasn't an existence that could be easily provoked, and suggested that an olive branch be extended to him instead.

Even the Zhou, Qian, and He clans of the capital clearly felt the same way.

The Chu and Yun clan heads regretted that they hadn't listened to their children's advice. If they had done so, then they would have had much to gain from Zhang Lie's ascension.

"Chu Feng, how's your relationship with Zhang Lie?" Chu Lin asked his son, a serious expression on his face.

"Ah, we're still on good terms, but it's nothing too special," Chu Feng replied honestly.

Chu Lin narrowed his eyes. He was certain that those who had attacked Zhang Lie at the Runic Forest—the Long clan, the Li clan, and a few dojos—would surely be unable to purchase white-grub cores from Zhang Lie any longer.

If they were able to purchase a large quantity of white-grub cores at a discounted price, it would be possible for all Chu hunters of the younger generation to experience this breakthrough, and hence allow the Chu clan to emerge at the forefront of the clans in China.

However, all these hinged upon Zhang Lie being willing to support the Chu clan.

"Can the situation really not be salvaged?" he asked, even as he came up with an audacious plan in his mind.

Just as the major clans reeled from the news of what had happened at the Runic Forest, Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith returned to the Blacksteel Inn.

It was naturally time to divide up the loot; they had earned far more than expected that day. Long Sheng, Li Sheng, and the various other hunters had given up over two hundred superior-grade soulshards in all, and everyone found quite a few that would be useful to them. Even Zhang Lie picked out a few choice soulshards that he added to his soulspace.

What the hunters of Team Zenith would need to do next was to acclimate to their newly acquired soulshards as soon as possible. As a result, once they had divided up their loot, they all returned to their rooms or the training chambers.

Zhang Lie collapsed under the side effects of the superior-grade blood ant soulshard. It was truly a double-edged sword, but the power it conferred was as incredible as the backlash. He couldn't help but sigh: activating the soulshard while sustaining [Eclipse] still took a huge toll out of his body.

After the attack that had decimated the enemy hunters, he was all but drained of genetic energy, and the rest of the battle had been nothing but careful pretense on his part.

"It looks like I'll have to try to induce the evolution of my framework now..."

The grade of his evolving [Ninecarp Transformation] had become the greatest limiter to his strength. He would need to have larger reserves of genetic energy; otherwise, he would only be able to use one attack while simultaneously activating [Eclipse] and [Ninecarp Transformation].

And if he wanted to evolve his framework, he would need additional gene fragments—but he had already reached his gene capacity in the first realm!

This implied that, in order to go further, he would have to find another source of limit fragments. The foundational breakthrough and Potions #1 and #2 had built an excellent foundation for him, one that he would have to take advantage of. There was one avenue he knew of to access even more genetic fragments: defeating the peak-grade moonlight wyrm!

He would have to devote some time to devising a plan of attack against it in the future. However, before that, he had something more urgent on his plate, the Zenith Dojo.

Everyone in Team Zenith had now acquired a number of superior-grade soulshards, and there was no need for them to remain in the dimensional world. After a short rest, he immediately returned to the Zenith Dojo with the rest of the team.

It was midnight on Earth. As the teleportation array flashed, Zhang Lie and the hunters of Team Zenith appeared out of nowhere. Before they could walk off the array, however, a black figure darted before them.

"Damn it, who's trying to frighten us all so late at night?!" Sun Xiaowu jumped up in shock.

Lin Xiu walked into the light. "Su Feng wants you to head to the Blackwind Fort immediately," he told Zhang Lie.

"Now?"

"6 AM the next morning," Lin Xiu replied.

"Excellent! I'll be ready by then."

It was likely that Su Feng wanted to speak with him regarding limit fragments. The affair with the dojo wasn't particularly urgent, so Zhang Lie agreed to the meeting without much thought.

As Lin Xiu nodded and left, Zhang Lie dragged his tired body back home. The next day, at daybreak, Zhang Lie and Lin Xiu walked out of the Zenith Dojo.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, this way please!" The moment they left the entrance, a suited chauffeur welcomed them into a camouflaged hovercar. "This is a hovercar that Commander Su has prepared specially for your use. If you're ready, we'll head to the Blackwind Fort immediately."

"Yes, let's go." Zhang Lie hadn't anticipated that Su Feng would go as far as to send someone over. He entered the hovercar, which shot off like a bolt of lightning.

The Blackwind Fort was so named because, from a distance, it looked like a black cyclone. The chartered hovercar approached the checkpoint to the fort within ten minutes. Because this hovercar had been requested by Commander Su himself, no one stopped them during their drive, and Zhang Lie was swiftly brought in front of Su Feng.

"Zhang Lie, haven't you forgotten our arrangement from before?"

"How could I? Only a single day's passed!"

They walked deep into the fort, to a series of ravines hundreds of feet deep. Amidst a whirring sound, a small warship emerged from the ravine, stopping in front of Zhang Lie and Su Feng. Su Feng stepped forward and motioned for Zhang Lie to follow him as they entered the ship.

It landed in what Zhang Lie now realized was the true heart of the keep, a sturdy earth-colored structure heavily patrolled by troops of armed soldiers. Several massive laser cannons poked out of the roof of the structure.