

U. Warlord 181

Chapter 181: Initiating Preparations

"I hereby declare the tournament over!" Yan Long glanced at the top ten hunters of China with a strange expression on his face. His eyes twitched as he realized that all the members of Team Zenith had made it. Even more surprisingly, the results from Mars were already out. There, it was once again a member of Team Zenith, Yang Ze, who had emerged as the champion of the tournament.

This level of achievement shocked all of China, and even the world federation.

Following the rankings was naturally the prize ceremony.

"Just like with the citywide tournament, the top ten victors will gain access to the world federation's treasury—this time, however, it'll be the national treasury of China!" Yan Long's words shocked the gathered crowd.

China's national treasury was one of the best treasuries in the entire nation, and its stock of treasures was in the upper echelons of treasuries even across the entire world federation. It was almost a certainty that there would be extremely rare herbs, superlative techniques, and even rare superior-grade soulshards to be found there.

Even Zhang Lie was amazed upon hearing the prize.

Ignoring the crowd's murmurs, Yan Long continued, "The champion will be able to choose five items of his choice; the second-place hunter, three; the third-place hunter, two; the fourth- through tenth-place hunters, one!"

Shockingly, the prizes handed out during the nationwide tournament were exactly the same as during the citywide tournament, causing Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng, respectively the second- and third-place winners, to smile in glee. Whatever rewards they received now were sure to boost their entire team's strength by another level.

"A fine prize indeed," Zhang Lie commented. "This competition was well worth my time!"

"The country's willing to spare no expense to nurture great hunters, after all," Yan Long replied. "After the ending ceremony, someone will lead you to the treasury. Before that, you should all begin preparations for the worldwide tournament." Yan Long gave Team Zenith a mysterious smile.

The worldwide tournament would be next, followed by the galaxywide tournament encompassing all first-realm hunters in the dimensional world. There would be quite some time until the last few stages of the tournament, so Zhang Lie would have the opportunity to get a few pressing tasks out of the way.

After the results of the tournament were announced, a large number of hunters, Zhang Lie and the rest of his team included, left the capital.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing, having realized how much stronger Zhang Lie had grown compared to them, began an intensive training regimen right after returning home. After all, as two of the top ten hunters in the nation, they qualified for the worldwide stage as well. The competitors they would face next would be far stronger and far more prepared, and they couldn't afford to remain stagnant where they were.

After returning to Team Zenith, Sun Xiaowu and the others went to bed to rest and recuperate after the grueling fights against each other, while Zhang Lie returned to handling matters related to the dojo.

He had received Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang's message about the return of Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen, who were both asleep by the time he headed to their rooms.

"How are the other disciples doing?" Zhang Lie asked.

During the competition, he had left the dojo in Zhang Hong's capable hands, and the disciples' instruction to Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang. Lin Xiu was tasked with helping where he could, but since he ultimately belonged to the military, Zhang Lie didn't request much of him.

"Most of the children are very hardworking, though there's always the one or two that laze off frequently," Xu Xiu replied.

"And what's the success rate for the foundational breakthrough looking like these days?"

"We're doing far better than expected. In the second batch, about 85% of the disciples succeeded on their first attempt!"

Zhang Lie inclined his head. This percentage was a fair bit beyond his expectations.

"Focus your resources on those who have broken through, but keep training the ones that haven't," Zhang Lie instructed.

The difficulty of the breakthrough depended considerably on one's personality and resolve, and it wasn't a measure of talent or lack thereof. For instance, inducing a breakthrough in seasoned veterans was far harder than for children.

"Understood!" Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang replied.

Zhang Lie glanced at Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen's sleeping forms again before leaving the room. Instead of heading to rest, however, he walked toward the teleportation array, returning to the dimensional world.

The Blacksteel settlement was still somewhat deserted; although the nationwide tournament had ended in China, there were quite a few hunters who wanted to wait for the end of the entire event before returning.

"Isn't that Zhang Lie?"

"Ah, what's he doing back here?"

A rare few hunters who had chosen to return to the dimensional world noticed him, but Zhang Lie ignored them and entered the Blacksteel Inn.

The reason he had returned was on account of Potion #3. There would still be some time before the galaxywide stage of the Void Cup, and he intended to raise his superior gene capacity and evolve his framework and techniques before that time.

The most important ingredient for Potion #3 was cosmos leaf, a rare herb only found in the most dangerous parts of the second realm. Despite his current strength, this herb would still be quite

difficult for him to acquire, and he had expected to have to ascend to the second realm before preparing the potion.

However, now that he was about to gain access to the national treasury, he was sure that there would be quite a number of rare herbs stored within, including the cosmos leaf that he desperately needed. In that case, it might be possible for him to concoct Potion #3 while remaining in the first realm, which would make hunting down the moonlight wyrm far simpler.

Ignoring the cosmos leaf, however, there were still quite a few ingredients that he would have to source, one of which lay deep in the Desert of Silence. What he needed from the Desert of Silence was known as wasteland essence, a rare liquid that was jealously guarded by the desert salamanders that lived deep within the Desert of Silence.

After some preparation, Zhang Lie left the Blacksteel settlement.

"Look, is Zhang Lie heading toward the Desert of Silence?"

"Quick, let's go! Let's follow him and see what he's up to."

"Follow him? What, are you tired of living? Don't you remember how many hunters died during his showdown with the Long clan?"

After the events of the Runic Forest, Zhang Lie was far more frightening an encounter in the wild than an errant superior-grade lifeform. There were only a rare few hunters who dared to tail him from a significant distance away, who watched on as he headed into the Desert of Silence, seemingly straight toward its center.

"Ah, he's really heading deep into the desert? Forget it, I'm not following him in!"

"As expected of Zhang Lie! Who else would brave such danger alone?"

"I can't believe he's already so strong!"

Following his past life's memories, Zhang Lie headed to a patch of sand where the wind didn't blow very strongly. The sand beneath his feet wasn't very well-packed, and it almost felt as though it would collapse at any moment.

As he walked forward, the sand suddenly shifted, and little bumps protruded from the sand before him. Zhang Lie stopped and frowned. Violent winds, which reigned freely at the center of the desert, blew by.

"Come out. I can sense your presence, superior-grade desert salamander!" Zhang Lie called out, licking his parched lips.

With a thunderous shout, a humongous lifeform darted out of the sands, its body sturdy and wide, its scales a golden-yellow, its pupils as fearsome as a crocodile's, looking straight toward Zhang Lie. There were two gills by its head, which fluttered as it breathed. Its sharp claws seemed to carry the scent of blood, gleaming in the sunlight.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. These desert salamanders were high up in the hierarchy of lifeforms that lived here, and there were rarely hunters brave or foolish enough to intrude into its territory. As it burrowed out of the sands, it flicked its tail lazily at Zhang Lie, sending bullets of sand in his direction.

Zhang Lie activated his white-grub soulshard, forming an armor that protected him from the attack, and simultaneously his galewolf soulshard as well.

The combination of the galewolf soulshard and [Mirrored Refraction] enhanced Zhang Lie's speed to a frightening extreme, and even the superior-grade salamander found it hard-pressed to follow Zhang Lie's movements.

No matter how strong the salamander was, it was still just a superior-grade lifeform. It was strengthened in the desert environment, but its weak points were equally obvious. Zhang Lie dashed forward with Venombane in hand, his body vanishing from sight.

The salamander cried out in unease, spawning a few whirlwinds of sand around him. However, the moment it cast its attack, an arc of violet light flashed by as quickly as a bolt of lightning.

"[The Boundless Blade: Quell]!"

A needle of sword energy threaded through the whirlwinds and deep into one of the desert salamander's eyeballs. As it roared in pain, its body spasmed, and it crashed onto the sand. By then, its carcass was already devoid of life.

The will of the world made an announcement in Zhang Lie's mind, but Zhang Lie had no intention of devouring the salamander's flesh, given that his superior gene fragments were already at capacity. As it died, Zhang Lie was able to progress toward his true objective: hunting down the wasteland essence.

This essence was essentially liquid water that superior-grade salamanders transformed, transported and stored in their lair via a specialized organ, and Zhang Lie's goal was to find that lair and claim the salamander's essence for his own.

Chapter 182: Entering the Treasury

After finding the entrance to the salamander's lair, Zhang Lie rushed deep within, bolstered by his genetic energy. Within moments, he arrived at the deepest part of the lair, where he found a glowing pool of golden radiance.

"Wasteland essence!" Zhang Lie shouted.

In the darkness of the salamander's lair, the golden light emanating from the wasteland essence was particularly eye-catching. After securing the essence, Zhang Lie left the Desert of Silence immediately.

There were still a few hunters among those who had followed Zhang Lie into the Desert of Silence, who were staring into its midst with anticipation and anxiety.

"Did you all hear that? Could Zhang Lie have gone inside to hunt down a desert salamander?"

"Isn't that nonsense? What else would he be doing?"

Amidst wind and sand, Zhang Lie, his armor stained with the blood of the desert salamander, emerged from the desert.

The hunters present gaped. How had Zhang Lie finished the battle so quickly?

Zhang Lie glanced toward the hunters standing by the entrance to the desert. He did nothing else, but this glance alone was sufficient to cause the hunters to turn aside, afraid that Zhang Lie would suddenly lash out at them—but Zhang Lie simply turned aside and continued on his way.

"I bet the desert salamander's been killed by now. Is there anything or anyone in the first realm that can win against Zhang Lie?" One hunter sighed, glancing at Zhang Lie's back.

After an entire day of rest and recuperation, Team Zenith was informed that their prizes were ready to be claimed. They teleported to the capital, where soldiers from the world federation were already waiting to bring them to the treasury.

There, they found Yan Long and Luo Lie.

"I'll need to require that you all wear this wristwatch while in the treasury, given the valuables that are within," Yan Long instructed. "As a reminder, don't try to pull anything funny, or you'll receive severe punishment from both the world federation and the military."

Once everyone had put on their wristwatches, a large airship appeared from the horizon and landed in front of Zhang Lie and the others. Luo Lie beckoned everyone in.

The airship flew toward the horizon. No one, not even Zhang Lie, knew where they were headed; after all, the national treasury's location was a closely guarded secret, one that the world federation certainly had no intention of sharing.

In about ten minutes or so, the airship slowed down and prepared to land. Luo Lie led the ten winners of the nationwide tournament out of the airship, where they found themselves surrounded by a mountain range.

"Have we left the capital?" Fang Yi murmured, glancing all around him.

"We have, but we also haven't," Luo Lie replied, smiling mysteriously.

The ground shuddered. The rock wall in front of them cracked open, revealing a small, dark tunnel, which they couldn't see within.

"Let's go." Luo Lie had a few guards remain at the entrance, then led Zhang Lie and the others through the tunnel. Although the surroundings were dark, Luo Lie seemed to be very familiar with the path. He led everyone else forward without ever pausing or having to turn back.

"We're here." After an interminable period of time, Luo Lie suddenly stopped. His sonorous voice echoed in the tunnel. Light flared all around them, turning their surroundings as bright as day.

Zhang Lie raised his head and took a good look at his surroundings. They seemed to be deep within a mountain, with a set of sturdy robotic doors before them.

"So this is China's national treasury?" Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng exclaimed, their eyes round in shock.

"Identity confirmed: Lieutenant-General Luo Lie. Welcome." A robotic whirr sounded as the doors slowly slid open, revealing a straight, narrow corridor.

Even as the door opened fully, Luo Lie made no motion to enter. Instead, he regarded the opening seriously. Seeing his behavior, Zhang Lie didn't dare make any sudden movements either. After all,

they were at the entrance of the national treasury, and it would be quite strange if the security here were lax.

With another robotic whirr, a gust of wind blew out of the corridor exposed by the doors, and Zhang Lie felt a strong aura envelop him. The other hunters of Team Zenith all frowned, their expressions serious, as they began to circulate their genetic energy, as did Chu Feng, Yun Bing, He Tian, and Qian Zhen.

"Don't worry. These are just the robotic guards guard the treasury," Luo Lie explained. Robots emerged from the corridor, outfitted with bulky black armor and thick limbs. Their eyes shone with red, glittering light.

The robots each possessed an incredible aura, one that pressured even the hunters of Team Zenith.

"Ah, red-eyed dark knights! Robots constructed with a third-realm hunter as basis," Zhang Lie murmured, shocking Luo Lie. Clearly, Luo Lie hadn't expected that anyone present would be familiar with such robots.

In the past, it had been the existence of these robots that had saved mankind in several critical battles, but at present, it looked as though such robots couldn't be manufactured in large enough quantities to be of public use.

"These robots aren't perfectly calibrated yet, so don't release hostile intent in their direction. Otherwise, it's very possible that they'll attack you," Luo Lie warned seriously.

The hunters all nodded as they walked in through the corridor. The robots' eyes shone brightly, as though waiting to scan the incoming hunters.

As the robot's gaze landed on Zhang Lie, it suddenly raised an arm, pointing a gun right at Zhang Lie's head. The hunters of Team Zenith all reared back in shock.

"Don't make a move, or even stronger guards will appear!" Luo Lie shouted. The anxious members of Team Zenith forcibly stopped circulating genetic energy as they glanced at Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie stared calmly at the robotic guard despite the life-threatening danger.

"Threat negated." The robotic guard put down its weapon as Zhang Lie walked by, causing the hunters of Team Zenith to breathe out in relief.

Luo Lie glanced at Zhang Lie. There were only two possibilities that could prompt such a serious response from the guards: either someone unidentified had barged into the treasury, or someone who could threaten even them had appeared.

He's only a first-realm hunter, so how could he be so strong? Luo Lie wondered to himself.

"What frightening robotic guards! We'd surely be able to reduce hunter casualties if we started employing them in interstellar warfare," Sun Xiaowu exclaimed.

"You're too naive! These robots likely haven't been field-tested yet, and the government wouldn't use them before exhaustively testing for the possibility of a malfunction. After all, our enemies are far more technologically advanced than we are, so if we were to use these robots without taking sufficient precautions, they could easily sabotage the robots or use them against us," Chu Feng replied before Luo Lie could.

On the other hand, Zhang Lie remained silent. He knew that these guards would only become usable in interstellar warfare after an exhaustive series of trials, tests, and improvements, and there was still a long way to go for the military.

"Behind this door lies the national treasury, and I can't go beyond it. I'll wait for all of you outside," Luo Lie said, as the party reached the end of the corridor.

As the final door opened up completely, a series of lights flashed on, illuminating the national treasury. Zhang Lie sucked in a deep breath as he beckoned the rest of Team Zenith forward, followed quickly by the remaining hunters. The wristwatches on their hands were what granted them access.

After they were all inside, the door slammed shut behind them. A long corridor stretched out near-endlessly up ahead, with shelves of treasures on either side. Soulshards, herbs, and even weapons and equipment awaited them all.

"Is that... a peak-grade soulshard?!" Fang Yi's eyes were focused on several glittering soulshards at the top of a cabinet. He sucked in a deep breath: indeed, it wasn't surprising that the national treasury would boast such staggering rewards.

"And that's... dragonbreath grass!" Before they teleported to the capital, Zhang Lie had given them a list of items that he needed to acquire, and this precious herb was among them.

Chapter 183: Besieging the Treasury

"As expected of the national treasury!" Chu Feng and the others had all spied treasures they wanted as well.

"Start picking out your favorite, but let me warn you: just because something is valuable doesn't mean that it'll be appropriate for you as you are now," Zhang Lie warned, then headed in the direction of the medicine cabinets.

Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng glanced again at the peak-grade soulshards, then forced themselves to look away and calm down. If not for Zhang Lie's reminder, they might well have chosen that as their prize.

Given their current genetic energy density, they would hardly be able to make use of the soulshards' true strength, and by the time they were able to do so, they would have ascended to the second realm, with sufficient ability to hunt down peak-grade lifeforms on their own. As a result, there was no urgent need to obtain those soulshards that they couldn't even make full use of.

Zhang Lie scanned the herbs present in the medicinal cabinet. He knew precisely what he wanted, and no rare trinket would distract him from his goal.

"Cosmos leaf... just where would the military put it?" Murmuring to himself, he went deeper into the treasury.

When Qian Zhen and He Tian saw Zhang Lie moving forward, they smirked at each other. As Zhang Lie vanished from sight, both of them also headed to find treasures that they wanted.

At the same time, somewhere within the capital, dozens of hunters were furiously tapping away at virtual keyboards. Command after command was sent to the system via these hunters' microchips.

"I've hacked into the treasury's system!" one of them announced jubilantly. "And there's the security system's targets modified..."

Within the treasury, Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi had just decided on their first reward. Sun Mengmeng ultimately obtained the dragonbreath grass, because it was an herb that Zhang Lie had requested at any cost. Similarly, Fang Yi chose the rare demonspirit flower, another ingredient on Zhang Lie's list.

After consuming Potion #1, the two of them were well aware of just how valuable some of these herbs were. Once they finished selecting their first treasure, they headed toward a selection of soulshards, hoping to improve their own collection. Despite how many soulshards were on display in the treasury, it was still difficult to find some that were perfectly compatible with their current frameworks and techniques.

"Cosmos leaf!" As he reached the other side of the treasury, Zhang Lie finally found the herb he had been looking for. However, just as he tried to take it, the cabinet suddenly glowed, and a tremendous force rushed toward him.

His body instinctively reacted, activating his white-grub soulshard and deflecting the attack.

Even then, Zhang Lie stumbled quite a few steps back. If not for the fact that his soulshard had activated instinctively, he would have been heavily wounded by the attack. What fearsome strength!

He frowned as he glanced at the cosmos leaf again. Why had he been attacked? An alarm began to blare and white light started to flash. An automated defense system seemed to have somehow triggered.

Could there be something wrong with the system? Zhang Lie sucked in a deep breath. He needed the cosmos leaf, and no defense system would stop him. As he circulated his genetic energy and activated [Ninecarp Transformation], he reached out toward the cosmos leaf again.

Alarms quickly sounded, and Zhang Lie reared back in shock. Had he triggered the entire treasury's defense system?

In Yan Long's mansion, as he was leisurely sipping a cup of tea and waiting for Zhang Lie and the others to return, his transceiver began to beep shrilly. The robotic message stated, "An invader has been sighted in the national treasury. Defensive systems are activating."

"What? Quick! Take me to the national treasury!" Yan Long cried out, then rushed out the door.

Outside the treasury, Luo Lie, who had heard the commotion, suddenly paled.

Sun Xiaowu banged on the robotic door that Luo Lie was standing on the other side of. "Lieutenant Liu, what's going on?!"

"There must be a problem with the automated defense system—it thinks you're all thieves!" Luo Lie shouted, glancing at his transceiver. He was well aware of just how strong the guards within the treasury were.

"In that case, hurry up and open the treasury doors! Let us out!" Li Feng shouted.

"I can't! I've lost my administrative privileges! It's likely that something's gone very wrong with the system, and we'll have to wait for Commander Yan Long to get here!"

"What will we do?" Sun Mengmeng asked.

"Commander Yan Long's on his way here. You'll have to defend yourselves for the time being," Luo Lie gritted out, knowing just how infeasible that was. Everything would be resolved once Yan Long arrived, but Luo Lie didn't know whether or not they would still be alive by then. After all, the guards within the treasury each had the strength of a third-realm hunter.

After Zhang Lie triggered the defense system, he retreated back and glanced warily around him. The other members of Team Zenith, along with Chu Feng, Yun Bing, He Tian, and Qian Zhen immediately gathered together.

Suddenly, several ion beams locked onto Zhang Lie's body, and he felt tingles of unease all over. As he activated his galewolf soulshard, Zhang Lie began circulating his genetic energy. The combined effect of his soulshard and footwork technique made him nimble and agile, and he was able to avoid the beams with ease. After the attack, however, two white-armored robots rushed forward, seemingly optimized for speed.

Radiance shone from their palms as they blasted beams of light toward Zhang Lie. The two robots sandwiched Zhang Lie between them, one to his left and one to his right.

Venombane appeared in his hand. Zhang Lie sucked in a deep breath, intending to get rid of the two robots flanking him first, but he suddenly felt killing intent directed at his back. Zhang Lie didn't have time to turn back. He darted aside, moving forward in an S-shape.

A barrage of genetic energy smashed into the ground where Zhang Lie had been located. He turned back to see two more robots coming from behind.

The four robots had all but blocked him off. Zhang Lie frowned again. The white-armored robots were each as strong as a third-realm hunter, whereas Zhang Lie was really only as strong as a peak second-realm hunter without combining [Eclipse] and his blood ant soulshard.

The reason he had managed to kill Li Xin was because his opponent had underestimated him, but he surely wouldn't stand a chance against four third-realm robots.

Zhang Lie inhaled. There was no need to fight off the robots; he just had to defend himself. After all, Yan Long and Luo Lie surely had to be alarmed by the activation of the defense system, and they would surely be on their way to investigate.

Zhang Lie glanced cautiously at the four guards, trying to recall whatever information he could about them. He was certain that, no matter how strong these robots were, they were still only just that—their artificial intelligence routines weren't complex enough to truly act like hunters. They were sure to have weak spots of their own.

One of the robots struck at Zhang Lie with a crackling lightsaber, moving so quickly it seemed to have used some sort of technique. Light exploded from its saber, and a blade of sword energy, curved into a crescent, flew toward Zhang Lie.

The other robots all used techniques of their own, techniques at the level of a third-realm hunter. With little space in which to maneuver, Zhang Lie seemed to have no choice but to defend himself from the blows.

"[Heaven's Judgment]!"

"[Lunarflame Shot]!"

Just then, two shouts came from behind him. An arrow flew toward the guards, a phoenix's shape materializing around it. At the same time, Fang Yi, surrounded by a crackling field of lightning, moved toward another guard.

Without hesitation, Zhang Lie activated [Fists of the Silent Sea] and [Three-Wave Resonance], crouching down in order to reduce his exposed surface area. As all sorts of genetic energy clashed against each other, the treasury rocked with the force of a multicolored explosion.

Zhang Lie darted toward Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng.

"We won't win against these robots. Run!"

"What do we do now, Captain?!" After trading blows with the robots, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng both realized just how strong they were.

"Wait!" Zhang Lie activated [Eclipse], spawning a domain around him that greatly sapped the speed and strength of the incoming robots. Their eyes flashed with red light, as though trying to analyze the technique that Zhang Lie was using.

"Don't forget, they're just analyzing our data and using it against us," Zhang Lie explained. [Eclipse] was a rare and unusual technique, one that the robots wouldn't be able to dissect in a matter of moments.

The four robots again gave off a wave of genetic energy. Zhang Lie focused on them. Given how much data these robots seemed to possess, it was likely that they could activate a variety of techniques. Indeed, each of the robots used a technique of a different attunement than before, and four different beams of light shot toward the three hunters from Team Zenith.

"Scatter!" Zhang Lie shouted, and they all rushed off in different directions.

Chapter 184: The Culprit

Huge waves of genetic energy spread out from the center of the explosion. The ground shook with such force that it shocked the gathered hunters.

As he avoided the attack, Zhang Lie began to analyze the situation critically. In one-on-one battles, Fang Yi and the others would be no match for the robotic guards, but if all of Team Zenith worked together and focused on slowing the guards down, they would likely be able to hold two of them back. In that case, they would be able to hold out until Yan Long arrived.

He was also considering another question: why was it that the alarm had been triggered the moment he touched the cosmos leaf? Why had the guards only focused on the hunters of Team Zenith? Although Chu Feng and Yun Bing had also been attacked, it was evident that they weren't the robots' priority targets.

As he mulled things over, the robotic guards shot out their second attack. Thanks to [Eclipse], however, the strength of those attacks was greatly reduced.

"Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, form teams with the others and try to deter as many of the guards as you can. Leave the rest to me," Zhang Lie called out. They would focus on offense, and he on defense.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng rushed over to help.

"What's going on?" Chu Feng shouted.

"Zhang Lie, we're here to help!" Yun Bing took a stand against the robots.

He Tian and Qian Zhen also joined their forces, although they looked somewhat unwilling to do so. Surprisingly, they were a huge help to Zhang Lie. Zhang Lie darted behind them to see whether the robots would attack them, only to find that the robots' attacks would deviate just enough to avoid them. As a result, they became particularly useful shields.

Outside the treasury, a hovercar was rushing toward the mountains. Yan Long's face darkened as he rushed out of the hovercar and met up with Luo Lie and two other hunters by the outside of the treasury.

"What's going on inside?" he roared.

"Commander, the automated defense system activated all of a sudden, and Lieutenant Liu doesn't have enough authority to override it," one of the hunters replied.

Yan Long frowned. Save for Luo Lie, he was the highest authority in charge of the treasury, but something had gone wrong with the system at precisely the moment Team Zenith and the others were inside. It was evident that someone had tampered with the security and defenses.

"Investigate whether the defense system has been tampered with. Do so immediately!" Yan Long commanded, rushing toward the scene.

Within the treasury, the members of Team Zenith used all their trump cards, as did Yun Bing and Chu Feng. Zhang Lie had activated his forest wolfman soulshard, but dealing with a dozen such robots at once was still near-impossible even working as a team. If not for his domain sapping at their strength and mobility, along with the human shields He Tian and Qian Zhen, the hunters would likely all have perished.

However, [Eclipse] drained quite a bit of his energy, and Zhang Lie was swiftly running low on his reserves. Seconds passed, then minutes; the fight had devolved into a battle of attrition.

However, the robots had a far larger supply of genetic energy than the harried first-realm hunters, and it would only be a matter of time before they were overwhelmed.

"Zhang Lie! Why don't you surrender? Stop resisting! These robots might just want to capture you!" He Tian and Qian Zhen were starting to feel a little spooked. In the previous few rounds of attacks, they had almost lost their lives when the robots' techniques grazed them, and they couldn't bear the sense of having their life dangling on a thread any longer.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Is that so? If I didn't know better, I'd think they were trying to kill me outright! Why don't I send you over first?"

After Zhang Lie spoke, the robots' eyes seemed to gleam an even more vibrant red, but Zhang Lie attacked He Tian and Qian Zhen before the robots could attack him. The two of them were subdued almost immediately; the last thing He Tian and Qian Zhen remembered was their necks turning cold, and then sudden darkness.

At that very moment, the doors to the treasury opened wide, and all the robotic guards stopped attacking. The danger dispelled for the moment, the hunters reared back in relief.

However, Zhang Lie instantly commanded, "Bring some treasures and stuff it in their laps, then wake them up!"

Despite the curious command, the members of Team Zenith obeyed Zhang Lie without question.

Yan Long and Luo Lie walked into the treasury, sighing in relief as they saw Zhang Lie, who had transformed into a forest wolfman.

"Zhang Lie, are you all alright?" Luo Lie asked.

"Commander Yan Long, what's going on? How did the defense system activate all of a sudden?" Sun Xiaowu queried, his face marred by a frown.

An ordinary hunter would have been a corpse by now, and they had all only survived because of Zhang Lie! Chu Feng and the others were equally concerned. This was a surprisingly low-level mistake for the military to make; had something gone seriously wrong?

Everyone looked toward Yan Long, waiting for him to give a satisfactory explanation for this entire mess.

"There were a few issues with the system," Yan Long replied. "That's all I know at the moment."

Shame burned red on his face. Regardless of what the issue was, it was indubitable that the problem lay with him, the authority in charge of the treasury.

"Once we rescue any wounded hunters, I'll make sure to give you all an explanation for this turn of events!" he promised. Yan Long turned to He Tian and Qian Zhen, who seemed to be unconscious. As the two of them slowly regained consciousness, they too asked about just what had happened to the defense system.

"Commander, could the defense system have been activated because someone tried to take out more treasures than they were qualified to?" He Tian suddenly asked.

Yan Long nodded. Otherwise, he wouldn't have had to give everyone a pre-programmed wristwatch.

"In that case, isn't there the possibility that the system was triggered because someone tried to take too many treasures than they were supposed to?" Qian Zhen added, glancing intermittently at Zhang Lie.

Yan Long frowned at what He Tian and Qian Zhen were implying. "Let's not worry about this for the moment. Have you all gathered the treasures you came here for?"

Zhang Lie glanced at all the members of Team Zenith, who nodded. Except for Zhang Lie, who had yet to acquire the cosmos leaf, everyone else had already decided on their treasures.

"Zhang Lie, haven't you chosen yet?" Yan Long turned back to him.

"No, not yet. I was intending to take the cosmos leaf, but the defense system activated at that very moment."

"Hoh? Was it really then that the system activated?" He Tian narrowed his eyes in Zhang Lie's direction.

"As I've mentioned, we'll discuss any such allegations later. Zhang Lie, pick the treasures you want to keep. I'll need all of you to come with me to the world federation's offices to investigate the anomalous failure of the defense system," Yan Long commanded. Such an important breach in security had to be investigated and analyzed in full detail.

"Team Zenith will cooperate to the utmost," Zhang Lie promised.

"Official Yan, the two of us will cooperate as well!" Qian Zhen and He Tian also quickly pledged, glancing at Zhang Lie with a conceited smile.

Zhang Lie retrieved the cosmos leaf, along with a few other herbs that he had had his eye on. Subsequently, the ten of them got into the military's hovercar and flew toward a military fortress, Yan Long's face as dark as before.

Rumors began to spread throughout the capital surprisingly quickly.

"The Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, taking more treasures than he was allotted at the imperial treasury, triggered the treasury's automated defense system! Zhang Lie's medals should be stripped because of his greed!"

"Zhang Lie: Dragonwolf or Greedwolf?"

News about the defense system's malfunction in the capital quickly gained the media's attention, who disseminated it even more widely.

Yan Long frowned at the news that covered the screen, all rumors designed to target Zhang Lie. The ten hunters all stared at the news report silently.

"I think this is a sensible accusation," He Tian immediately exclaimed.

"Isn't that so? Otherwise, why would the defense system activate?" Qian Zhen followed suit. Chu Feng and Yun Bing exchanged a glance as they looked toward the two hunters from the He and Qian clans, clearly suspicious of them.

On the other hand, Zhang Lie remained calm, as though he weren't the target of the rumors being flung in his direction.

Yan Long eyed the He and Qian hunters. "In that case, this whole fiasco started because Zhang Lie got too greedy?"

Chapter 185: Maligning Others

"Isn't that possible, Commander Yan? This is the national treasury, and you know about the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie's background! Wouldn't it be natural that he might be tempted by the treasures on display?" He Tian responded, smiling. Qian Zhen nodded agreeably by his side; the duet the two of them were putting on disgusted the other hunters.

Yan Long stroked his jaw. According to Chu Feng and Zhang Lie himself, Zhang Lie had triggered the defense system as he reached out for the cosmos leaf.

It was true that Zhang Lie would draw the largest suspicion. On the other hand, Qian Zhen and He Tian had fallen unconscious, and they were almost free of suspicion entirely.

However, this was all a superficial picture. Zhang Lie did come from the slums, from a life of poverty, but he had more foresight than even most hunters from major clans. Furthermore, as the champion of the nationwide tournament, he certainly didn't lack for treasures.

"Commander, it seems as though there really are a few items missing from the treasury," a subordinate walked over and reported to Yan Long.

"Oh?" Yan Long's brows raised, and the members of Team Zenith all glanced up sharply. Had someone actually stolen from the treasury? Certainly, none of them had the time to do so.

"Commander Yan, there's simply too much suspicion cast on Zhang Lie. Just in case, I recommend confiscating all the treasures that he's taken from the treasury," He Tian requested once more.

Yan Long glanced at Zhang Lie, who was smirking at He Tian and Qian Zhen.

"Commander, it's been no more than an hour, but the rumors are already circulating widely around the capital," Luo Lie whispered.

A web of suspicion was being cast over Zhang Lie, one that was catching hunters in the capital in its thrall. Quite a few major clans and dojo leaders poured oil on the flames.

"Ridiculous! I'm sure someone's just trying to target Zhang Lie. We've found signs that the defense system in the treasury was tampered with, clearly professional work—and they had to be working with at least one person within the treasury as well!" Yan Long chuckled coldly.

From start to finish, he had believed in Zhang Lie. Zhang Lie was simply too calm in the face of these accusations, so calm that he seemed to be merely enjoying the show put on by a few clowns.

Furthermore, he had requested a significant favor from Zhang Lie before giving him access to the treasury. If there were really something that Zhang Lie needed, he could have mentioned it directly to him then.

He was certain that the issue with the defense system had been caused by one of the factions hostile to Zhang Lie, trying to take advantage of the world federation's military to manufacture Zhang Lie's death.

However, Zhang Lie was far too strong for their plan to succeed, so they had to resort to besmirching his name by spreading rumors throughout the capital. The only factions with the ability to do this were the major clans of the capital.

Clearly, the capital had forgotten about his reputation as the fiery dragon of the east—well, he'd make sure to pound that moniker into their heads!

"I don't mind the scrutiny, Commander Yan, but all of us should be searched. After all, any of us could have been the culprit," Zhang Lie replied.

"Indeed, the two of us are in agreement," Chu Feng replied for himself and Yun Bing.

"We too agree!" Qian Zhen and He Tian exclaimed. Yan Long stood up and gazed at the ten hunters.

"Thank you for cooperating. In that case, please hand over the treasures you've selected from the treasury." Yan Long glanced at the items that the hunters placed on the table, then turned to his subordinates.

"What's missing?"

"A seven-star heavenly ox soulshard, the manual for [Tyrant's Dominating Fist], and a superior-grade evergreen dryad soulshard," his subordinate reported.

Yan Long narrowed his eyes. The seven-star heavenly ox soulshard stood out to him; that was a peak-grade soulshard, and one of the more valuable treasures stored in the treasury.

"Does anyone object to having their possessions searched?" Yan Long asked again.

When no one disagreed, he beckoned for one of his subordinates to approach the hunters.

Zhang Lie materialized his potbellied-toad pouch and spilled its contents all over the table. Within the pouch were ingredients for concocting Potion #3, as well as whatever soulshards he didn't yet have time to deal with. Even so, it shocked everyone around him: the pouch alone contained over a hundred superior-grade soulshards.

It was certainly unusual for a first-realm hunter to possess such wealth, but Yan Long knew where he had acquired all of it: from conflicts with the major clans of the capital!

"And the rest of you?" Yan Long turned to the other hunters in the room.

Yan Long and his subordinate checked everyone's spatial-type soulshards, but the three missing items weren't in any of their possessions. Yan Long frowned, turning to his subordinate. "Perform a body search."

The hunters of Team Zenith, along with Yun Bing and Chu Feng, passed through the inspection without issue, but He Tian and Qian Zhen suddenly found that something seemed to have been stuffed into their breastplates. Before they could do anything, however, Yan Long's subordinate had already made her way over to them, patting down their body with a pair of gloves.

The other eight hunters glanced at them mockingly as Yan Long's subordinate pulled out a shard of black glass from his chest.

"Look, isn't that the seven-star heavenly ox soulshard?! Who would have expected Young Master He to be a thief?" Chu Feng gasped in surprise, causing Yun Bing to hide her smile behind a fake cough. She knew full well that Chu Feng was the one who had snuck it in while he was unconscious!

"This—no, it's impossible! I didn't do it!" He Tian began to stammer, unable to believe that one of the missing treasures had ended up in his possession. He hadn't ever seen this soulshard before!

"Zhang Lie, it was you! It had to be you! You knocked us unconscious, and then—"

"Hoh. Were you trying to allay suspicion for your crimes by blaming others? How dirty. Is this what the major clans are like?" However, he was interrupted halfway through by Yan Long's subordinate, who had found the remaining soulshard and manual on Qian Zhen's body.

Yun Bing, Chu Feng, and the hunters of Team Zenith all began to mock the two thieves, but neither of them could muster a word in their defense.

"He Tian, Qian Zhen, do you have an explanation for this?" Yan Long glared at the two of them.

"I-It wasn't us! It was all Zhang Lie's fault—yes, yes, he had to have stuffed them into our armor while we were unconscious!"

Sweat dripped down He Tian and Qian Zhen's forehead.

"Stealing from a national treasury is punishable by death!" Yan Long shouted, his voice low with killing intent.

"No! Commander Yan, I swear we weren't responsible for this!" Either because he was too frightened or because he was skilled at acting, He Tian began to cry as he pleaded innocence.

"Yes, Commander Yan, neither of us are at fault! I'm sure someone tried to pin the blame on us—it had to be Zhang Lie!" Qian Zhen added, his voice quivering with fear.

"You refuse to admit to your crimes, even now?! Were the two of you responsible for the breach to the defense system as well?"

Yan Long's killing intent grew more and more pronounced, as though he were about to slap them both dead with a single blow. He Tian and Qian Zhen could do nothing but gulp in fear, begging for mercy as they knelt down and pleaded.

"Commander Yan, the He and Qian clan heads are here to pay you a visit!" Yan Long's transceiver suddenly beeped. He sneered as he stepped closer to He Tian and Qian Zhen.

"Ah, are your fathers here to clean up your messes? Your clans must be daring indeed to mess with affairs under my jurisdiction. The two of you will be stripped of your status as two of the top ten participants in the nationwide tournament, and the treasures you've taken will be surrendered to the other victors.

"As for this alleged theft and matters involving the security system, we'll see just what a detailed investigation dredges up, won't we? In the meantime, the two of you can wait in a prison cell!"

He Tian and Qian Zhen's faces were ashen as they were dragged away.

Chapter 186: The Heart of the Matter

The treasures that He Tian and Qian Zhen would have received ultimately ended up in Chu Feng and Yun Bing's hands. He Tian and Qian Zhen were escorted away by soldiers just as the respective clan heads walked in.

"Commander Yan, I heard there was a thief, and that the national treasury's defense system was hacked! Is my son alright?" He Liancheng, the head of the He clan, inquired. He had noticed that his son and Qian Zhen seemed to be the only two hunters who were missing. His words didn't seem particularly threatening, but his tone wasn't friendly, either. He glanced menacingly at Zhang Lie as he spoke.

"Right! Haven't you heard the rumors? I was told that the thief was the champion of the nationwide tournament, Zhang Lie! Commander Yan, this matter must be investigated carefully—the reputation of the military is at stake!" After He Liancheng spoke, so did Qian Zhenbei. Just like their sons, they too worked in tandem to place the blame of the entire affair on Zhang Lie.

However, Zhang Lie only smiled as he glanced at the two clan heads.

Yan Long's face grew darker as the two clan heads continued to speak.

"Clan Head He, Clan Head Qian, are the two of you really here just to check up on your sons?" Yan Long questioned them.

He Liancheng and Qian Zhenbei blanched, but before they could defend themselves, Yan Long continued, "Don't you know just what your sons did?"

"What? Commander Yan, surely you wouldn't accuse our sons without any proof? Just what could they have done?" He Liancheng replied.

"Right, Commander Yan, what do you mean? Where are our sons? Surely you wouldn't let them be the scapegoats just to shield someone else of blame, would you?" Qian Zhenbei glared at Zhang Lie.

"Scapegoat? I think not, clan heads. He Tian and Qian Zhen were caught with the stolen goods in their hands!" Zhang Lie finally spoke up, all but cackling in glee.

"How dare you interrupt our conversation with Commander Yan!" He Liancheng retorted.

"As a victim of the crime, don't you think I have a right to speak? Just who do you think you are? Are all the major clan heads of the capital so petty?"

He Liancheng was used to dominating others with his authority, but Zhang Lie didn't care for his tricks.

"Insolence!" Qian Zhenbei called out, genetic energy exploding from his body.

"And just what do you think you're doing, Clan Head Qian?!" Yan Long slammed a fist on the table. They were at military headquarters—just what made the He and Qian clan heads so bold as to ignore his authority here? Of course, He Liancheng and Qian Zhenbei's goal was solely to terrify Zhang Lie, but their actions had completely backfired.

"I apologize, Official Yan. It's true that we've been a bit too rash, but we're simply concerned about the sanctity of our nation's treasury!"

"Indeed! The military and the world federation must maintain its trust in the public eye," the two of them replied, adapting another tactic against Zhang Lie.

"Don't you think I can see through your manipulative ploys? Do you really want me to imprison every member of both your clans?!" Yan Long spat out, activating his own genetic energy. Caught by shock, even Zhang Lie began finding it hard to breathe, let alone the other hunters around him.

He Liancheng and Qian Zhenbei, who suffered the brunt of Yan Long's aura, fared even more poorly. The two of them were forced onto one knee as they paled.

"Official Yan, please calm down! We never intended to be disrespectful to you!"

"We—"

"Enough! Within the day, hand over all hunters who participated in hacking the treasury's defenses. Otherwise, not even your ancestors will be able to save you! He Tian and Qian Zhen will be disqualified from participating in the worldwide tournament. I expect the two of you to end any grudges you have against Zhang Lie and behave the way major clans should. Do you understand?"

As one of the three heads of the Chinese branch of the world federation's military, Yan Long had encountered more than his fair share of intrigue and plotting. After he went over the day's events in his head, he had more or less figured out just what was going on.

He Liancheng and Qin Zhenbei couldn't have expected that Official Yan, who had always been on good terms with them, would end their relationship so brusquely just for Zhang Lie alone. If Yan Long wanted to take their clans both down, all he needed to do was send out a message. Even more frightening were his piercing eyes, which seemed to see through all their deceit,

"Yes, Official Yan!" Against an infuriated Yan Long, the two clan heads had no choice but to grit their teeth and suffer the loss.

Yan Long then turned to Zhang Lie. Before he could speak, Zhang Lie had already begun to pledge, "I won't provoke anyone unless they do so first, Official Yan. From today onwards, I won't bear the He or Qian clans any grudges. As long as they don't attack me, I won't attack them either."

Yan Long smiled at Zhang Lie. "In that case, let's settle matters with this. You'll announce to the media that there was a malfunction in the treasury's defense system. Because of the injuries that they suffered, He Tian and Qian Zhen will have no choice but to drop out of the Void Cup. I'm sure your clans are also responsible for spreading these malicious rumors around—you don't need me to tell you what to do, do you?"

"Yes, Official Yan, we understand!"

Yan Long sent for his subordinates to hand over He Tian and Qian Zhen, ending the fiasco that had riveted the capital for one entire afternoon. The He and Qian clans swore never to provoke Zhang Lie in the future, and Team Zenith returned from the capital to Ning.

After the nationwide tournament, there would be a month-long break before the worldwide tournament, giving Zhang Lie plenty of time for his own affairs.

There were quite a few more disciples who had broken through, but still a fair number who hadn't. Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang were concerned about the disciples who persistently failed every trial, but they didn't know how to tackle the problem. After they notified Zhang Lie, he personally went to observe the disciples' training.

His gaze finally landed on Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen. His two apprentices' expressions were calm as they repeated a few moves over and over again, infrequently incorporating some genetic energy into their attacks.

Unlike the other disciples, they focused not merely on their framework, but also on honing every part of their body, likewise some knowledge they had obtained over the course of their struggles in the dimensional world.

As time passed, a number of disciples were unable to bear the high-intensity training. They walked out of the chamber and began to cool down, but Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen remained, gritting their teeth as they forced their bodies to higher and higher heights.

"Xu Xiu, Ding Qiang, how are my two apprentices doing?"

"Very well, Dojo Leader Zhang! They're the two best students of this entire cohort." Indeed, both of them had given the two youths quite a few pointers while Zhang Lie wasn't around.

"It looks like their trial in the dimensional world was worth it, after all." Zhang Lie inclined his head. Once the two of them developed further, they would both be forces to be reckoned with. "Have them come find me after the training," he told the two instructors, then moved on.

Moments later, as Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen walked out of the training chamber, Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang passed on the message to them. Their eyes both lit up: this was the moment they had been waiting for! They raced toward Zhang Lie's office in the dojo. Xu Xiu, looking at their backs, seemed a little perplexed.

"What's the matter? Were you hoping that Jiuxiao would become your apprentice?" Ding Qiang teased.

"No... no, no, forget it—it had to be a figment of my imagination!" Xu Xiu sighed.

Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen rushed to the dojo leader's office, but they didn't dare knock.

"Come in." Just as they hesitated and looked toward each other, Zhang Lie's voice came through the closed door. They gulped and headed in to see Zhang Lie glancing calmly at them.

"Dojo Leader!" they called out nervously.

"You're still calling me Dojo Leader? Both of you have passed my trial, and you're my apprentices now. Isn't it time to change your mode of address?" Zhang Lie replied, smiling. Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen's faces brightened up.

"Yes, Master!"

"Now that you're my apprentices, I'll have to be more invested in your growth and future development. Do you know what you're striving to accomplish in the future?" Zhang Lie was certain that, after they experienced the cruelty of the dimensional world for themselves, they would quickly mature and strive toward new goals.

"I want to become strong," Ye Xianchen replied without any hesitation. On the other hand, beside her, Jun Jiuxiao hesitated for a long moment before he finally said, "I want to become the strongest!"

Chapter 187: Preparations Complete

As he headed deep into the Night Forest, Zhang Lie finally stopped by a particularly fetid swamp. This swamp, the Night Swamp, was the only place in which night yams would grow. These yams were the last ingredient that Zhang Lie needed for Potion #3.

In truth, these yams weren't strictly necessary, and were just an additional ingredient that would boost the success rate of concocting it. However, Zhang Lie's knockoff version of Potion #3 would be brewed with quite a large number of substitutes, and these night yams had turned from a recommended to a necessary ingredient.

Luckily for him, Zhang Lie wouldn't have much trouble wading into the swamp because of his white-grub soulshard, and all that he had to be careful about were the alligators that lurked within. He sucked in a deep breath, encased himself in silver armor, and hopped into the swamp.

In the Long manor at Lingnan, a day after the end of the Void Cup, the Long clan head looked down at his kneeling subordinates, their eyes filled with fear and unease.

"Why didn't you strike?" Long Xiao asked, his tone menacing.

"The military laid down a direct passageway to the tournament for Zhang Lie. Judging that our attack would likely be unsuccessful and would attract the attention of the military, we chose not to act," the leader of the men explained. In truth, what he cared most about at that moment was his own life.

Long Xiao narrowed his eyes.

"You're all hunters who have dedicated your lives to the clan. I'm disappointed that you chose to prioritize your lives over the clan's wellbeing," Long Xiao stated, his fingers tapping on his armrests. The kneeling hunters' faces turned ashen.

"No, Head! I was simply waiting for a better opportunity," the leader of the hunters said, causing Long Xiao's fingers to pause.

"Very well. You'll have an even better opportunity shortly. The worldwide tournament will begin in around a month's time. Make your preparations now; I don't want to see him during the worldwide tournament!"

"Yes, Head!" The black-robed hunters vanished from sight as though they had never been there.

On the other hand, the Qin and Wang clans had largely given up on opposing Zhang Lie. Both their clans were vehemently against the notion, and the Qin and Wang clan heads might not keep their positions for long if they were to oppose that decision.

As such, they had no choice but to delay any plans they might have had for the future—but how could the Li clan head give up on his blood feud against Zhang Lie, who had slaughtered both his sons?

"Why didn't you strike? Why did you allow Zhang Lie to appear in the tournament?" Li Mo interrogated the hunters kneeling at his feet.

"Head, I wanted to strike, but the military seems to value him enough to send an airborne fort to the tournament and lay out a special passageway for him. I didn't dare strike lest I rouse the military's ire," the Li hunter explained. Indeed, no one could have predicted that the military would value Zhang Lie so highly.

"Lucky brat—but he won't remain that lucky for much longer. Before the worldwide stage of the Void Cup, make sure to hunt down this bastard!" Li Mo closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Just like Long Xiao, he wanted to get rid of Zhang Lie before the worldwide tournament began.

At present, Zhang Lie was already starting to unsettle him. If he let Zhang Lie develop much further, then he would surely crush the Li clan beneath him. The only solution was to kill Zhang Lie and extricate the Li clan from the embarrassing situation it had found itself in.

"I understand, Head," the hunter replied, then got up to leave.

Back in the dimensional world, a forest wolfman suddenly emerged from the swamp with a violet sword glowing brilliantly in his hand. As he emerged from the swamp, so did countless bubbles

from nearby—the superior-grade lifeforms around him were darting out of the muck to ensnare their newfound prey. One glare from the wolfman was sufficient to dissuade them from that idea.

Once he was fully on shore, Zhang Lie returned to his human form.

"I've finally collected all the ingredients for Potion #3," he breathed out, smiling at the night yams in his hand. Potion #3, which he expected only to be able to concoct in the second realm, would be finished far ahead of schedule.

He returned to the Moonlit Pond. The deep trench in the middle of the pond remained as ominous as before, as though there were a slumbering lifeform deep below. If he were able to concoct Potion #3, it wouldn't be impossible for him to overcome even the peak-grade moonlight wyrm.

However, he didn't know if he could be entirely successful, because even in his past life, he hadn't experienced a foundational breakthrough, and he hadn't witnessed the wyrm's true strength for himself.

As a safety precaution, Zhang Lie would need to concoct an additional potion besides, one that was specialized against scaled lifeforms, with the ability of greatly reducing their scales' defense.

This potion was one of the catalysts for mankind's growth: quite a few hunters used it to great effect to acquire gene fragments that were otherwise unattainable to them, improving the strength of all hunters uniformly by a rather wide margin.

Zhang Lie would be making a variant of such a potion that he could dissolve in the Moonlit Pond, with which the moonlit wyrm would be forced to come into contact. With both superior-grade limit fragments and this new potion, he was certain of the success of the hunt.

After all, this moonlight wyrm was known to be extremely intelligent. If his first attempt to defeat it were to fail, it would be near-impossible to lure it out the next time around.

"There's still almost a month before the worldwide tournament, so I should have enough time," Zhang Lie murmured to himself, then left the pond for the Blacksteel settlement.

There were quite a few ingredients necessary for the scale-weakening potion, but they were relatively common. Zhang Lie had long since requested the ingredients from the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion.

There were five ingredients in particular that he was missing, three of which could only be found in the second realm: the mandara flower, violet-edged brambles, and soulhome grass.

These were all notable poisons in the second realm. The poisonous fog that the mandara flower gave off had deleterious effects on the minds of both hunters and lifeforms. Light exposure would affect mental fortitude, whereas heavy exposure would prevent the activation of genetic energy entirely.

The violet-edged brambles had thorns covered with particularly debilitating poison. Once the poison entered a hunter's bloodstream, it would affect the hunter's constitution and leave the hunter in a grossly weakened state, one which could lead to life-threatening danger.

Finally, a hunter who consumed soulhome grass would die in a matter of moments; there was no known antidote to its consumption.

All three poisons were vital to this scale-weakening potion. Before he could think about this potion further, however, his emergency transceiver began to beep, and Zhang Lie had no choice but to drop what he was doing and return to the real world.

Yang Ze was trying to contact him. "Captain, isn't the Void Cup over? Should we return to the dimensional world?"

Indeed, it had been some time since he had last communicated with Yang Ze, especially after the Void Cup started. Furthermore, even after the tournament, everyone had been busy dealing with all sorts of miscellanea in the Zenith Dojo.

"Yes, I expect the nationwide tournaments are over both on Earth and on Mars," Zhang Lie replied.

"Yes, it's over on my end too. Since the worldwide tournament is coming up, should we return to the dimensional world to train?" Yang Ze asked with a smile, but there was a hint of loneliness in his eyes.

"Good idea. I'll inform everyone that we'll be returning, and I'll see you at 5 PM at the Blacksteel Inn," Zhang Lie agreed. The members of Team Zenith would want to see the Moonlit Pond for themselves to plan for the upcoming battle.

Subsequently, he then returned to the dimensional world, where he contacted the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion.

"Honored Mr. Peppercorn, it's been a while since we last spoke. Is there anything that I may help you with?" Daffodil replied almost as soon as he sent her a meeting request.

"How much of my order have you managed to complete?" Zhang Lie asked.

"We're almost ready, Mr. Peppercorn! We have 90% of your order on-hand."

"Good. Do you have these three ingredients at the moment?" Zhang Lie asked about the three poisons that he would need to brew the scale-weakening potion, which were relatively difficult to obtain because of their highly poisonous nature and the fact that they were guarded by rather strong lifeforms in the second realm.

"Please wait for a moment while I check on the status of these ingredients, Mr. Peppercorn. I'll let you know as soon as I find out," Daffodil replied.

"If they're not ready yet, prioritize these ingredients as much as possible. The price isn't a problem for me," Zhang Lie added, then terminated the conversation.

He believed that there would surely be hunters willing to brave the risk if he were willing to spend additional points on those poisons. For now, however, he would start brewing Potion #3.

Just like before, in order to avoid unnecessary trouble, Zhang Lie spent ten thousand points to rent out the best underground lab that the Blacksteel Inn had to offer. With all his preparations complete, the next step would be to start brewing the potion in earnest...

Chapter 188: All Things in Hand

Concocting a potion sounded straightforward, but the actual details and techniques were, unsurprisingly, complicated and involved a significant amount of manual labor. The preparation process for each ingredient was even more intense than with Potions #1 and #2. There were over a

hundred auxiliary herbs required for Potion #3, each of which had to be prepared with painstaking care.

It took Zhang Lie an entire day and a half of preparatory labor before he was ready to brew the potion in earnest. In front of him were over a hundred herbal essences of various shades and colors, and what Zhang Lie had to do now was to add these essences to each other in an orderly, sequential manner.

Despite the seeming simplicity of this process, the slightest error could propagate, and timing was of absolute importance. For instance, if two of the essences being combined were at different temperatures, the temperature gradient alone could ruin the synthesis.

He only had enough ingredients to prepare Potion #3 once. The preparation had already consumed four stalks of cosmos leaf, along with hundreds of other herbs and the rare wasteland essence and magical yams. This would be his only chance at crafting Potion #3 in the first realm, so Zhang Lie was fully focused on the work in front of him.

After four hours of extremely careful manipulation, Zhang Lie was left with a potion the color of sapphires.

"It's a success!" Only when he saw the potion's signature deep blue shine did Zhang Lie finally sigh in relief.

Next, he would have to consume the potion. Because Zhang Lie's [Ninecarp Transformation] was a growth-type framework, every potion Zhang Lie downed was an opportunity to evolve his framework further. It was for this reason that Zhang Lie had chosen to prepare Potion #3 at this critical juncture.

He sucked in a deep breath and downed the entire potion in one gulp, feeling an unusual refreshing sensation coating his throat and quickly spreading through the rest of his body. Moments afterward, a fiery sensation, as though he were being burned alive from the inside, enveloped his entire body.

Waves of pain spiked through each of Zhang Lie's nerves and muscles. Compared to Potions #1 and #2, the side effects of Potion #3 were notably more severe.

Zhang Lie felt each of his cells burning up, but despite the discomfort, he sat upright in a cross-legged position and began to circulate genetic energy in the manner dictated by [Ninecarp Transformation]. His multicolored genetic core began to spin violently as sapphire waves of herbal energy impacted it, causing it to vibrate following a certain rhythm.

As it vibrated, the black serpent within ignited in blue flame, causing it to lose its vitality and to start to melt. In a matter of moments, the black serpent had vanished from sight, but its dark coloring had also dyed the flames black. The flames shuddered, then split in triplicate. Sapphire waves of herbal energy continued to pour into Zhang Lie's genetic core, but it was dyed black the moment it entered the vicinity of the core.

Next was the arduous process of accepting, purifying, and condensing that herbal energy and transforming it into pure genetic energy. During this process, Zhang Lie could clearly sense his genetic energy changing on a qualitative level.

It took another day before the three black flames in Zhang Lie's genetic core took form once more.

The first was a small carp, which darted agilely in the core: the grace and vitality of water.

The second was a serpent, its figure fuzzy: the mystery and majesty of darkness.

Finally, the third was a winged tiger: the resilience and sharpness of gold.

The water-attuned carp could swallow flames, the darkness-attuned serpent could corrode, and the gold-attuned winged tiger could sharpen part of its body. Naturally, this final transformation was indicative of [Ninecarp Transformation]'s third evolution.

Zhang Lie's reservoir of genetic energy had at least quintupled, and he had gained yet another elemental attunement, that of gold. Zhang Lie's framework was now an extremely rare water-, darkness, and gold-attuned one, with three animal archetypes that he could draw on and combine at will. The speed at which his stamina and genetic energy recovered was far improved from before.

He waved his right arm. Genetic energy in burnished gold swept down his arm, leaving his fingers and palm as sharp as a blade.

The fire that seemed to have spread all over Zhang Lie's body was finally quenched. His strength had increased again by leaps and bounds, and a pool of sweat, dotted with black impurities that had been forced out of his body, had formed by his feet. He seemed to have just recovered from a major illness.

[For consuming an unknown potion, your superior gene capacity has been increased.]

The pain vanished. A sapphire-blue glow appeared over the surface of Zhang Lie's body, only to vanish in the very next moment.

His stats had grown to a nightmarish level. In terms of framework, techniques, soulshards, and gene fragments, he eclipsed any other hunter of the first realm.

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX; Ninecarp Transformation, Third Form: Winged Tiger

Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (advanced), Eclipse (novice)

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

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

Zhang Lie opened his eyes wide and stood up. As he circulated his genetic energy, three figures appeared to his sides and behind him, the agile fish, the mysterious serpent, and the bladed tiger.

"The moonlight wyrm will be mine!" Even Zhang Lie couldn't help but let out a whoop of joy.

He cleaned up after himself and immediately left the underground laboratory. After all, he had promised to meet up with the members of Team Zenith at 5 PM in front of the Blacksteel Inn, and it was just about this time in the real world.

"Zhang Lie!" However, the moment he stepped into the Blacksteel Inn's lobby, a familiar voice called out to him. "You're still dressed like this? I'm sick and tired of it!" Chu Xun's voice could be heard from a distance.

Zhang Lie turned in that direction to see her heading toward him with Chu Feng in tow. He teased, "What's the matter, Young Master Chu? What's so urgent that you would bring your sister here to find me?"

Chu Feng clearly wanted to say something, but he didn't seem to want to broach the topic.

"Forget it, Brother! Even I'm not so thick-skinned!" Chu Xun pursed her lips and stepped toward Zhang Lie instead.

Chu Feng clicked his tongue. If not for the fact that he needed his sister's acutely developed sense of smell to find Zhang Lie, he wouldn't have agreed to let her come with him today.

"We're friends, aren't we?" Zhang Lie said. "If you need my help, let me know."

"On behalf of the Chu clan, I hope you'll continue to cooperate with us with regards to developing your Potion #1. We'll try our best to satisfy your demands," Chu Feng requested, lowering his head.

Zhang Lie glanced at him appraisingly. The reason he had terminated his partnership with the Chu and Yun clans was because they didn't help him out in a time of need. However, now that his star was rising, the two clans wanted to take advantage of his expertise and newfound fame.

"I refuse," Zhang Lie stated curtly. "You know that I'm a forthright person, and you know my reasons for declining. Before the two of you become the heads of your respective clans, with final say in the clan's decisions, I don't intend on working with either of your clans."

Zhang Lie's final words suddenly caused Chu Feng to brighten up. "Zhang Lie, thank you! No matter what, I'll always be a friend of yours!"

"I recognize you as a friend, and I certainly hope my friends will grow stronger with me. On that note, here's Potion #1." Zhang Lie handed a bottle to Chu Feng.

It was true that the two of them had initially worked together for profit and individual gain, but they had grown to become friends. That being said, Chu Feng was Chu Feng, whereas the Chu clan was the Chu clan. The two entities weren't, and wouldn't be, synonymous. He was willing to help Chu Feng out, but he certainly wouldn't supply these potions to the Chu clan.

"Th-This is far too precious!" Chu Feng was clearly surprised by Zhang Lie's generosity, but despite his words, he claimed the gift almost immediately.

Chu Feng uncorked the bottle and was about to down it all in one gulp when Zhang Lie's eyes widened.

"Wait! If you don't want to die, go somewhere secluded and start circulating your genetic energy before drinking it."

"Ah, I can't just drink this directly?"

"You'll see once you experience its effects for yourself—"

"Zhang Lie, aren't you being a little too biased?" Yun Bing had arrived out of nowhere. She was frowning at the sight of the transaction, an aggrieved expression on her face.

Chapter 189: Surveying the Battlefield

"Don't worry, I've prepared your share too!" Facing the aggrieved Yun Bing, Zhang Lie had no choice but to take out another Potion #1. "Alright, we can discuss other things later. I have to go now!"

Before the two of them could react, Zhang Lie swiftly marched away.

"Hey, hold it! Where's my potion?!" Only then did Chu Xun, her face filled with admiration for her idol, realize that she had been neglected. Of course, Chu Xun's shout didn't summon Zhang Lie back; instead, he walked away even more quickly.

"Potion #1... if only my clan had believed in Zhang Lie from the beginning! It would certainly have allowed them to be head and shoulders above the rest," Chu Feng sighed, and Yun Bing's features turned serious.

The two of them made a decision at that very moment: if they ever grew into a position of authority in the clan, they would get close to Zhang Lie at any cost.

"I've never seen anyone else who was able to impact a clan's future—even the world's future—on his own," Yun Bing murmured.

By the time Zhang Lie headed out of the lobby of the Blacksteel Inn, the members of Team Zenith were already there waiting for him.

"Captain, you're finally here!" Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng rushed up to him.

"We're finally back, but we won't be able to advance to the second realm of the dimensional world before we're done with the Void Cup. Isn't it boring?" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed.

"Boring, you say?" Zhang Lie smiled in a manner that sent chills down the hunters' backs. He waved them all into one of the Blacksteel Inn's suites before he announced, "I have just the task for all of you! Before the worldwide stage of the Void Cup begins, I intend on hunting down the moonlight wyrm."

"What? The moonlight wyrm?" Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng were both taken aback.

"Ah, the legendary lifeform living at the bottom of the Moonlit Pond!" Li Feng gasped.

Everyone stared at Zhang Lie in shock.

"But isn't that just a legend? If we don't even know what grade of lifeform it is, how will we hunt it down?" Fang Yi grew tense.

Their prey for this hunt would be a legendary lifeform! No one knew if it truly existed; only those hunters from the major clans had caught a glimpse of it.

"As a conservative estimate, the moonlight wyrm is likely a peak-grade lifeform. You don't have to worry about how to hunt it down—just listen to my command!" Zhang Lie explained.

"A peak-grade lifeform?" The hunters' eyes opened wide.

"Well? Is this exciting enough for all of you?"

"Yes!" the hunters of Team Zenith replied without any hesitation. Indeed, they would only grow by surpassing their limits time and again. Even if their prey were a mythical dragon, they would be perfectly willing to hunt it under Zhang Lie's direction.

"In that case, let me show you the battlefield before we start planning out the attempt. As you all know, the Moonlit Pond is located in the Night Forest, lush with greenery and various lifeforms. The pond itself lies by the waterfall deep within the forest."

A holographic image appeared in front of everyone's eyes, a recording of the Moonlit Pond's surroundings.

"Position yourself appropriately according to your elemental attunement," Zhang Lie instructed, magnifying the image for the members of Team Zenith.

Of course, this was just for preliminary planning; they would finalize their positioning and approach once they arrived at the Moonlit Pond and saw the scene for themselves.

Just then, a knock could be heard from the door.

"Ah, it must be Yang Ze! You're finally back, you bastard!" Li Feng ran out of the room to greet him.

"Not bad, Yang Ze. You've really made a name for yourself on Mars," Fang Yi commented.

"Ah, the hunters there are simply too weak." Yang Ze scratched the back of his head.

Zhang Lie watched the interaction among the members of Team Zenith with a smile; it seemed like it had been quite a while since they last had time to relax.

After exchanging greetings with the other members of Team Zenith, whom he hadn't seen for quite some time, Yang Ze calmly walked toward Zhang Lie. "Thank you, Master!"

His body was vibrating with nerves, and the other hunters quieted down. Although they didn't know all that much about Yang Ze's background, they could guess at what had happened. If Yang Ze hadn't met Zhang Lie, he certainly wouldn't have been able to shine during the nationwide stage back on Mars. If he had become a participant following his original trajectory as a hunter, he would only have ended up a joke, nothing more.

"There's no need to say anything. Since you're here, have a seat. We'll be discussing something that I think will be quite unexpected for you." Zhang Lie smiled.

"Yes, Captain!" Yang Ze sat down by Li Feng's side, and Zhang Lie had Sun Mengmeng explain to Yang Ze just what he had missed.

Yang Ze's eyes widened.

"Alright, since you've all gotten a sense of the geography, let's go have a look at the real thing right now." Zhang Lie beckoned to the others as they left the inn.

"Look! Team Zenith's heading out of the Blacksteel settlement again!"

"As expected of the dark horse of this year's tournament!"

"It looks like they're heading in the direction of the Night Forest."

A gust of wind brushed by their hair as they walked into the Night Forest, the rumbling of a waterfall audible from a distance

"Stop!" Zhang Lie suddenly shouted, as the Moonlit Pond appeared within sight.

The members of Team Zenith immediately stopped. This moonlight wyrm would be far stronger than any lifeform they had faced to date—who knew what peak-grade lifeforms could do? They remained silent as they observed their surroundings, unable to hear anything beside the waterfall.

Zhang Lie whispered, "Start scouting the vicinity. Head to the location where you think you would be most advantageously placed."

The hunters of Team Zenith silently crept away as they investigated their surroundings. The Night Forest was lush with greenery, so Zhou Ying would be able to shine no matter where she was.

In fact, except for Sun Mengmeng, who was fire-attuned, everyone else managed to find a location suitable to their elemental attunement and soulshards, and they had all gained an understanding of the Moonlit Pond and its surroundings.

"Captain, we've finished scouting!"

"In that case, let's leave."

The members of Team Zenith looked very surprised.

"Captain, all we did was check the surroundings! Are we going to leave just like that?" Sun Xiaowu asked. They hadn't even seen the moonlight wyrm for themselves, and couldn't develop an accurate sense of its capabilities.

"We won't be doing anything more today. The moonlight wyrm's extremely intelligent. If we want to lure it out, we'll have to use some exceptional bait, and there's no guarantee that it'll work a second time around. You might have to wait until the hunt itself before you see the moonlight wyrm for yourselves," Zhang Lie explained.

Once they returned to the inn, Zhang Lie told the hunters everything he knew about the wyrm.

Finally, he handed them a list of herbs. "I don't care how you do it, but within the next two months in dimensional-world time, make sure you acquire at least ten of each herb!"

The hunters' eyes widened as they looked at the list. There were over a hundred herbs listed, most of which were jealously guarded by superior-grade lifeforms. How were they supposed to acquire at least ten of each within two months?!

"That urgently? Captain, what do you need these herbs for?" Fang Yi asked. Based on his understanding of Zhang Lie, these herbs would soon serve a vital purpose.

"What for? To make Potion #2 for all of you, of course. Don't you want mutated limit fragments?"

What? Mutated limit fragments?

"As you might have guessed, the fact that you can acquire basic limit fragments also means that you can acquire mutated, and even superior, limit fragments," Zhang Lie continued.

"What?!" The hunters all stared at him in shock. In that case, how much stronger could they become?!

Chapter 190: Collecting Herbs

Surely they would be undefeatable? That was what every member of Team Zenith was thinking—yes, they would be undefeatable! As far as they knew, the only one who had access to such potions and information was Zhang Lie and Zhang Lie alone.

Just the existence of basic limit fragments alone had thrown them for a loop, let alone that of mutated or even superior limit fragments.

"Well? What are all of you waiting for? The faster you find all those herbs, the sooner you'll be able to get another breakthrough!"

"Right, we'd better get those herbs as quickly as we can!" The hunters of Team Zenith left the inn jubilantly, excited for their impending powerup.

Once everyone was gone, it was again time for Zhang Lie to focus on his own affairs. He had successfully consumed Potion #3 and broken through, so his next step would be to reach his new superior gene capacity. Zhang Lie left the Blacksteel settlement and headed in the direction of the Desert of Silence.

Meanwhile, the hunters of Team Zenith had split up into three small groups to maximize the efficiency of their search. As a result, quite a few hunters reported sighting the hunters of Team Zenith around the vicinity of the Blacksteel settlement, which were immediately followed by one or two pained howls from the lifeforms nearby.

"What are the hunters of Team Zenith doing? Why are they still slaughtering superior-grade lifeforms like crazy? Haven't they already reached their gene capacity?"

"They must be hunting for superior-grade soulshards, of course! What else could they be doing here?"

Many hunters began commenting on their sudden appearance and disappearance.

Within the Night Forest, Fang Yi thrust his spear forward, devouring the superior-grade wolf-type lifeform in front of him. At the same time, Sun Mengmeng shot an arrow up into the canopy, seemingly causing the forest itself to shudder. Moments later, a devastating howl could be heard from the distance. Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng ran off clutching a few herbs in their hands.

Although they were tired, the process of acquiring these herbs felt extremely rewarding.

The other members had also collected quite a fair number of herbs on their own; given their rate of progress, they would likely be able to acquire everything on the list before the end of the two-month deadline.

Meanwhile, deep within the Desert of Silence, a figure gave off huge waves of genetic energy amidst a violent sandstorm. Howls and thumps could be heard from the sand, but within moments, as the dazzling show of genetic energy ended, countless superior-grade lifeforms fell to the ground.

Zhang Lie walked out of the pile of carcasses and began skinning his kills. Moments later, the scent of roasted meat drifted through the desert.

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade dragon salamander, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 101]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade dragon salamander, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 108]

[...one superior gene fragment. Current total: 116]

[...one superior gene fragment. Current total: 121]

The three different lifeforms he had killed sufficed to raise his superior gene fragments by twenty. After breaking through, Zhang Lie's entire body had gotten an upgrade, including his digestive abilities. Zhang Lie had a sumptuous feast, patted his stomach and headed even deeper into the desert. His traces were quickly covered up by the roaring wind.

Late at night, the members of Team Zenith gathered once more. They looked somewhat exhausted, but their eyes were all shining brightly. They had spent the entire day killing lifeforms, most of which were superior-grade.

"We've managed to get a few dozen of the herbs on just the first day alone! If we work harder, we might even be able to finish within two weeks!" Sun Xiaowu waved his hands in excitement.

"Not necessarily. We did well today, but I suspect there won't be any useful herbs left in the vicinity of the Blacksteel settlement. We'll have to head out further, and it'll cost us more time and put us in more danger. From tomorrow onwards, I think we should work in three-member teams so that we can prioritize our safety," Fang Yi announced.

"Indeed, but given our current strength, there's not much that we have to worry about. Instead, I think we need to plan out our search more carefully—that'll surely save us quite a bit of time," Yang Ze suggested.

The hunters began discussing the optimal plan of attack after their experience that day: it seemed as though the task that Zhang Lie had laid out for them would be far harder than it seemed at first glance. Even Sun Xiaowu, who was initially quite excited, suddenly felt burdened by the immensity of the task.

As their conversation drew to a close, Zhang Lie suddenly entered the room.

"Well? Did you find anything good today?"

"Captain, this task's crazy difficult! Do we really have to acquire thousands of herbs?" Sun Xiaowu complained.

"You can reduce the quantities you need by a third, but if I fail to brew it correctly, I won't have enough potions for all of you," Zhang Lie replied.

"The brewing process can fail?!"

"Of course—what makes you think it can't?" Zhang Lie retorted.

Everyone grew silent. Indeed, obtaining enough ingredients for ten potions would be the safest option. Zhang Lie's eyes glinted as he looked at the crowd, because he knew that only this sort of pressure would cause them to speed up their search; this was, in some sense, a part of their training as well.

"Well, we're Team Zenith. Of course we'll be able to get all these herbs within two months!" Sun Mengmeng shouted, trying to raise everyone's spirits.

"Right, it's only been a day, hasn't it? I'm sure we'll be able to acquire the remaining herbs in no time!"

Everyone slowly regained their confidence.

The next day, the hunters of Team Zenith continued searching for more herbs as Zhang Lie hunted down more superior-grade lifeforms. His body drenched, Zhang Lie stepped out of the Mo river with a giant cuttlefish in one hand and a sprig of herbs in the other, giving off a strong fragrance that covered up even the pungent odor of the cuttlefish.

"Surprisingly difficult to deal with," Zhang Lie murmured, dumping the superior-grade cuttlefish's body unceremoniously onto the sands as he focused on the deepsea vine in his other hand. He had come to the Mo river in search of both the superior-grade cuttlefish and for an ingredient to be used in the scale-weakening potion.

This auxiliary ingredient would allow the poisons from each of the three main herbs to better combine with each other, and was invaluable for raising the success rate of the concoction. Because it was available in the dimensional world, he didn't request that the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion search for it.

He glanced at the cuttlefish's body as he stored the vine in his potbellied-toad pouch, but just as he was doing so, a fluctuation in genetic energy came from behind him.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes and activated his galewolf soulshard, dashing away in the blink of an eye. When he turned back, he felt the sea wind on his face.

"Hand me the deepsea vine! I'm willing to exchange points for it," a long-haired youth approached, calling out to Zhang Lie.

His face was expressionless. Genetic energy surrounded his body, and the sword buckled to his waist was particularly eye-catching. It came with a gold-alloyed sheath on which a jewel was embedded, and it shone with a curious sparkle in the sun. He had on a suit of light blue armor, and was staring fervently at the vine in Zhang Lie's hands.

"It's not for sale." Zhang Lie rejected him instantly, given his poor attitude.

"I recommend that you sell it to me, or I'll snatch it from you if I have to." The other party seemed to need the vine urgently. His hand moved to his sword.

"Are you threatening me?" Zhang Lie raised an eyebrow. It seemed as though all his encounters lately were with those who wanted to steal or snatch something from him, as though he were an easy target.

"I promise I'll give you a good price."

"And I told you, I won't sell!"

Genetic energy began to rise from the youth's body, and the sound of an ocean wave could be heard from a distance.

Water-attuned genetic energy? Before Zhang Lie could think too much about it, the youth suddenly pulled out an ancient longsword gleaming with light.

Zhang Lie's eyes widened at the craftsmanship of the sword, but before he could admire it further, the youth was already charging toward him.