

U. Warlord 191

Chapter 191: The Withering Hong Clan

The sound of footsteps arose all around him, as though there were a thousand soldiers on horseback rushing toward him.

"What a strange footwork technique," Zhang Lie murmured, opening his eyes wide. The first thing he saw was blades of sword energy heading in his direction.

He activated [Mirrored Refraction]. It felt as though a drop of water had landed in a still pool, casting out ripples in every direction. In the blink of an eye, Zhang Lie vanished from sight.

The youth's sword cut down the afterimages that Zhang Lie left behind, frowning as even more sword energy gathered around him. "[Ocean's Bounty: Rain of Blades]!"

A strange mark appeared on the youth's forehead as he was swallowed up by sword energy. The moment the mark appeared, Zhang Lie felt a sudden tinge of recognition, but he didn't know just where he had seen it before. Subsequently, a far stranger thing occurred: Zhang Lie's [Eclipse] activated of its own accord.

A tremendous pressure forced that youth to bow down as a radiant moon appeared in the skies.

"Th-This is [Eclipse]! You..."

The technique that the youth was charging up for failed to manifest against the dominating pressure of [Eclipse]. The youth's face was filled with shock, but killing intent glinted in his eyes.

Zhang Lie frowned and thrust forward with his blade, sending a crest of golden sand toward the youth.

"[Cresting Sweep]!" The youth launched another technique in his direction, tilting forward and making a quick flick with his wrist. Behind him, the river roared. His sword energy clashed against that from Venombane.

Amidst an explosion of white light, the youth stumbled back, a slice through his armor. The youth, brimming with fury, turned and leaped back into the river. "I'll remember this!"

Zhang Lie tsked, but didn't give chase. The youth didn't seem like Li Hong and the others, who had taken advantage of their strength to bully others. Instead, it seemed that circumstances had pushed him into dire straits, forcing him to try to snatch what he needed from others.

Zhang Lie hadn't struck him with a lethal blow, and he didn't give chase. Shaking his head, he picked up the superior-grade cuttlefish and left the Mo river. The evening sun cast a long shadow ahead of him as he walked.

That night, the manager of the Blacksteel Inn walked around with a curious expression on his face, as did all the hunters who walked by the inn. A deep, complex aroma permeated the entire inn, and quite a few hunters swallowed a gulp of saliva upon smelling the scent.

The scent originated from Team Zenith's suite. After rushing around the dimensional world for the entire day, the fatigued hunters were all eyeing Sun Mengmeng's superior-grade firemane lion stew with gusto. Even before they began to eat, Sun Xiaowu's saliva was almost about to drip into the stew, causing Sun Mengmeng to give him a disgusted look.

"Alright, if everyone's ready, we can dig in now," Zhang Lie said, glancing at the ravenous faces all around him.

"No one else could make such a delicious-smelling stew!" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed, grabbing the ladle and serving himself immediately.

"Have some too, Captain." Sun Mengmeng specially served Zhang Lie a bowl of soup.

After the meal, everyone rubbed their bellies in satisfaction as they let out burps, announcements from the dimensional world pinging in their heads.

"How was your haul today?" Zhang Lie asked.

"Relatively decent. We've pretty much scoured the vicinity of the Blacksteel settlement by now, so we'll likely have to start going farther out by tomorrow," Fang Yi replied.

"Despite our hard work, we only managed to obtain around seventy sprigs," Sun Xiaowu sighed. Their haul the first two days had been rather impressive, but the rest of what they needed would be far harder to acquire. Even with two whole days of searching, the hunters had only managed to acquire around two hundred sprigs of herbs that they needed.

"This is the dimensional world, after all, and you have to rely on yourself for personal growth. If you can't find all these herbs, then it'll be impossible for you to break through!" Not only did Zhang Lie not console them, he even pressured them harder. He walked out of the suite, leaving the rest of the night for the exhausted members of Team Zenith to relax.

At the same time, downstream of the Mo river, where the Carter settlement was located, a pale youth shrugged off the pale blue armor he was wearing, one with a deep rent through it.

"Can this suit of armor be repaired?"

"The severity of the damage is too great to be repaired," the robot he was speaking to droned in a cold tone.

The youth frowned, picked up the armor, glanced briefly at it, and then threw it into the furnace. Then, he clutched the wound on his shoulder and hobbled deep into the settlement.

"Oh? Isn't this Young Master Hong, Hong Xiao?" A mocking voice came from behind as a silver-haired youth walked by.

Hong Xiao ignored him, straightened up, and covered up his debilitating wound with his left hand.

"Ignoring me, are you? Were you unable to find the deepsea vine to rescue your grandfather?" The youth boomed with laughter as Hong Xiao's gaze turned icy.

"Scram. I have no time to bicker with you."

"Still so proud? You should know that the Hong clan's about to meet its end."

Hong Xiao inhaled deeply, ignored the offending party, and headed deep into the settlement grounds.

"Ah, you're leaving just like that? As I said, there's no honor in being a member of the Hong clan any longer!"

Laughter to his back, Hong Xiao clenched his fists so tightly that his knuckles turned white, causing the silver-haired man to laugh even more loudly. Just as he was about to taunt Hong Xiao further, however, one of his subordinates came running up to him.

"Captain, there are hunters from other settlements encroaching on our territory!"

"What? From what settlement?" Liu Feng frowned, motioning for his subordinates to follow him as he walked away.

The Carter settlement was adjacent to the Mo river as well as the Labryinthine Forest, which was far larger than the Night Forest near the Blacksteel settlement. It was full of resources and herbs, so even though it was far from the Blacksteel settlement, three members of Team Zenith had still headed toward it, planning on grabbing whatever they could find.

Deep within the forest, a superior-grade monkey-type lifeform fell lifeless to the ground.

Fang Yi's eyes brightened. "Look at all the herbs in this area! Does no one from the Carter settlement care about them?"

Sun Xiaowu shrugged, plucking the herbs from behind the monkey's carcass. "Who knows? Maybe they don't even know how to make use of them."

Yang Ze smiled. "That really might be the case. Would we recognize these herbs if we didn't get a list of them from the captain?"

They were simply surprised that there were so many herbs in this forest that were on Zhang Lie's list; Sun Xiaowu was stuffing them into his potbellied-toad pouch handful by handful.

"Apparently, the nearby Mo river is particularly suited for the growth of these herbs," Fang Yi explained. "At any rate, we certainly haven't wasted our time traveling here."

"Alright, shall we keep heading deeper into the forest? We'll surely beat the other team today like this!" Sun Xiaowu urged.

Fang Yi nodded, leading the way with his obsidian spear in hand. Suddenly, he frowned. He thought he had sensed quite a few fluctuations of genetic energy heading in his direction, but they had all vanished.

"Is something wrong?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

"No, it's nothing." Fang Yi shook his head, thinking that he was being too paranoid.

As they strode deeper into the forest, a malicious gaze suddenly landed on Yang Ze's back.

"Yang Ze?! What's he doing here? In that case, these three hunters must all be from Team Zenith!" the silver-haired Liu Hong mumbled to himself, malice distorting his otherwise attractive features.

Chapter 192: Shocking the Crowd

"Captain, isn't that Yang Ze?" one of the hunters beside him shouted out the moment the three hunters from Team Zenith vanished from sight.

Everyone turned toward Liu Hong, who was a hunter from Sacred Fire on Mars. Yang Ze was the victor of the tournament in Sacred Fire; no one in the Carter settlement had managed to win against him, and even Liu Hong had been vanquished in a single blow.

"I'm not blind!" Liu Hong hissed back. He believed he would have been able to get into the top ten easily given his strength, but because he met Yang Ze, he wasn't even able to advance to the finals. Otherwise, he wouldn't be looking at him with such malice.

The crowd of hunters quieted down. They might have dared to lay a hand on a regular team of hunters, but against Team Zenith... Yang Ze alone would likely be enough to take on them all, let alone the two other hunters of similar strength beside him.

"What do we do now, Captain?!" After all, the Labyrinthine Forest was in the vicinity of the Carter settlement, and they surely had to defend their resources from being taken by other hunters.

However, how could they stop three hunters from Team Zenith?

"We'll head back first," Liu Hong suddenly suggested, breaking the silence. The hunters rushed back to the Carter settlement.

"Go on—spread some news about how hunters from the Blacksteel settlement came to the Labyrinthine Forest to hunt down some lifeforms," he commanded, the moment they reached the settlement gates.

The hunters nodded and spread out through the crowd. What did hunters in the dimensional world care most about? Enhancing one's strength, improving one's framework and techniques—and all this relied on the resources available around the settlement. Would hunters from the Carter settlement allow others to steal resources from them? Of course not!

You might be hunters of Team Zenith, but let's see how well you can handle tens of thousands of enraged hunters!

The startling information quickly spread throughout the settlement, and large swathes of hunters rushed out of the Carter settlement and into the nearby forest. Liu Hong, the one who had instigated this entire affair, didn't even deign to participate; he simply had his subordinates handle everything.

Deep within the Labyrinthine Forest, just as Sun Xiaowu plucked out another herb, Yang Ze and Fang Yi heard a commotion coming from behind.

Yang Ze frowned, his hand on his sword. "What's going on? It sounds like there are quite a few hunters rushing our way."

Fang Yi smiled. "It's normal, isn't it? We're intruding on their territory and their resources— but don't forget our objective. We'll try to avoid a confrontation as much as possible!"

A party of about a hundred hunters rushed out from the trees nearby almost exactly as soon as Fang Yi finished speaking, surrounding the three hunters.

"You're members of Team Zenith from the Blacksteel settlement, aren't you? The Labyrinthine Forest is the domain of the Carter settlement. Please leave immediately!" A hulking hunter walked out of the crowd before Fang Yi and the others could say anything, calling out for them to leave.

Fang Yi smiled and stepped forward. "Friends, I think you might be mistaken. We're just passing by the area, and we don't intend on hunting down the lifeforms in the forest—only those that are blocking our way. On what grounds do you seek to expel us? Stand forth, if you dare!"

Fang Yi's smile made him look friendly and approachable, but by the time he finished his remarks, all the hunters present were shivering with shock. Wind- and thunder-attuned genetic energy exploded from his body, and the aura forced everyone present to take a step back.

The hulking hunter who had led the crowd stammered, "I—no, I mean, all of us—"

However, hearing his words, everyone else hastily took another step back. They were just there out of indignation; who would be foolish enough to pick a fight with members of Team Zenith? The members of Team Zenith were known worldwide! All of them had already broken through and had perfectly acclimated to their limit fragments, and they had won every single fight in the Void Cup with just one blow.

How could any of them hope to stand up to such strength? This wasn't an official competition, after all, and there would be no one to save them if they were defeated. They had initially expected to overwhelm even the hunters of Team Zenith with numerical superiority, but despite the fact that there were only three hunters on the other side, they didn't seem cowed at all.

The moment Fang Yi activated his framework, so did the other two hunters, bearing down on the others with the vitality of the sea and sharpness of gold. The hunters from the Carter settlement instinctively reared back against such dramatic fluctuations in genetic energy.

Furthermore, as the hunters from Team Zenith had claimed, they truly didn't seem to be hunting down the lifeforms in the forest. Many of the hunters who had gathered were even thinking of retreating.

"You? Do you speak for everyone here?" Fang Yi's eyes focused on the hulking hunter in front.

The leading hunter, Li Youcai, couldn't help but panic. "No, no, I'm not!"

Fang Yi suddenly retracted his aura and began to smile. "Given your behavior, it looks as though someone has taken you for a pawn. Tell me: who's the one who incited all of you to come here? Who told you that Team Zenith's trying to steal all your resources?"

Li Youcai, along with quite a few hunters in the crowd, suddenly blinked. They turned around and tried to search for the hunters that had led the way, only to see a few of them retreating from the crowd and running away. However, by then, it was already too late.

"Liu Xiu!" Li Youcai called out the name of one hunter who was trying to dart away, and others quickly noticed as well. Within mere moments, Liu Xiu, Wang Neng, and one other instigator—subordinates working for Liu Hong—were ferreted out and pushed to the front of the crowd.

Staring at the three offending hunters, Fang Yi spoke once more, "Shall we hear why these three hunters are trying to provoke all of you to attack us?"

He leaned forward and, grinning maliciously, whispered into the ears of the three hunters, "Of the three of you, only one will live: whoever gives me the most details about what's going on."

"I'll speak!"

"No, no, let me speak! It's Liu Hong!"

"No, it's Li Xiao!"

"What? Of course not—it's Liu Hong!"

The three of them spoke over one another all at once.

"One at a time!" Fang Yi shouted impatiently. "Liu Xiu, you begin!"

Liu Xiu smiled broadly. "Yes, yes, I'll speak! Liu Hong—more specifically, Young Master Liu, from Sacred Fire on Mars—was the one who had us rile up the crowd. Li Xiao, who was brought up earlier, was just one of Liu Hong's subordinates, and we're only doing this because he gave us points. Please, spare our lives!"

Liu Xiu bore Liu Hong no loyalty; his life was far more important.

"And do either of you have anything to add?"

The other two hunters, their faces ashen, clutched their hair as they tried to think of anything else to add in order to save their lives. As they did so, Fang Yi mulled over the situation. The Liu clan, from Sacred Fire... it didn't seem like a particularly small clan, so why would they be targeting Team Zenith?

Suddenly, he turned to Yang Ze, who was standing behind him.

"Come over here, Yang Ze!"

Of the hunters of Team Zenith, Yang Ze was the only one who could be implicated in this series of events.

"Wait, I have something to add!" Just then, Wang Neng spoke up. "It's all because of Yang Ze! Liu Hong was one of the top ten hunters in Sacred Fire, but because he encountered Yang Ze during the nationwide stage, he failed to advance to the next round. He's harbored a grudge for Team Zenith since then, and Liu Hong's surely the mastermind behind this whole affair!"

Yang Ze raised an eyebrow. "Who are you talking about? That cocky white-haired brat?"

The crowd was stunned into silence. Who would dare to call the only son of the Liu clan head from Sacred Fire... a white-haired brat?

Chapter 193: A Tremendous Haul

"That's right, Liu Hong's tall and thin, with long white hair—that's all we know, so please, spare us this once!" The final informant begged for mercy.

Fang Yi smiled as he nudged Yang Ze. "Not bad, Yang Ze—looks like you're turning into Public Enemy #1 just from participating in the Void Cup!"

He turned back to the three hunters. "Listen up—you guys better not do this again, or you could well lose your lives. I'll spare you this once. Scram!"

The three informants rushed off as though they were afraid of Fang Yi changing his mind.

Next, Fang Yi turned back to the hundred-hunter group.

"Everyone, I think we've resolved the misunderstanding between us now. I, Fang Yi, assure you all that we'll be passing through the Labyrinthine Forest, but we certainly won't be conducting any large-scale hunts in the region. Indeed, unless we're threatened, we don't plan on hunting down any lifeforms here at all. I won't lie to you all: the reason we're here is to search for a few important herbs to brew an antidote."

Fang Yi patted his potbellied-toad pouch. "We're interested in these sorts of herbs. If you have any, we'll be willing to trade for them generously with points."

Yang Ze and Sun Xiaowu's eyes lit up, but the hunters of the Carter settlement all seemed quite shocked. The members of Team Zenith weren't here to hunt down any lifeforms at all—they just wanted worthless herbs!

Indeed, before the rise of pillmasters, the herbs that were scattered throughout the dimensional world could easily be acquired for a pittance compared to their true value, except for those whose potency and effects were obvious.

Quite a few of these hunters had acquired some of these herbs because they seemed potentially useful, but no one had been willing to buy the herbs from them. Now that the hunters from Team Zenith were here, however...

"I have some!"

"Me too!"

"Take mine!"

Li Youcai, who had been the leader of the group, again strode forward. "My team has all the herbs you need, but they're not with me—they're within the settlement. If you want any, I'd be happy to trade them to you once we return."

"Our team has some too! Let's head back to the settlement to trade." Li Youcai said what all of them were thinking. The fact that they had managed to make it so deep into the forest meant that their teams' strength was sufficient to explore the area, which also meant that they had likely gathered quite a few herbs from the region as well.

None of them had yet found any use for the herbs; either the herbs were going to remain in their storage cabinets forever, or they'd be sold to a few hunters who used them as feed for their summons. Who wouldn't want to sell them off if they could?

Fang Yi and the others were overjoyed by the enthusiastic response.

"Good, very good! In that case, let's head back to the settlement immediately."

The Carter settlement was about the same size as the Blacksteel settlement, with buildings constructed from the same architectural style. As the group of hunters returned to the settlement, Liu Hong, who was hiding in the Carter inn, learned of the bad news.

"Trash! They're all useless trash! How could they retreat with their numerical superiority?!" Liu Hong slammed a palm down on the table in anger.

"Don't be upset, Captain! It was a hastily constructed plan, and the members of Team Zenith did far too well during the Void Cup, so it's normal for regular hunters to be wary of them. Furthermore,

I'm not sure that's what we need to be worried about. Instead, now that Team Zenith knows that we were behind the misunderstanding, do you think they'll strike at us directly?"

"Ha! Do you think they could? Even if I can't participate in the Void Cup, I'll be able to ascend to the second realm of the dimensional world within a day or two. Once I'm there, with my brother to protect me, I won't have to worry about anyone or anything! But now that we've been found out, we'd better lie low for a few days. Wait for them to leave before we do anything else."

Liu Hong wasn't stupid; knowing that he wouldn't be able to overcome them in a contest of strength, he decided to avoid confrontation instead.

It wasn't as though Fang Yi and the others had time to deal with them, because they were now being surrounded by a veritable wave of hunters. Quite a few teams who had gone out hunting also quickly rushed back to the settlement to retrieve any herbs they might have stored away.

Fang Yi and the others were busy trading for herbs with hunters all over the settlement. Fang Yi's inspired idea had quickly netted them over five hundred sprigs of herbs. Of course, not all the herbs could be used in Potion #2, but they were all ones that Zhang Lie had brought up at some point. Most importantly, the hunters they were trading with clearly didn't know how to value their herbs properly, and they traded them away for a fraction of their true value.

Furthermore, there were still quite a few teams of hunters who hadn't heard about the news, so the progress that they had made today could also be replicated in the next few days. In addition, this procedure could even be repeated in other settlements, especially the smaller ones where few corporations had tried to do the same.

In their suite in the Carter Inn, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, and Yang Ze were all grinning happily.

"Fang Yi, you've really made life much easier for us! I'll head back to Earth and inform my sister about what's going on, so she can start using this method as well. As long as we can repeat this process in four or five more settlements, I'm sure we'll be all but finished with collecting ingredients for Potion #2!" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed.

"That we do, but don't get their hopes up too high. A large part of our success was due to luck, after all," Fang Yi replied with a smile.

Yang Ze whooped. "They might not get as lucky as we are, but it's certainly still faster than harvesting herbs on their own! No one really knows about the true value of these herbs, do they? I can't believe we've bought them all so cheaply! Go on, Sun Xiaowu! Let your sister know about the good news. If we hurry up, I'm sure we can finish collecting everything within the week!"

As night fell and Sun Mengmeng began sorting through her spoils with Zhou Ying and Li Feng, her transceiver suddenly started beeping like crazy.

"I apologize, but it looks like someone's looking for me urgently. Can I hand things here to the two of you for the moment while I return to Earth?"

She pulled out her potbellied-toad pouch as Zhou Ying and Li Feng both nodded. The moment she came out of the portal by the Zenith Dojo, she saw Sun Xiaowu by its side.

"What's the matter, Xiaowu? Why did you contact me so urgently?"

When Sun Xiaowu saw his sister come out of the portal, he said, "Well, it's for something big, of course. But before that, tell me just how many sprigs of herbs you managed to acquire today!"

"How many? About a few dozen, I'd guess. I was trying to sort through them when you suddenly contacted me, and I had no choice but to leave it to Zhou Ying and Li Feng," Sun Mengmeng replied, frowning.

Sun Xiaowu cackled in glee. "Ha! Guess how many herbs we acquired today!"

"Xiaowu, did you contact me just so you could boast? Looks like you must have gotten quite a few, then—say, two hundred?"

"Hah!" Sun Xiaowu laughed again, making Sun Mengmeng want to smack him in the face. "That's far too conservative an estimate!"

Sun Mengmeng's annoyance turned into interest. Two hundred herbs wasn't a small number; even in the vicinity of the Blacksteel settlement, a locale they were all familiar with, they would only get a hundred herbs a day at most.

"Alright, alright, just tell me how many you managed to collect!"

Sun Xiaowu smirked as he stretched out his palm.

"Fi-five hundred?! You aren't joking, are you?" Sun Mengmeng exclaimed in surprise.

"Of course not, Sis! I'm not kidding—we got at least five hundred in a single day!"

"Really?"

"Why else do you think I reached out to you so urgently?"

"Quick! Tell me how! Surely you didn't find all five hundred sprigs yourself?"

Sun Xiaowu explained to his sister Fang Yi's brilliant idea, causing her eyes to widen as she realized its implications. "Thank you, thank you, Xiaowu! I'm in the Godspath settlement now—I'll try to replicate Fang Yi's strategy and see if it works!"

Before her brother could respond, she darted back through the teleportation array.

Chapter 194: Concocting the Potions

Three days later, in a training chamber within the Zenith Dojo, Zhang Lie was interacting with his two disciples when his transceiver suddenly beeped.

"Captain, where are you? We've finished collecting the herbs!" Fang Yi shouted.

"Wait for me at the Blacksteel Inn." Instead of leaving immediately, however, Zhang Lie turned back to Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen.

Because Jun Jiuxiao was particularly agile and dominating in battle, Zhang Lie had recommended him the dojo's only dual-attunement technique: [Rondo of Wind and Storm].

On the other hand, Ye Xianchen boasted a surprising affinity with darkness-attuned genetic energy, and Zhang Lie eventually recommended her the pinnacle-grade [Tome of Darkness].

Zhang Lie had suggested that they pick their favorite techniques from the available selection before going over their choices with him. The two of them glanced at each other, then sat down obediently.

"Master, my framework may be [Rondo of Wind and Storm], but compared to Senior Fang Yi, I think I'm leaning closer to the wind-attuned side. As a result, I've chosen to split my techniques accordingly, with the wind-attuned [Blade of Heavenly Wind] as my blade technique, along with [Wind's Spirit] and [Floating Clouds] for my fist and footwork techniques, just like Senior Fang!"

Jun Jiuxiao's response was far more articulate and thoughtful than Zhang Lie had anticipated. After all, it was rare for a boy only ten years old to have such a clear sense of his future.

Even Zhang Lie praised him. "Jiuxiao, I'm glad you're so forward-looking. Since you already have a plan, I think you should do as you say."

Zhang Lie handed him a few microchips for the corresponding techniques, then turned to Ye Xianchen.

Somewhat nervously, she recited, "Master, I'd like to learn [Nightmarish Strike], [Fiendfire Claws], and [Nightwalker] for my sword, fist, and footwork techniques respectively!"

Zhang Lie glanced at her thoughtfully.

"I approve. The two of you have already made great strides with your foundation, so you can start learning your three techniques today. In two months' time, you'll be returning to the dimensional world to train there."

Zhang Lie handed Ye Xianchen the three microchips corresponding to her techniques.

"I'll be a little busy for the near future, so ask your two instructors if you need any help. However, be careful: neither of you have many gene fragments, and your framework and techniques are of a particularly high grade. The moment you sense discomfort in your body, stop cultivating immediately and alert me at once."

"Yes, Master!"

Zhang Lie nodded, then vanished from sight. By the time Zhang Lie returned to the suite that was permanently reserved for them within the inn, everyone else had already gathered and was boasting about their successes.

"Captain!" the hunters greeted him as he entered.

Zhang Lie could smell the mouthwatering aroma of barbecued meat, as though they had all just had a sumptuous feast. "Not bad, to have gathered all the herbs within a single week."

Hearing his skeptical tone, Yang Ze immediately challenged him, "You don't believe us, do you, Captain? Not only did we collect all the ingredients needed for Potion #2, we even ended up with quite a few of the herbs you told us about way back when!"

Zhang Lie smirked. "So you've found the shortcut, have you? I suppose the nearby settlements are all out of stock of herbs by now."

"You told us we could use any method we wanted, Captain!" Sun Mengmeng pointed out carefully.

Zhang Lie harrumphed. "Well, hand over the ingredients, then rent me the best underground laboratory in the inn. I'll see you in a few hours."

"Everything's prepared for you already, Captain! We've rented out Lab #3, and all the ingredients are there. Is there anything we can do to help? We'll be willing to do anything!" Fang Yi informed him.

Zhang Lie raised an eyebrow. "Help? Are any of you familiar with medicine or herbology?" Huffing, he turned and left the suite.

Entering Lab #3 and seeing the potbellied-toad pouches within, he found that the members of Team Zenith had arranged everything surprisingly neatly for him. All sorts of herbs filled each pouch, labeled and categorized neatly. Furthermore, the hunters had divided the herbs between those that would be used for Potion #2 and those that wouldn't, saving Zhang Lie quite some time.

Most importantly, of the other herbs that they had acquired, Zhang Lie found a few supplementary ingredients necessary for the scale-weakening potion. As a result, the moment the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion acquired the three second-realm poisons, he would be able to craft the potion immediately.

At present, however, his main task was to concoct Potion #2. As Zhang Lie's reserves of genetic energy grew larger, and his number of elemental attunements increased, despite the fact that he was working alone,

Zhang Lie finished preparing another brew of Potion #2 in just half an hour, far faster than he had done so the first time around. In the fume hood, three test tubes, one black, one white, and one empty, were secured in a test tube rack.

Zhang Lie wasn't as nervous as he had been the first time. At that time, he had no choice but to succeed; failure would mean having to start the hunt from scratch.

He picked up the two black and white test tubes with stable hands as he poured them symmetrically into the third, empty test tube. As the two herbal concoctions combined, gold fog wafted out of the third tube, causing a smile to appear on Zhang Lie's face.

He had succeeded! Once again, he had succeeded in brewing Potion #2!

What followed was the tedious process of repeating the same procedure five more times. Of course, no one could be entirely faultless, and even Zhang Lie failed because of a tiny misstep during his fourth try. After that failure, Zhang Lie grew even more careful, and he succeeded in concocting the rest of the potions in one fell swoop.

In the end, because there were ten batches of ingredients available, he used them all up to make three extra batches of Potion #2. Once everything was complete, Zhang Lie brought the potions back toward Team Zenith's suite. About five hours had passed since Zhang Lie left, and it was already very late at night, but the atmosphere in Team Zenith's suite still seemed to be booming.

"Captain!"

"Was the brewing process successful?"

Everyone rushed up and crowded around him.

"Yang Ze, aren't you speaking nonsense? When has the captain ever failed us? Of course he succeeded!"

"Right, Yang Ze, don't curse us with bad luck!"

"If only five potions were successful, you'll have to wait for next time, I'm afraid!"

Yang Ze's question instantly provoked outrage among the gathered hunters, and Zhang Lie laughed at their antics.

"Yang Ze, for daring to doubt me, you'll be the last to take the potion!"

"Ah, Captain, Master, no!"

"Don't try to deny it, Yang Ze, you knew what you were doing—everyone agrees!"

Everyone laughed as Yang Ze tried to defend himself, but they straightened up and listened with a serious expression on their faces once Zhang Lie began to speak.

"Alright, listen up. Potion #2's significantly stronger than Potion #1, so if you don't process the medicinal energy well, your life could well be in danger," Zhang Lie warned.

"First, I'm not kidding when I say that I want you to take turns consuming the potion. While you do so, I'll keep an eye on you to make sure that none of you suffer any accidents. Second, make sure that you're circulating genetic energy throughout your body during the process, no matter how much pain you're in. This will speed up the assimilation process and help strengthen your body immensely. Do you understand?"

Everyone nodded.

"In that case, let's begin. Who wants to be first?"

Chapter 195: Full Breakthrough

"I'll go!" Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng both shouted.

"Let's give priority to the ladies, shall we? Mengmeng, you can go first." Zhang Lie turned to the other hunters. "Before we come out, don't try to break in no matter what you hear!"

Zhang Lie brought Sun Mengmeng into the training chamber, where he handed her a bottle of Potion #2. "Drink this, then immediately start circulating genetic energy through your body."

The taste of Potion #2 was surprisingly sweet and buttery, so much so that Sun Mengmeng eyed Zhang Lie strangely as she downed the potion. Before she could fully appreciate the taste, however, the potion started to make its way through her body.

"Sit down and start cultivating!"

Moments later, the sweet taste had vanished. Sun Mengmeng's body was wracked with wave after wave of medicinal energy. They smashed against her body, causing her to howl out in pain.

As Sun Mengmeng momentarily lost control of her genetic energy, purple and black flames erupted over her skin. Sun Mengmeng could feel her body being taken apart and rebuilt by the force of the genetic energy, a process of such constant, unceasing pain that she felt her mind starting to dissociate.

"Focus, Sun Mengmeng! Circulate [Black Sun] at maximum intensity!" However, just as she felt her mind drifting away, Zhang Lie's voice pulled her back.

A pair of cold hands pressed against her back, causing her body to tremble. Her mind suddenly cleared, and she began circulating [Black Sun] as Zhang Lie had instructed. She suddenly found that her genetic energy, and the medicinal energy running through her body, seemed to have been reined in by a certain mysterious force.

As she circulated genetic energy through her body and the golden medicinal energy seeped into her cells, she could sense her cells breaking through their original limits. Her pores widened and contracted, her muscles spasmed, her arteries and veins and capillaries were broken down and reinforced. Her body seemed to be reforging itself on a fundamental, genetic level.

As she expelled her impurities, the domineering medicinal energy started to fade away, rushing into her deep red genetic core. In her core was a flaming, purplish-black sun. As the medicinal energy seeped into the core, her body began to glow with black light. Sun Mengmeng could visibly feel the purity of her genetic energy increase, conferring upon her a tremendous strength.

It was then that she realized why Zhang Lie had been so strong.

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

Sun Mengmeng: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Black Sun (intermediate)

Techniques: Flameburst Step (pinnacle), Lunarflame Shot (advanced), Baptism of Hellfire (intermediate), Firefeather Wings (intermediate)

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

Soulshards: Embersoul Archer (superior), Firebird (superior), Ardorcrown Monkey (superior), Deepflame Beetle (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Suddenly, she flushed red, finding herself naked. Before she could consider her circumstances further, however, a jacket was draped over her body.

"When you lost control of your genetic energy just now, your clothes burned to ash and soot," Zhang Lie explained. "However, everything is fine now. Congratulations on breaking through!"

The sound of Zhang Lie's voice coming from behind caused Sun Mengmeng to blush even redder. "Th-thank you!"

"There's no need for thanks. The moment you all entered the team, we became one big family." Zhang Lie patted her shoulder. "Take some time to freshen up. Don't worry—I won't let anyone else enter before you leave."

For some reason, as Sun Mengmeng saw Zhang Lie running out of the room flustered, she couldn't help but smile.

"Captain!"

"Captain, what's going on inside? Where's my sister?"

"Was the procedure successful?"

The moment Zhang Lie stepped outside, the other hunters, who were waiting by the door, thronged forward.

"There was no issue, but Sun Mengmeng needs some time to recuperate. Have you decided who will go next?"

After Zhang Lie brought Sun Mengmeng into the chamber, the rest of the hunters had decided on the order in which they would break through. By unanimous vote, Yang Ze was assigned last place because of what he had said previously, and Fang Yi, Li Feng, Sun Xiaowu, and Zhou Ying fought in a battle of wits to determine who would go after Sun Mengmeng. Li Feng eventually won out, and would be followed by Fang Yi, Zhou Ying, and finally Sun Xiaowu.

As they chatted with each other, the door to the training chamber opened up and Sun Mengmeng walked out.

"Sis!"

"Mengmeng?!"

Sun Mengmeng, in her deep red armor, looked as bright and radiant as the midday sun. The hunters gathered around here could barely believe that this hunter giving off such a scorching aura could be the usually gentle and polite Sun Mengmeng.

"Sis, how do you feel? Tell us everything!" Sun Xiaowu shouted, clamoring to be heard.

"It feels wonderful, as though my whole body has been upgraded and reworked. Once you experience the breakthrough for yourself, you'll see what I mean," she replied, but Sun Xiaowu's face turned glum.

After all, he would be second to last to experience the breakthrough for himself.

"I'll have quite a while to wait, it seems," he sighed lifelessly.

"Waiting a while longer won't kill you, will it? Mengmeng, head to a separate training chamber and familiarize yourself with the changes to your body. Li Feng, follow me!"

What followed was simple. After gaining experience dealing with Sun Mengmeng during her breakthrough, Zhang Lie handled the other hunters' breakthroughs with ease. As promised, the hunters felt as though they had become different hunters entirely.

Li Feng: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Arclight Dragon's Imprint (intermediate)

Techniques: Dragon's Triumph (intermediate), Light's Bulwark (intermediate), Daybreak (advanced)

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

Soulshards: Lightborne Beetle (superior), Radiant Salamander (superior), Owl of Wisdom (superior), Prismscale Wyrms (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Li Feng, who had been nothing more than an ordinary citizen before he met Zhang Lie, could hardly describe his feelings upon looking at his new data, and he swore that he would remain loyal to Zhang Lie for the rest of his life.

Fang Yi: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Rondo of Wind and Storm (advanced)

Techniques: Heaven's Judgment (intermediate), Wind's Spirit (intermediate), Floating Clouds (intermediate)

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

Soulshards: Shadowcrest Serpent (superior), Stormward Albatross (superior), Runetiger (superior), Thunderflash Mantis (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Just like Li Feng, Fang Yi gaped at his own data, but he quickly collected himself.

Zhou Ying: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Avatar of the Fae (intermediate)

Techniques: Storm of Leaves (advanced), Willow's Caress (intermediate)

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

Soulshards: Devil-Face Spider (superior), Forest Wolfman (superior), Butterfly of Decay (superior), Treeborn Leopard (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Zhou Ying glanced at Zhang Lie with ardor, tears brimming in her eyes. She was extremely touched by all that Zhang Lie had done for her and the rest of Team Zenith.

Sun Xiaowu: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Adamantine Aegis (intermediate)

Techniques: Golden Divide (intermediate), Goldenscale Palm (advanced), Blinding Flash (intermediate)

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

Soulshards: Gold-Limned Tiger (superior), Rampaging Rhinoceros (superior), Goldenhorn Beetle (superior), Iron Hog (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Glancing at his body disbelievingly, Sun Xiaowu likewise swore that he would dedicate his life to Zhang Lie.

Chapter 196: The Last Competitors

Yang Ze: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ripples of Shattered Glass (intermediate)

Techniques: The Boundless Blade (advanced), Fists of the Silent Sea (advanced), Mirrored Refraction (intermediate)

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

Soulshards: Tigershark (superior), Snapjaw Crocodile (superior), Deepsea Crab (superior), Windborne Eagle (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Of course, Yang Ze wouldn't lose out to the other members of Team Zenith in terms of loyalty. After all, without Zhang Lie's guidance, he wouldn't have gotten first place in the nationwide stage in Sacred Fire. He was the one who sought out Zhang Lie's help the most, as well as the only one who persisted in calling Zhang Lie Master. His loyalty toward Zhang Lie was self-evident.

After all six members of Team Zenith had successfully broken through, they would need to acclimate themselves to their newfound strength and acquire additional mutated gene fragments.

Meanwhile, Zhang Lie was contacted by the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion, which had successfully gathered the three poisons he required. He began concocting the scale-weakening potion immediately.

A week passed in the blink of an eye, and all that remained before the hunt of the moonlight wurm was an opportunity.

Zhang Lie and the others, who were all prepared for the hunt, spent the time leading up to it working with the disciples of the Zenith Dojo, filling up whatever time remained before the worldwide stage of the Void Cup. As Zhang Lie's name grew more and more famous, quite a few dojo instructors signed up to work with Zhang Lie, and the support staff in the dojo also filled out.

In a flash, it was already time for the worldwide stage to begin.

Zhang Lie snuck into the Holy Glory Academy wearing a disguise. Just as Zhang Hanxiang was about to return to her dormitory, her transceiver began to beep. When she saw just who was contacting her, Zhang Hanxiang's eyes turned round.

"Brother!" She hurriedly accepted the call, shocking the two friends that were with her.

They knew of her brother's identity, of course; as Zhang Lie's name spread through the capital, Zhang Hanxiang also became quite famous in the academy, and a number of Zhang Lie's diehard fans began to organize a bodyguard schedule for her.

The two classmates accompanying Zhang Hanxiang were naturally two such bodyguards.

"Where are you?" Zhang Lie's familiar voice came from the transceiver, causing the two guards to turn toward the device with mutual fascination.

"I'm in the academy, of course! And what about you, Brother? It's been so long since you've come to visit! Where are you?" Zhang Hanxiang replied.

"I'm at your academy, and I just left your classroom. Where are you?"

"What? Really? Brother, you've really come to the academy? I'm right outside my dorm!"

"Give me a moment. I'll be right there!" Zhang Lie cut the connection; moments after that, a mysterious figure darted to their side out of nowhere.

"Brother!" Even though Zhang Lie was disguised, Zhang Hanxiang still recognized him immediately. Directing her wheelchair in his direction, she quickly rushed over.

Zhang Lie immediately stooped down and embraced his sister.

"Look, it's really Zhang Lie, the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Ah, it really is him!"

Zhang Hanxiang's two companions were wide-eyed in shock.

"Shh!" Zhang Hanxiang immediately shushed them, indicating for them not to spread the word, but one of the fans was so excited that she fainted at the sight.

Zhang Lie had never chased stars before, and he didn't understand their mindset. Whenever he saw news articles about them, he would always find them funny—and he could hardly believe something like that would actually happen in front of him.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Qingqing, I'll have to leave Lizi to you! Brother, what are you doing? We'd better hurry up and leave before you end up attracting too much attention!"

There were quite a few people by the entrance to the dormitory, and Zhang Hanxiang's guards' stifled cries had nonetheless drawn some attention to the two of them. Students were walking closer to Zhang Lie to try and see what had happened, and it was likely that they would soon be bombarded with attention.

Zhang Lie blinked and quickly reacted. Grabbing onto Zhang Hanxiang's wheelchair, he rushed off with her into the midst of the gathering crowds.

"Ah, where's Zhang Lie? Where's my idol?"

"He ran off! Look there!"

"What amazing footwork!"

"I can't stand this any longer! I'm going to switch my major to focus on becoming a hunter—I want to enter the Zenith Dojo and take Zhang Lie as my master!"

"Hoh! Do you think you can succeed? I want to have his babies!"

The female dormitory seemed to have turned into a talent competition, but the protagonist of the whole affair had long since departed. By a coffeeshop far from the outskirts of the campus, Zhang Hanxiang let out a giggle as she stared at the hastily covered-up Zhang Lie.

"Brother, your appearance now is really quite amusing!"

"Alright, alright, stop making fun of me. How've you been these days?"

"I love it here, Brother. There's always news about the amazing things that you've been doing, so how could I be anything but happy? I'm just a little disappointed that you didn't inform me about your starting up a dojo, or becoming the champion of the Void Cup..."

"I'm sorry, Hanxiang, but there was a reason—"

"I know! I know you're protecting me, Brother, but that's why I feel helpless—I shouldn't need your help," Zhang Hanxiang murmured.

"You've really grown into an adult, haven't you, Hanxiang? Do you have any suggestions in mind? I'll try my best to satisfy them."

"I'd like to enter the dimensional world as a hunter in my own right, so that I can help you," Zhang Hanxiang replied, causing Zhang Lie to frown.

"I'm sorry, Hanxiang, but I won't be able to satisfy your request now. I'll definitely become the champion of the worldwide tournament and get the materials I need to cure you of your paralysis. Only then will I allow you into the dimensional world!"

"In that case, I'll hold you to your word, Brother. I'm sure you'll become the champion. Then, will you explore the dimensional world with me?" Ever since her childhood, Zhang Hanxiang had dreamt of being able to walk and run like a normal human being.

"I promise. I'll always be by your side, and I'll support you no matter what."

"Thank you, Brother!" Zhang Hanxiang pulled her brother in for another hug.

The two siblings' only family was each other. The reason Zhang Lie had sent Zhang Hanxiang to the Holy Glory Academy was because of her desire to study, and because he felt it important for her to interact with more people beyond just him. It would help her broaden her horizons and mature as an adult, and it seemed as though his plan had worked flawlessly.

After accompanying Zhang Hanxiang for a little while longer, Zhang Lie left the academy.

The worldwide stage of the Void Cup would be held tomorrow in Northern Europe, in Odinstadt. Hunters from over a hundred nations had already gathered there, and the other Chinese representatives, Chu Feng and Yun Bing, had also arrived three days ago. Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith were a few of the only remaining participants who had yet to arrive.

The worldwide stage of the Void Cup was a huge affair for the galaxy at large, and the tournament would start at about the same time on each planet. During this period of time, the first realm of the dimensional world would be unusually empty, and this would be Zhang Lie's opportunity to hunt down the moonlight wyrm.

Although Zhang Lie was quite confident of his success, the moonlight wyrm was ultimately a peak-grade lifeform, and he was expecting the match to be rather time-consuming. As a result, he had no choice but to wait until the Blacksteel settlement was devoid of hunters; otherwise, if someone else were to steal the kill from him at the last moment, he would have wasted all his efforts.

Team Zenith had been waiting for Zhang Lie by the portal to the dimensional world. The portal suddenly buzzed, and Zhang Lie's familiar figure appeared by the teleportation array.

"Captain!"

"Master!"

"You're finally back!"

Everyone crowded around him.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting. Let's go!"

Just as the hunters of Team Zenith gathered by the array, however, Zhang Lie's transceiver suddenly began to beep. Zhang Lie chuckled bitterly when he saw who the caller was.

"Zhang Lie! What's going on? Don't you know what time it is? Where are all the hunters of Team Zenith? This is the worldwide stage! Don't you have any respect for authority? Get over here now!"

Everyone could hear Yan Long's howl even from a distance, but Zhang Lie still seemed calm and unperturbed. "Don't worry, Commander! The tournament starts tomorrow, doesn't it? We'll surely arrive before then!"

Chapter 197: Hunting the Moonlight Wyrm

Zhang Lie hung up amidst six shocked faces, then activated the teleportation array to send them all to the dimensional world. With a flash, Team Zenith appeared once more in the Blacksteel settlement.

As expected, no one was present when they arrived.

"Captain, wasn't that Commander Yan Long? Are you sure it's alright to just hang up on him like that?" Fang Yi asked cautiously.

"There's no problem at all—at worst, we'll apologize to him tomorrow. It's far more important that we manage to take down the moonlit wyrm today."

They passed through the Blacksteel settlement and found, to no great surprise, no hunter at all present.

"Captain, you were right—there really is no one around!" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed.

"Of course! The Void Cup happens only once every five years, and it's a massive event both in the real world and the dimensional world. This is particularly true on the eve of the worldwide stage, and essentially all hunters will be taking this opportunity to relax and watch the tournament. We should be thankful for this—otherwise, it really wouldn't be easy for us to hunt down the moonlight wyrm unnoticed." Perhaps because everything was going according to plan, Zhang Lie patiently explained the thought process behind his decision.

The hunters encountered no one else at all as they traveled to their destination, the Moonlit Pond.

"Alright, everyone, get in position!" Zhang Lie whispered. The hunters of Team Zenith split into two groups, flanking the Moonlit Pond from the left and the right.

As they had planned, the left flank would harass and distract the wyrm, and would comprise Yang Ze, Li Feng, and Zhou Ying. The right flank would focus on auxiliary damage, and would comprise Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and Sun Xiaowu.

The main attacker, Zhang Lie, was hovering by the top of the waterfall. After confirming that everyone was in position, he retrieved two large potion bottles, one an acid green, the other speckled with dark flecks. He poured both into the Moonlit Pond. The green and black potions dyed the clear water a ghastly dark green.

At the same time, Zhang Lie began to circulate genetic energy throughout his body, preparing for the moonlight wyrm's emergence. The rest of Team Zenith did the same.

Moments after the potions filled the pond, a huge bubble of air emerged from its center, and the prepared hunters immediately vanished from sight.

An enraged roar shook the whole forest. The next moment, a pure-white wyrm emerged from the pond within sight of everyone. Its scales seemed like white jade, and it had a small horn sticking out of the top of its head. Its rage and anger were evident on its face.

The moment it headed out of the surface of the water, Yang Ze, Li Feng, and Zhou Ying immediately began to strike. Zhou Ying would be leading the attacks, with Yang Ze and Li Feng aiding her from behind.

Activating her devil-face spider, forest wolfman, and blood ant soulshards, she cried out, "[Avatar of the Fae: Dance of the Earth Dragon]!"

Two jade-green dragons darted out of her hands like two beams of light. When the moonlight wyrm, its pure-white scales already starting to be speckled with black, discovered her presence, it shot out two arrows of water to counter her attack.

The two wood dragons splintered, but the momentum of the water arrows was hardly reduced. Yang Ze and Li Feng hastily stepped forward, intending to counter the blow.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Earthbound Prison]!" Zhou Ying stomped on the ground, her feet seemingly becoming rooted. The patch of ground beneath and all around her began to glow green, and hundreds of jade-green roots flew into the air, rushing toward the moonlight wyrm.

Although the water arrows were strong, the sheer number of roots managed to overwhelm the attack, causing the arrows to disperse into mist in mid-air.

The moonlight wyrm roared at Zhou Ying, its tail whirling around the surface of the water, generating countless miniature black wyrms to strike back at Zhou Ying's roots. As the attacks clashed with each other, slivers of wood and splashes of water flew toward each of the hunters.

As expected of a peak-grade lifeform, even with the aid of Li Feng and Yang Ze, Zhou Ying was ultimately unable to deal with the moonlight wyrm's attack, and dozens of the remaining black wyrms rushed toward Zhou Ying.

However, Zhou Ying had planned for this eventuality. The trees around her suddenly began to wither, their mass forming into a gigantic forest wolfman tens of meters tall. He was formed out of solid, dark-green wood, with golden, resplendent armor covering his body and spikes protruding out of his flesh. From appearance alone, he was a force to be reckoned with.

As he howled, a pair of golden swords suddenly materialized in his hands. He smashed apart all the black wyrms heading in his direction, then turned to the moonlight wyrm and sent a few slices of sword energy in its direction.

The dramatic rise of the forest wolfman instantly caught the moonlight wyrm's attention. This time around, instead of using a technique, the moonlight wyrm met him with its body, all its attention focused on this newfound foe.

It smashed apart the forest wolfman's attack with its tail, but the moment it did so, the three hunters on the other side of the pond made their move. A bird's cry pierced the skies as a tricolored firebird

appeared behind the moonlight wyrm. It was doused in wind-, fire-, and thunder-attuned genetic energy, with an aura no less strong than the wolfman from before.

The moonlight wyrm instantly recognized the threat.

At the same time, Zhou Ying continued launching even more attacks. A dozen wood dragons launched out of the earth by the side of the gigantic wolfman. The golden swords in his hands turned blood-colored: it was evident that the three hunters, currently seated by the top of the forest wolfman's head, had activated their mutated blood ant soulshards.

With wood dragons by the surface of the pond, a bloody greatsword by its front, and a firebird coming from behind, the moonlight wyrm seemed to be in dire straits. The next moment, however, the water in the Moonlit Pond suddenly streamed out of the pond. The force of the water splintered Zhou Ying's wood dragons, and it even forced the three hunters' combined sword technique back.

The tricolored firebird was quenched instantly, but the arrow still managed to break through countless layers of water and strike the moonlight wyrm's flank.

It howled in rage at the fact that it had been hit by a lowly hunter's attack; despite the fact that Sun Mengmeng's arrow had only barely scratched its skin, the moonlight wyrm was enraged that it had managed to achieve even that much. It roared up at the skies, then summoned a huge torrent of genetic energy with which it seemed poised to launch at Sun Mengmeng.

However, just as it was glaring at Sun Mengmeng, another figure appeared between its eyes. With this figure's appearance, the glowing moon in the sky was replaced by its bloody twin. A winged tiger roared; as bloody ripples spread through the air, the moonlight wyrm, whose body was starting to feel numb, suddenly felt a sense of unease.

"[The Boundless Blade: Requiem of the End]!" That moment, a violet-black shooting star headed toward its right eye.

As expected of a peak-grade lifeform, it was able to react even to such a sudden attack, but its hasty defenses were no match for the blow that Zhang Lie had been charging up for ever since the start of the battle.

As Zhang Lie thrust Venombane into the moonlight wyrm's eye, the sword technique composed of three elements rampaged its body.

Chapter 198: A Curious Misconception

Almost as soon as Zhang Lie's strike landed, the moonlight wyrm began to writhe in pain, opening its maw and trying to strike at Zhang Lie's head with its long tongue as it did so.

Zhang Lie frowned. In an explosion of genetic energy, he transformed into a blood-colored wolfman, his body adorned with a suit of silver armor, gold wings spread out wide open behind him. Compared to the gigantic wolfman that Zhou Ying, Li Feng, and Yang Ze had combined to pilot, Zhang Lie's wolfman form was smaller but also more agile.

With Venombane, Zhang Lie defended himself against the wyrm's tongue, remarking at how tough it was. As he fended the tongue off, he launched a bloody dragon in the wyrm's direction. "[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!"

The wyrm howled, and the water in the Moonlit Pond again rose up at its will. It formed a belt of water under the moonlight wyrm's control, defending itself against Zhang Lie's attack.

However, the moonlight wyrm had still underestimated Zhang Lie's attack. His framework now combined three elemental attunements, and its resulting strength was far superior to what the moonlight wyrm had anticipated.

As a result, its defensive technique failed completely, and the bloody dragon took barely a moment to break the barrier of water and smash against the moonlight wyrm's head. The wyrm screeched, the scales on its head corroding in wisps of black smoke. Black blood leaked out of its ruined eye, and its majestic features were now all in tatters. The moonlight wyrm felt a sense of primal fear for the first time.

As it tried to retreat back into the pond, attacks came at it from the left and the right. From the left, the gigantic wolfman had somehow sprouted wings of light, and was heading right for the wyrm. On the right, nine blueflame phoenixes shot toward the wyrm, their strength incomparable to Sun Mengmeng's previous attacks.

"[Storm of Leaves: Void Cut]!"

"[Lunarflame Shot: Ninefold Phantasmagoria]!"

The gigantic wolfman swung its blade from some distance away; nevertheless, the blade suddenly appeared by the moonlight wyrm's side, as though the distance between them were immaterial.

The moonlight wyrm screeched again as its scales broke against the attack. The force of the attack propelled it upward, causing its intention to retreat back to the depths of the pond to fail.

At the same time, the nine phoenixes struck its face, causing the wyrm to keen in agony. Blood streaked down the rest of its once-immaculate body, but Zhang Lie frowned at the sight. Something was wrong—the wyrm was too weak!

Although it had broken through the limits of a superior-grade lifeform, it wasn't peak-grade yet. Furthermore, it seemed to be a bit slimmer than the wyrm he had seen the last time around. Could there have been multiple wyrms in the Moonlit Pond?

Zhang Lie, who was supposed to follow up with an attack, instead hesitated for a moment, giving the wyrm some room to breathe. It cried out, disgorging a beam of white light from its body, purifying and nullifying all domain effects in the immediate vicinity.

The next moment, it darted back into the pond and began fleeing into the deep trench at the very center. Although Zhang Lie was still unsure about just what was going on, he followed suit without any hesitation.

"Wait for me here. Prepare for another fight at any moment!"

He darted into the water so quickly the members of Team Zenith couldn't say anything to him. The water had become murky because of the poisons he had poured into the pond, but Zhang Lie was resistant on account of his framework being water-attuned. At his stage of development, he could even be considered an anthropomorphic aquatic lifeform.

He navigated the perturbed waters based on the fluctuations of genetic energy and the scent of blood that the injured moonlit wyrm gave off. It was currently diving deep into the pond, so quickly it seemed almost like a ray of light. However, Zhang Lie wasn't much slower. Circulating [Ninecarp Transformation], he followed behind the wyrm like a black piranha.

Because the wyrm was injured, the distance between it and Zhang Lie was steadily narrowing. In a matter of moments, Zhang Lie was close enough to strike. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Waves of force punched through the water. Although he was too far from the wyrm to do substantive damage, he could at least slow down the wyrm even further, but the wyrm retaliated with attacks of its own, repelling Zhang Lie with flamboyant waves of its tail.

The distance between the two creatures remained at around thirty meters; Zhang Lie wasn't able to close in, but neither could the wyrm escape his pursuit. Both of them were diving even deeper into the pond, so deep the water had regained its clarity.

Zhang Lie was only able to identify how deep they were going because of the steadily increasing water pressure, which wasn't a good sign for him. Although Zhang Lie's elemental attunement was compatible and his stats were high enough that the water pressure was unlikely to be a burden, it would certainly reduce his agility and strength in a battle.

The moonlight wyrm had impressive defensive capabilities; if Zhang Lie had to expend much of his genetic energy just to deal with the water pressure, it would be hard for him to trap the wyrm here.

He reactivated the blood ant soulshard that he had deactivated the moment he dove into the water, and his body immediately became suffused with a bloody glow, raising his speed almost fivefold.

In a matter of moments, Zhang Lie had caught up to the moonlight wyrm. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Rise]!"

Before the moonlight wyrm could react, it felt a tremendous pain by its lower jaw, a blow directed at it with such force that he was propelled upwards. Despite the fact that it was running away so quickly, the wyrm was inflicted with heavy wounds and copious toxins throughout its body, so it had little offensive power left.

Furthermore, the moment Zhang Lie caught up, he activated [Eclipse] once more. The bloody moon caused the genetic energy supporting its body to falter as it drained away.

The moonlit wyrm keened once more, its final defense, causing rings of white light to shine around it as it purged the debilitating effects in its vicinity. Even Zhang Lie's [Eclipse] was dispelled, but the moment it did so, Zhang Lie struck at it again with [The Boundless Blade], piercing through its lower jaw.

This time, the moonlight wyrm didn't even have energy to struggle. Zhang Lie's sword technique exploded in its head, killing the wyrm instantly.

Shockingly, the moment the wyrm perished, genetic energy condensed by the horn on its ruined forehead, producing a white-jade soulshard, a soulshard from the moonlight wyrm itself! Zhang Lie had hardly anticipated that he would be so lucky.

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

However, his excitement didn't last long. A... superior-grade moonlight wyrm? Just what was going on? Wasn't this supposed to be a peak-grade moonlight wyrm?

It really was weaker than he had anticipated, but the will of the world had used an unusual adjective, 'liminal'. Could he have been mistaken? Was this really the only moonlight wyrm in the Moonlit Pond?

Despite the unusual classification, the moonlight wyrm had only given superior-grade rewards. That implied that the moonlight wyrm was still technically a superior-grade lifeform, and had yet to evolve into a peak-grade one.

Perhaps this was because the first realm of the dimensional world wouldn't allow the existence of peak-grade lifeforms, but even so, it was far stronger than an ordinary superior-grade lifeform, which was likely why the will of the dimensional world evaluated it as 'liminal'.

But something was still strange. He was certain the moonlight wyrm he had encountered was a peak-grade lifeform... Could he have been mistaken because he was too weak then?

In truth, even Zhang Lie himself was confused as to what was going on. However, this wasn't a good environment in which to ponder such a question. Zhang Lie would swim back up to the surface before thinking further about this.

With the moonlight wyrm's carcass in his hand, he began swimming upwards. What he didn't notice was the blood seeping from the moonlight wyrm's mouth as he continued to swim, causing a large air bubble to rise from the depths of the Moonlit Pond.

Chapter 199: The Peak-Grade Lifeform

As the air bubble grew larger and larger, a sound could be heard from deep within the trench.

Something's wrong! Zhang Lie swam even faster toward the surface, but the moment he did so, a howl came from beneath the surface of the water, filled with boundless rage. It was evident that there was another moonlight wyrm living at the bottom of the Moonlit Pond.

As he sensed its fluctuations of genetic energy, Zhang Lie's face fell. This was a peak-grade lifeform, there was no doubt about it! Zhang Lie turned around to see what seemed like a white beam of light rushing toward him.

He couldn't fight the wyrm underwater, no—Zhang Lie circulated his genetic energy as quickly as he could as he rushed upward to the surface of the pond. When he dove down, he was chasing a moonlight wyrm; now, as he rose up, he was being chased by one.

Zhang Lie had noticed its presence while it was quite some distance away, and he wasn't too much slower than the wyrm at full speed, so it wouldn't be easy for the wyrm to catch up immediately.

Above the pond, the other hunters of Team Zenith were waiting for Zhang Lie to emerge somewhat languidly. From their perspective, the fight was already over, and the will of the world had informed them of their contribution in taking down the moonlight wyrm.

"Do you feel like something was wrong?" Just like Zhang Lie, Fang Yi was a little concerned about the fight from before, which had seemed a little too easy.

The members of Team Zenith had split into two groups, one to restrain the wyrm's motion, and the other as an auxiliary attacker. Zhang Lie had struck at the moment at which it was weakest... but could a peak-grade lifeform be defeated just like that?

In their training exercises, Zhang Lie had emphasized just how dangerous the battle would be, but they hadn't had much trouble at all.

"What's wrong? Didn't you hear the announcement from the will of the world just now? The moonlight wyrm's dead, and it even condensed a soulshard!" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed. "Yang Ze, you're water-attuned—do you have a guess as to the utility of this moonlight wyrm soulshard?"

Sun Xiaowu unintentionally changed the topic.

Yang Ze thought for a moment. "Perhaps a weapon-type soulshard? Or maybe the purifying ability that the moonlight wyrm demonstrated..."

"That really does sound plausible," Li Feng agreed.

However, before their train of thought could continue, Zhou Ying interrupted them. "Fang Yi, I think you're right. The moonlight wyrm from before was too weak. Didn't we all hear what the will of the world stated? It was a liminal superior-grade moonlight wyrm, and it gave superior gene fragments and a superior-grade soulshard.

"However, the captain told us that our opponent would be a peak-grade lifeform, and he told us to be prepared to be injured! Most importantly, before he dove into the pond, he told us to be ready. I think he might also have noticed this discrepancy, so we shouldn't take it easy!"

Her argument shook some sense into the other hunters.

"You're right, Zhou Ying! We'd better take some of the potions we prepared to restore our genetic energy," Sun Mengmeng replied. She immediately took out a potion and drank it, as did the other hunters.

As they were doing so, Zhang Lie, dragging the moonlight worm's carcass behind him, broke through the surface of the water.

"Spread out! Get far away from the pond. Prepare for battle!" he shouted immediately.

The hunters followed his command and retreated. From a distance, Fang Yi shouted, "What's going on, Captain?"

"There's more than one moonlight wyrm. A peak-grade one's chasing me right now. Get into the six-element formation!"

Rather than quailing in fright, however, the hunters' eyes all glimmered with excitement. There really was a peak-grade lifeform that they were about to face!

A geyser of water erupted from the pond, followed by a long keen that shook the earth and sky. Everyone could clearly sense the wyrm's explosive anger. This wyrm was just a bit larger than the previous one, but the genetic energy fluctuations it gave off were at least a magnitude more intense.

As the wyrm broke through the surface of the pond, Zhang Lie tossed aside the moonlight wyrm's carcass that he was still holding.

"Get into formation!" he shouted again. Zhang Lie stood in the middle of all six hunters, who released their genetic energy all at once. A surprisingly intense aura emanated from the center of the formation where the energies combined, giving off multicolored ripples of light.

The six hunters channeled their energy into the formation, causing radiant light to glow from underneath their feet: flames in purple and black, the jade-green energy of life, gold, sharp and resplendent, the purest white light, rampaging thunder in silver, and palliative blue water.

Six elements traced out a runic formation as they spread toward its center, where Zhang Lie was standing in an inferno of dark genetic energy. A red-and-black winged tiger darted down from the skies as a starry sky enveloped them all. A bloody moon ascended to primacy, causing an unbelievable pressure to descend over the Moonlit Pond.

The moonlight wyrm, which had discovered its targets, reacted near-instantly. A thin spray of water shot out of its mouth, so quickly it broke through the sound barrier. It seemed to skirt by the constraints of space and time, appearing almost immediately in front of Zhang Lie's sight.

However, Zhang Lie was prepared for it. The six-element formation countered the attack; the moment it entered [Eclipse]'s domain, its potency began to deteriorate, and it had lost about half its momentum by the time it reached Zhang Lie.

Nevertheless, Zhang Lie didn't take the attack lightly. Summoning all his genetic energy, he struck at the arrow with his left palm, causing the winged tiger to claw at it with its left paw as well.

With a great splash, water-attuned genetic energy exploded into the air, seemingly splintering the very fabric of the world itself. The hunters' eyes widened at the sight. This was how strong the attack was even after it had passed through the six-member defensive array?! If they hadn't gotten into formation, they would likely have perished from the attack.

In truth, Zhang Lie had seen just how strong this attack was before.

In the past, just one beam of water that the moonlight wyrm had casually shot out was sufficient to kill Zhou Qian and cripple Qin Xiao, and the resulting attack still had sufficient energy to cause an avalanche when it hit one of the mountains in the area. This time, the wyrm was completely enraged when it struck, and the attack would only be stronger as a result. Fortunately, Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith now had the strength to resist such an attack.

Of course, as a peak-grade lifeform, the moonlight wyrm had more potent attacks than just a beam of water. After its long-ranged attack failed, the moonlight wyrm ascended to the skies like a jade dragon. As it made use of its full strength, its body swiftly began to grow, until it was a hundred meters long.

Opening its maw wide, it struck at Zhang Lie, intending on devouring him in a single bite.

The six hunters forming the defensive perimeter felt a near-intolerable wave of pressure overwhelming them. The defensive array began to crack with the force of the moonlight wyrm's blow.

"Everyone, activate your blood and soulshards. Use your reserves of genetic energy to reinforce the array now!" Zhang Lie called out.

The next moment, under Zhang Lie's direction, a bloody pillar of genetic energy spiked into the sky, a devastating attack formed from the combination of six elements.

The moonlight wyrm shrieked in pain, and the hunters suddenly found themselves relieved of the pressure that had almost overwhelmed them.

Writhing in pain, the moonlight wyrm reared back, its maw corroded and its flesh decaying. The moonlight wyrm had paid a price in its rashness at trying to seek revenge for its mate, but this price amounted to little more than a superficial injury for it.

"We won't be able to hold out against it in a drawn-out battle. We have to attack in earnest!" Zhang Lie commanded.

Chapter 200: Giving Your All

"Use all your genetic energy. Let's end the fight as quickly as we can!" Zhang Lie's eyes glinted with excitement. In quick succession, he activated his forest wolfman, flamewing eagle, runic salamander, and blood ant soulshards.

The dazzling glow of the activated soulshards surrounded Zhang Lie, turning him into a gigantic wolfman almost ten meters tall. The moment the wolfman emerged, a ring of wind surrounded him, and black runic patterns crawled up his skin, causing his muscles to bulge. A bloody mist dyed his fur red and strengthened his genetic energy fluctuations by almost an order of magnitude, so much so that space began to distort around him.

The bloody moon in the sky, as well as the shadow of the winged tiger, began to expand, causing the domain to cover a region almost a kilometer wide. Within this patch of land, lifeforms began to slump over, trees began to decay and wither, and the ground turned dry, cracked, and arid, as though the vitality they possessed were being quickly transferred to the massive wolfman.

Shining silver armor appeared over the wolfman's body, and he held an exquisite violet shortsword in his right paw. Zhang Lie's aura was no less commanding than the moonlight wyrm's itself.

All this happened in the blink of an eye, while the moonlight wyrm was extricating itself from the six-element formation.

"Kill it!" he howled. "[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!"

As Zhang Lie leapt into the air, the ground cracked where he stood. Frightening pressure from [The Boundless Blade] poured out of him like a tidal wave. An underworld river formed from thin air, rushing toward the moonlight wyrm in a torrent.

Enraged that a lowly human would dare challenge him, the moonlight wyrm roared, but it could clearly sense the changes in Zhang Lie's strength. As a result, it didn't dare strike so carelessly any longer. Raising its maw to the heavens, it breathed out a pure-white mist, crystallizing the air and turning it into a heavenly river.

Compared to Zhang Lie's underworld river, which corroded and decayed all that it touched, the wyrm's heavenly river purified and cleansed everything. As the two attacks clashed against each other, waves of genetic energy spread through the air. The ground rumbled, as though there were an

earthquake; space seemed to collapse where the two attacks met. However, neither attack could dominate over the other, and the two rivers eventually faded away together.

At that moment, Zhang Lie grasped the belt of wind floating around him, imbued it with his three-element attunement, and sent it flying at the wyrm. At the same time, he leapt up once more and activated [Mirrored Refraction], his humongous body dissolving into countless afterimages.

The moonlight wyrm spat out a fusillade of water arrows at the chakram, which ultimately lost all its momentum from the wyrm's counterattack. However, the fact that the wyrm had to defend itself against that blow earned Zhang Lie plenty of time for his next move.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" Before the wyrm could retaliate, a bloody dragon was already dashing toward it, followed quickly by Zhang Lie himself. Venombane glittered with the coldness of death, and Zhang Lie had already charged up [The Boundless Blade: Requiem of the End].

However, despite being faced with Zhang Lie's potpourri of attacks, the wyrm merely stretched out and howled, coalescing what seemed to be an air bubble around itself. Zhang Lie struck at the bubble, but instead of breaking it, the attack was flung backward by the recoil. The rebounded attack struck a small hill and smashed it into flat ground.

The only trace that the bubble had been attacked was a slight distortion in the membrane.

Zhang Lie widened his eyes at the unusual bubble, but continued his attack regardless. "[The Boundless Blade: Requiem of the End]!"

After realizing how elastic the bubble was, however, Zhang Lie imbued his attack with as much of the winged tiger's sharpness as he could. The bubble resisted the blow for a brief moment, but ultimately burst like a balloon that was popped by a pin, negating much of the attack's force as it did so. The moonlight wyrm ducked to avoid the blow, then lashed out with its tail.

Zhang Lie reacted quickly, but it still knocked him back. Luckily, he had concentrated his white-grub armor by his chest, so the lash didn't lead to a particularly devastating injury; however, the wolfman transformation he had applied to himself was forcibly canceled as a result of damage to that form.

The six hunters still fuelling the formation from below groaned, but they transferred more and more energy into the formation to speed up Zhang Lie's recovery.

However, the peak-grade moonlight wyrm certainly wasn't going to give up on such an opportunity to strike. Flicking its tail, it darted forward and shot out a breath of cold air. Before the attack could land, however, Zhang Lie suddenly extended a pair of bladed wings out of his rapidly rematerializing wolfman form.

The icy breath catapulted Zhang Lie backwards and slammed him into the ground, but the wings that had folded protectively around him negated much of the injuries that he would otherwise have suffered. Regardless, he was certainly at a disadvantage, because the moonlight wyrm was drawing near. Its tail was raised high up in the air, and genetic energy streamed off its body.

If this tail strike were to land, Zhang Lie would surely be flattened into nothing more than a pancake. The six hunters watched on breathlessly, unable to help more than by channeling into the formation at full power.

"Stay strong, Captain!" Fang Yi shouted, wind and storm crackling around him. Within the domain of [Eclipse], the obsidian spear that had been stuck in the ground now shot toward the moonlight wyrm's right eye.

Opposite him, Sun Mengmeng shot a purple firebird toward the moonlight wyrm's left eye.

Yang Ze concentrated on the formation, focusing as much on the healing and regenerative powers of water as he could.

Zhou Ying leaned down and dug her hands into the ground, forming a gigantic jade-green shield by Zhang Lie's side.

Sun Xiaowu punched at the ground, trying to cause Zhang Lie's location to shift relative to the wyrm's attack.

Li Feng was the closest to Zhang Lie, so he focused on sending a flare of light toward the wyrm, trying to distract it and affect its vision.

However, because the moonlight wyrm was a peak-grade lifeform, and because they had to focus most of their attention on maintaining the formation, the hunters were limited in terms of what they could do.

Although they had all activated their genetic energy, they made little impact on the wyrm itself. Fang Yi's spear and Sun Mengmeng's firebird were wiped out by the vortices of water surrounding the wyrm, whereas Sun Xiaowu's fist didn't have much of an effect on the ground close to Zhang Lie at all.

Zhou Ying's shield and Li Feng's flare of light were, in the wyrm's eyes, nothing more than childish tricks. Its tail would overcome even Zhang Lie's bladed wings, let alone Zhou Ying's shield. As for Li Feng's misdirection, the peak-grade moonlight wyrm had such developed senses that it would be able to attack Zhang Lie even without its vision.

As its pearlescent tail made to strike, the force of the attack seemed to distort space itself. It was so quick that it sent soundwaves through the air, causing Zhang Lie's wolfman transformation to explode as his aura vanished.

There was no blood, no broken limbs—it seemed as though the moonlight wyrm's attack had annihilated him whole. The six-element formation, of which he was the center, broke apart. The moonlight wyrm looked to be the battle's final victor.

"No, Captain! This is impossible!"

"Captain!"

"I won't believe this!"

"Captain, how could you lose? Stand up! Stand back up!"

The moonlight wyrm roared in triumph, announcing its strength to the world.

