

U. Warlord 211

Chapter 211: The Ignorant Have No Fear

Yan Long's intentions were straightforward: Zhang Lie was Chinese, and the limit fragment research that he had come up with belonged to him and him alone. China wouldn't allow its citizens' private property to be stolen, not by petty thieves, other nations' governments, nor even the world federation itself.

Even if northern Europe were to take the lead against China, not many other countries would join in the fight; it would simply be too risky, and China had made a name for itself as a difficult enemy to handle.

Furthermore, given the galactic situation, it wasn't a good time for an internal conflict—there were quite a few alien races paying careful attention to Earth, and conflict now would give them the opportunity to strike.

The hosts of the tournament were simply prodding Yan Long to get a sense of just how valuable this research on limit fragments was. Given Yan Long's response, it was clearly so high as to be incomputable—he was willing to make enemies of a dozen countries worldwide to protect and safeguard this research.

"General Yan Long, do you intend to take responsibility for your words?" asked the mayor of Odinstadt, General Hill.

Many of the top officials of northern Europe looked toward Yan Long following General Hill's words, but Yan Long only smiled. "I am a general of China, after all. Of course I'll take responsibility."

Was Hill planning to start a war? Well, Yan Long didn't fear him—and Hill wouldn't dare to do so, regardless! China had bolstered its power by sending its citizens into the dimensional world, and it wasn't a country that could be attacked at will.

"Northern Europe and Asia have been in a cooperative relationship for quite some time, and northern Europe certainly won't violate the harmony between us. Of course, we'll still have to report this to the world federation, and we'll be carefully observing what happens next. General Yan, I hope you won't regret your words today."

Hill desperately wanted to obtain the research on limit fragments that China possessed, but he knew that it would be meaningless to continue arguing with Yan Long. What he had to do now was to report this information to—and hence pass the buck to—his superiors.

"No amount of pressure from the world federation will cause China to relent. As for you of northern Europe, well, if you make this decision knowing that it'll sour relationships between us, I hope you won't regret your decision either."

Yan Long left the room. He rushed straight for the Chinese competitors' prep room. Yun Bing had just returned after defeating her opponent, so everyone from the Chinese delegation was present.

"Get over here, Zhang Lie, I have a question for you!" Yan Long shouted the moment he arrived, without any time for pleasantries.

Zhang Lie stood up and followed him to one corner of the room, as did Su Feng, noticing that Yan Long seemed to be particularly harried.

"Zhang Lie, you rascal, did you make a new discovery related to limit fragments? Team Zenith, Chu Feng, Yun Bing—none of these hunters used to be this strong, did they? In the last match, Chu Feng admitted that he had over fifty limit fragments. What's going on?!"

Zhang Lie glanced surreptitiously at Chu Feng, understanding the situation almost immediately.

Other countries were eyeing his successes, weren't they? More specifically, they were eyeing Potion #1. Zhang Lie had planned on announcing the news regarding Potion #1 during the worldwide stage, but he hadn't expected things to develop so quickly. Well, even if that were the case, he had nothing to hide.

"That's right. Recently, I had a breakthrough with my research, and I was able to develop a potion that raised the basic gene capacity even further—Potion #1!"

Su Feng and Yan Long glanced at him. They had guessed that something like this had occurred, but the extent of Zhang Lie's success was ridiculous. He had developed a potion that could allow a hunter to break through the basic gene limit once more?! If it were anyone else, they would have claimed that it was impossible, but for Zhang Lie...

"Just what sort of effect does this potion have?!"

"It permanently raises your basic gene capacity by fifty, to a maximum of a hundred and sixty," Zhang Lie explained, causing both generals to take a step back in surprise. Even though they were prepared to hear something extraordinary, the effect of the potion still shocked them both—no one knew better than the two of them just what this potion could mean for all of China.

"Fifty basic limit fragments? That—no wonder all of you went undefeated! Doesn't that mean that our hunters will have a natural advantage over everyone else? So that's why Chu Feng was able to beat Charles Murphy!"

Su Feng heaped lavish praise on Zhang Lie, and while Yan Long didn't speak, his trembling fingers were testament to his excitement. At that very moment, Yan Long knew that he had to keep Zhang Lie affiliated with the Chinese military.

"Can it be produced in bulk?" Yan Long asked.

This time, however, the answer left him disappointed. Zhang Lie shook his head. "Definitely not, at least not in the short term. This potion requires more than a dozen herbs, and although most of these herbs can be cultivated, this will have to be a long-term project."

The two generals frowned, but relaxed almost immediately afterwards. Zhang Lie had said that it wasn't possible in the short term, but over the long term...

The two generals' breathing became rather rapid.

"In that case, are you cultivating these herbs at the moment?" Su Feng pressed.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Unfortunately, I've been very busy dealing with my dojo's affairs, and then the Void Cup—"

"Cultivate these herbs immediately! The sooner the better—what could be any more important?" Su Feng shouted urgently.

"One month or two won't make a big difference. We can discuss it after the Void Cup, if you'd like," Zhang Lie replied, seemingly unruffled.

"Oh? You already have a plan, don't you?" Yan Long's lips quirked up in a bitter smile.

As a hunter, Zhang Lie had the highest growth potential he had ever seen. It was fortunate for him that he was from China, or Yan Long would have sacrificed just about anything to destroy him before he blossomed into his full potential as a hunter. Even now, as little more than a fledgling, he was already shocking the world, so what could he accomplish in the future?

Had he really acquired some lost inheritance of his father's, as the rumors claimed? The military had investigated Zhang Lie's missing father before, but it was almost certain that his father wouldn't have been strong enough to obtain such a miraculous treasure.

Regardless, all that could be dealt with later. What was most important was the world federation's scrutiny, which would imminently land on Zhang Lie.

Before that, Yan Long had to confirm one thing. "If you already have a plan for mass-producing these potions, we don't have to discuss them for the moment. Are you the only one who knows the recipe to make this potion?"

Zhang Lie nodded immediately. "Of course."

"Very good. The fewer people who know it, the better. Does anyone outside of Team Zenith, excluding Chu Feng and Yun Bing, know about Potion #1?"

Zhang Lie glanced in Chu Feng and Yun Bing's direction. "A few of the elites of the Chu and Yun clans, I'm sure. I had initially wanted to work with them to organize a large-scale auction in the real world to acquire some rare herbs for future study, but I elected not to do so given their lack of support during my dojo's opening ceremony."

Yan Long and Su Feng's eyes widened. An auction—had this brat really been about to try something like that? Even rumors of this supposed Potion #1 would lead to intense scrutiny by enemy factions, let alone an auction in which these potions were the centerpiece!

Luckily, the auction had been canceled, or even Yan Long wouldn't have known what to do...

Chapter 212: Equivalent Exchange

"Lad, you should be glad your auction didn't actually happen—otherwise, both the Yun and Chu clans might be gone by now! No, not just those clans—all of China would be shaken to its very core because of these potions of yours!" Yan Long exclaimed.

Were matters as serious as he had described? More so, in fact—this could be seen from the reactions of the tournament hosts. After all, this was a potion, something every hunter could consume without having to sacrifice their hard-earned power or start anew, as with the foundational breakthrough.

This implied that any hunter, not just a first-realm one, would be able to benefit from the potion. It would be a treasure wondrous beyond all measure, and those who owned such potions would easily be able to overwhelm enemies that they would otherwise be unable to defeat.

Yan Long was very glad that the plans for the auction had been scrapped and that the two clans had been smart enough not to advertise the news beforehand. Otherwise, the outcome would have been disastrous.

"Zhang Lie, listen up—from now on, the Chinese military is officially hiring you as the lead researcher in charge of these limit fragments. You'll be instated in this position immediately after the Void Cup ends. No matter what sort of research you want to perform, no matter what rare ingredients you need, the soldiers of China will do their best to fulfill your every request.

"From now on, all your research will be of China's highest confidentiality, and I hope you'll keep things a secret. I'll address the members of Team Zenith, Chu Feng, and Yun Bing regarding this matter as well. Do you understand?" Yan Long pressed, causing both Su Feng and Zhang Lie to look on in shock.

Zhang Lie blinked a few times, surprised by the extent of Yan Long's reaction. "Is it so serious, Commander?"

In his past life, Zhang Lie hadn't been anywhere near the apex of power, and his intuition about such matters wasn't anywhere near as sharp as Yan Long's.

"Of course! Chu Feng mentioned that he had over fifty limit fragments in his last match, and the other hosts of the tournament applied pressure on me immediately to get me to spill the beans. The world federation's highest authority will soon be involved in this matter. Do you realize how serious this is now?"

Zhang Lie recoiled in shock. He had expected that Potion #1 would cause a stir in the hunter community, but not such a major one. Yan Long had clearly intended this new "job" as protection for Zhang Lie, and Zhang Lie would gratefully accept.

"I apologize, Commander Yan. I didn't realize how serious this discovery would be, and—"

"Enough! Now's not the time to apologize, and word would have spread anyway. With the Void Cup, your ridiculous talent and strength would have made itself known regardless, so just focus on the competition. We'll handle the rest! Before that, however, tell me—how many of these potions do you have at the moment?"

"Fewer than 20," Zhang Lie replied, causing Yan Long and Su Feng's eyes to narrow.

Twenty potions? They both knew that Zhang Lie wasn't likely to be entirely truthful. Adding the potions that all the members of Team Zenith, Chu Feng, and Yun Bing had consumed, it was likely that Zhang Lie had made over fifty such potions in all.

The two generals fell silent. Fifty miracle potions...

"Alright, we'll discuss this later. Make sure word of this doesn't spread to anyone else!"

"Yes, Commander!"

Yan Long hurriedly left the room, while Zhang Lie and Su Feng informed the other competitors of what they had settled on.

Very quickly, the third individual round began. As expected, Zhang Lie, the members of Team Zenith, Yun Bing, and Chu Feng all won quickly and decisively, but none of them spoke a word to

their competitors. They got on stage, motioned politely for their opponent to strike, and then vanquished them in a single blow.

The remaining three matches followed similarly. They defeated each and every opponent with just one blow, no matter whom they were facing, no matter how significant their reputation, no matter how strong they were.

It felt as though the eight Chinese representatives had total control of the tournament, and they all entered the team round with a perfect score. In fact, because of how quickly they defeated their opponents, the competition that day finished ahead of schedule.

The team competition would only begin tomorrow, so they could either remain to watch the other competitors or return to their hotel to rest.

Yan Long and Su Feng naturally took them back to the hotel; there was nothing interesting to be seen, and they both knew just what kind of storm was brewing beyond the horizon, hidden by a temporary calm.

Deep in the Milky Way floated a magnificent palace constructed for the world federation. The highest authorities in the world federation stayed in this palace. These authorities consisted of the three to five strongest hunters from each planet out of the billions of humans living all across the Milky Way. Earth was host to four such hunters, all of whom received a notification from Earth almost simultaneously.

Naturally, this notification dealt with Zhang Lie, as well as the theory of limit fragments that he had pioneered. It was then that Zhang Lie officially entered the eyes of the top monarchs from Earth.

"Zhang Lie, limit fragments? Hmm..."

Within the floating palace, the only authority from China, the martial sage Hong Tianqi, murmured to himself after a call from Yan Long. A few seconds later, three pairs of footsteps came from outside his estate.

"Have tea ready for our guests, Nuo!" Hong Tianqi called out, a broad smile plastered on his face.

The other three authorities from Earth, Wilson Peters, Gresham Anderson, and Jill Rodney were here to pay him a visit.

"Hong, it looks as though you've received the news, haven't you?" Wilson Peters called out.

"Yes, I have. Please, have a seat." Hong Tianqi motioned to the square table in the salon, on which a pot of steaming tea had just been prepared.

"Authentic xianzong tea," Hong Tianqi informed them. "It'll be ready shortly."

The three authorities' eyes lit up. Jill Rodney, seated opposite him, murmured, "I've wanted to try this famed brew for quite some time! It looks like I'll finally be able to do so today."

"Jill, we're not here just to have some tea, are we?" Gresham Anderson cut her off with a look of impatience, unappreciative of this so-called xianzong tea. He turned to their host. "Hong, you should know why we're here, don't you?"

Hong Tianqi settled down calmly, placing a teacup in front of each guest and then filling them up in turn. A pleasant scent emanated from the jade-green tea, causing all three guests to sniff appreciatively.

"I do know why you wanted to talk, but I must admit I'm not certain of your objective. Well, let's have at it, then. What would you have me do?" Hong Tianqi asked pleasantly, taking a small sip of tea.

"Hong, this isn't a trifling matter. First, we do have to thank China—this discovery will easily augment mankind's abilities to a new level. What you have to do, first and foremost, is to publicly release the fruits of Zhang Lie's labor. We need to know just how he's done it—this is too important an accomplishment to be left in the hands of one individual or one country.

"Next, in order to further the research as quickly as possible, researchers from all over the world should be brought together; let this development be spearheaded by the Chinese youth who discovered it all, in hopes that he'll make another breakthrough to benefit all of mankind!" Wilson Peters urged. However, his words caused a frown to mar Hong Tianqi's face.

Jill and Gresham nodded in agreement with Wilson Peters' words.

"Shall I summarize what you've asked of me, then? First, to hand over the results of private research, and second, to hand over the genius researcher who came up with this work for you to imprison. Is that right?" Hong Tianqi spoke, his placid voice somehow sending warning bells ringing in the other authorities' heads.

"Hong, that's a rather uncharitable interpretation of our words, isn't it? We're doing this for the good of mankind—" Jill Rodney began, but Hong Tianqi interrupted her halfway through.

"On what grounds?" Hong Tianqi's eyes glimmered with light, and space seemed to freeze.

Wilson Peters, Gresham Anderson, and Jill Rodney found that none of them were able to move even their pinky finger, while Hong Tianqi slowly poured himself more tea. Jade-green drops of tea splashed into his teacup, beautiful, mysterious, and with potent strength.

"What could your countries provide that China cannot? Zhang Lie can spur the growth of humanity right where he is. If you'd like the fruits of his labor, you had best come prepared with a trade that would satisfy him."

Chapter 213: Martial Sage Hong Tianqi

The three authorities suddenly found the constraints of space holding them in position vanishing.

"Hong, you-you've broken through?!" Jill Rodney exclaimed.

Hong Tianqi smiled without answering the question. "I hope you'll all take my words to heart."

"No! No! No! Hong, this is unfair! You have to maintain order on Earth!" Wilson Peters shouted, and Gresham Anderson nodded in agreement.

"That's right, Hong! If we handle this inappropriately, it's possible that Earth might become enmeshed in conflict—"

"Enough. Whether or not there ends up being internal conflict will depend on you, not me. I appreciate that you have all reached out to me beforehand, but China won't be threatened by the

likes of you. If you'd like to cooperate, I hope you'll be able to come up with terms that are satisfactory to all of us. My attitude won't change, not now, nor in the future.

"Nuo, see the guests out!"

Thus ended the meeting between the four authorities of Earth. Wilson Peters, Gresham Anderson, and Jill Rodney glanced at each other, then walked out of Hong Tianqi's estate. They hadn't expected to be able to strongarm him into submission, but this level of resistance was beyond them.

Hong Tianqi had broken through—he had become the second person in the entirety of the world federation to pass over that vaunted boundary. At this point, China had nothing to fear, not even if the heads of the world federation stepped in.

In the end, the authorities did nothing. The future development of this research would depend on the reaction and behavior of the world leaders back on Earth.

In Team Zenith's suite, everyone stood at attention as they faced a holographic projection of Hong Tianqi.

"I've dealt with the other three authorities, Yan Long. I doubt they'll do something reckless."

"Yes, Authority!" Even Yan Long was deferent in front of Hong Tianqi, let alone the hunters of Team Zenith. The others might not know just who Yan Long was speaking to, but Zhang Lie was certain that this was the strongest hunter of China, even of Earth—Hong Tianqi, martial sage!

"Very good. I'll leave the rest to you, then. You'll likely be forced to release at least part of the research, but try to keep the core of it hidden."

"Yes, Authority!"

Hong Tianqi then turned to Zhang Lie and eyed him somewhat appraisingly. "Are you Zhang Lie?"

"Yessir!"

"Do you have any objections to this plan?"

"No, sir!"

Zhang Lie truly respected Hong Tianqi from the bottom of his heart. In his past life, Hong Tianqi had perished to stop the Ming invasion, sacrificing himself to kill the god-emperor of Ming in the cold depths of space. In this life, he had been a tremendous help in relieving the pressure that Zhang Lie would otherwise face.

"Very good. I was nowhere near as talented as you in my youth, so I'm looking forward to your future. May I have a bottle of your Potion #1?"

Everyone's eyes widened.

"O-Of course!" Zhang Lie replied with a stammer.

"Don't worry—I don't intend to take it from you for nothing. Tomorrow, after the Void Cup's over, have Yan Long take you to my personal treasury."

Yan Long and Su Feng's eyes bulged, neither of them expecting that Hong Tianqi would be so generous.

"Yes, Authority!" Zhang Lie replied. He didn't know much about this treasury, but given Yan Long and Su Feng's reactions, he could tell that this deal was weighted heavily in his favor.

"Well, that's all from me. Grow up quick, won't you?" The holographic projection turned off, and Hong Tianqi's figure vanished.

The hunters all heaved a sigh of relief and slumped.

"Even his projection was stressful to face—I didn't even dare move my fingers!" Chu Feng exclaimed, walking toward a nearby sofa.

The others all did the same, rubbing their shoulders and thighs as though they had stood still for quite some time, despite the fact that the conversation had only lasted five minutes at the most.

All the hunters present were capped-out first-realm hunters, and fatigue from standing was hardly a thing any of them had to worry about. More important was the mental pressure they faced.

When Hong Tianqi appeared, it was as though space had frozen all around them.

Zhang Lie turned to Su Feng. "Commander Su, what was this treasury that was mentioned? Both you and Commander Yan seemed to be very shocked, so..."

"Brat, you don't know just how lucky you are! That treasure—"

"Su Feng! Tell him about this later—he'll know once he sees it," Yan Long interrupted. "What we need to discuss is how to handle the other countries' requests regarding Zhang Lie's research.

The authority made this quite clear—it's impossible to keep the whole thing under wraps, so we have to reveal at least a little, but what should we reveal, and how? Zhang Lie! Do you have any idea?"

Zhang Lie thought for a moment, then smiled. "Isn't that straightforward? If everyone wants these potions, then we'll hand them over. After the Void Cup ends today, hand them this list of herbs."

He passed a list over to Yan Long, then added, "I'll be happy to exchange one potion for ten sprigs of each herb on that list."

It was obvious that Zhang Lie was treating this opportunity as free labor to acquire various herbs in great quantities. Of course, these countries would be experimenting with these herbs immediately in order to discover the formulation for themselves, but doing so in the short term wouldn't be possible.

Not only would this curb their cries for fair treatment, Zhang Lie would also make a killing from the transaction. Even an amateur like him knew that brewing one such potion wouldn't require a thousand sprigs of herbs, and he had to admire Zhang Lie's ingenuity.

However, he would still need to check that the recipe couldn't be reconstructed from this list of ingredients so easily. After all, several of the strongest countries would quickly be able to obtain a few potions for themselves, and if they managed to acquire the recipe...

Yan Long hesitated for a moment after looking at the ingredients, but Zhang Lie reassured him, "Don't worry. They won't be able to reconstruct it in the short term, and by the time they do, the recipe will be worthless." Zhang Lie smiled devilishly.

"In that case, we'll go with your suggestion."

All that remained was for the hosts of the various countries to come over to beg the Chinese delegation for these potions. At present, they were speaking with their own authorities.

Wilson Peters' face appeared on a holographic projection facing Hill, who was looking at him with a hopeful expression on his face. Peters had bragged that he would easily be able to force China to cooperate, but given how the situation had evolved...

"Commandant Wilson, has the Chinese authority agreed to release the information?"

Hill had prepared for the worst the moment he saw the commandant's expression, but the affair was so important that he had no choice but to ask regardless.

Wilson shook his head, frustrated. "No. China's authority has recently broken through, and none of the three of us were able to do anything about him. However, he did promise not to interfere, and that you would be able to trade for the information."

"Trade for the information? How?" General Hill asked again.

"How should I know? Go ask the Chinese delegation!" Commandant Wilson hung up in exasperation before General Hill could respond.

Chapter 214: Cheap Laborers

The other two authorities advised their respective hosts in much the same way that Commandant Wilson advised General Hill, returning agency to Zhang Lie, Su Feng, and Yan Long.

Around half an hour later, there was a knock on the door to Yan Long's suite. Glancing at Hill, Carrey and hosts from the eight other strongest countries behind them, Yan Long began to smile.

"Ah, what's going on? You've all come over to visit?"

Su Feng seemed rather surprised that all ten hosts had come over together. He knew that they would approach him or Yan Long sooner or later, but not in such a united fashion.

"Isn't it better for all of them to come together? It means we have to talk less, at least." Yan Long pushed the door open.

"General Yan Long, we haven't disrupted your rest, have we?" Hill inquired politely, his tone now reconciliatory rather than interrogative.

"If I said it did, would you depart?" Yan Long retorted, an ugly expression on his face.

The ten representatives began to frown, but Yan Long was right: they couldn't back down now, not when so much was at stake.

Eventually, Su Feng broke the stalemate, taking his role in their good cop-bad cop routine naturally.

"Stop it, Yan Long, they're all guests. Please, enter."

The representatives had successfully entered Yan Long and Su Feng's suite, but the intense aura which had shrouded them had all but dissipated.

There was barely enough space on the large sofa for five people, let alone ten, but everyone still squeezed in together. If they didn't obtain anything from the Chinese delegation today, they were certain they would fall behind the others.

"Are you all here regarding Zhang Lie's research on limit fragments?" Yan Long asked a question he knew the answer to.

The representatives glanced at each other; General Hill replied with a resounding yes.

"Haven't I already explained my thought process?" Yan Long's face turned ugly once more.

"General Yan Long, we apologize. We shouldn't have approached you with that sort of attitude, so please calm down. However, we had no choice. This research on limit fragments is simply too valuable to keep secret, and all our countries need it urgently."

"Right, General Yan, please don't reject us. Give us an opportunity to make things up!"

Hill, Carrey, and the other representatives all suddenly seemed eager to please, causing Yan Long and Su Feng to exchange satisfied smirks.

"Indeed? How convenient it is that you only remembered this now! This research on limit fragments is one of China's top-secret projects, developed by the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie himself. Do you think it's something you can get in on just by asking?"

Despite their attitude, Yan Long remained resistant to their plans.

Su Feng jumped in at an opportune moment. "Yan Long, calm down! Perhaps cooperation's out of the question, but we're still willing to accept an equal trade, aren't we?"

Su Feng's words caused the other representatives' eyes to light up. Indeed, they could trade for something of equal value! Everyone began thinking about what research their countries were conducting, and whether it would be significant enough to merit such a trade... but then they slumped back down into the sofa.

Nothing they had could even compare in value to these so-called limit fragments!

Hill, who led the other representatives, murmured uneasily, "General Su, I'm afraid we don't have any research of equal value to Zhang Lie's work on limit fragments, so—"

"So you intend on stealing this research for nothing? Is that it?" Yan Long interrupted impatiently.

"No, no! General Yan Long, you misunderstand my words. We're certainly willing to trade for it, but because we don't understand what this research entails, we don't know what to offer in trade," Hill replied diplomatically.

"Let me clarify, then. The result of all this research is a miraculous potion."

"A potion?!" The representatives were rather shocked; After all, pillmaking was still in a fledgling stage of development at this point in time, and most gene-enhancing techniques involved directly editing DNA to correct any deficiencies and perfect one's gene line. This was the case with England's gene-splicing technology.

"Indeed, a potion!" A blood-red potion appeared in Yan Long's hands. "This potion, Potion #1, will raise a hunter's basic gene capacity by fifty points!"

"What? Fifty points?! That's ridiculous!"

The foundational breakthrough that Zhang Lie had promulgated had only raised the basic gene capacity by ten, and it wouldn't be a decisive advantage, but fifty basic gene fragments was a significant amount.

None of them had expected that it would be so easy to obtain fifty gene fragments—all they had to do was down a small potion! If this potion truly were so miraculous, they had to acquire its recipe at any cost!

"General Yan Long, the effects of this Potion #1 are truly mindblowing. Can we verify its results for ourselves?" General Hill proceeded cautiously, hoping to get a free sample or two out of Yan Long.

"Verify? I think not!" Yan Long replied, huffing. "If you don't believe my words, you're welcome to leave."

But what could Hill say in response? If he left now and missed out on such a miraculous potion...

"No, General Yan, I don't mean to doubt you! It's just that—"

"Enough! You all see what you're trading for, don't you? I'm happy to accept anything of equal value," Yan Long broke Hill off brusquely, then restated the terms of the trade.

The representatives of each country began to mull over just what they could provide in exchange; from their perspective, once they acquired the potion, they would easily be able to reconstruct the recipe.

In the end, it was Hill who spoke up again. "General Yan Long, all I can think of is to trade you the herbs that would constitute this potion for the potion itself!"

This was exactly what Yan Long and Su Feng wanted.

"To trade us the herbs?" Yan Long pressed, pretending to be confused.

"Yes," General Hill affirmed. "Put simply, we'll provide the herbs and an additional fee besides to exchange for the potion in your hand!"

The other representatives also began to nod, thinking that this would be a viable proposition. Yan Long hesitated, as though he weren't sure of the proposal. He ultimately turned to Su Feng, as though asking for his opinion.

Everyone's gaze fell on Su Feng.

"This would work, and Zhang Lie's amenable to it, but..." Su Feng seemed to want to say something more, but hesitated.

The other representatives all sucked in a breath, waiting for Su Feng to continue, but he simply shut his mouth and waited.

The impatient Carrey called out, "General Su Feng, what additional requirements is Zhang Lie asking for? We'll do our best to satisfy them!"

"Right, General Su Feng, please tell us!"

In the end, Yan Long finally said, "Potion #1 simply requires quite a lot of ingredients."

The representatives relaxed. This wasn't a serious issue at all! Of course such a miraculous potion would require a considerable number of ingredients, and their countries' treasuries and storehouses did contain quite a decent number of herbs. Before the invention of Potion #1, these herbs were only useful as mediocre substitutes for standard medicine at best, and exchanging them for Potion #1 was surely a worthwhile trade.

"Don't worry, the herbs won't be a problem!" Hill shouted before Su Feng could change his mind.

Su Feng nodded, then handed each representative a copy of the list that Zhang Lie had prepared.

"Ten sprigs of each herb on this list will be sufficient to exchange for one bottle of Potion #1. The trade will take place in the Blackdragon settlement in the first realm!"

Chapter 215: Matters on Mars

The representatives' eyes bulged, then they rushed forward to grab a copy of the ingredients.

"There's no rush—everyone can get one!" Su Feng reminded them with an avaricious smile.

When they finally saw the herbs on the list, however, their faces changed. There were no fewer than a hundred different herbs listed, many of which they hadn't even heard of. In that case, they would need to trade over a thousand sprigs of herbs for one bottle of Potion #1. It was obvious that this was many times the number of herbs that would actually go into making the potion, but what could the representatives do?

They departed in droves after a hurried farewell, leaving Su Feng and Yan Long alone in the suite.

"I can't believe they were chomping at the bit to get their hands on such a terrible deal," Su Feng murmured.

"Who could resist the temptation of an unconditional fifty basic gene fragments? We'd do the same if we were in their shoes!" Yan Long cackled, overjoyed with how the tables had turned.

These fellows had all banded together to threaten him just a few hours ago, but now? Yan Long was pleased just thinking about their faces when they begged him for charity!

"Shall we have a taste of this potion for ourselves, then?"

After sending the representatives off, their part in this problem was all but finished. They had managed to acquire a potion each from Zhang Lie, though at no small cost. Because of Hong Tianqi's example, the two of them both promised Zhang Lie a favor in exchange for the potion; Yan Long even said that he would help be a matchmaker for Zhang Lie.

That one of the three most influential soldiers in the Chinese military would promise such a thing shook Zhang Lie to his core, but in the end, both commanders walked away with their own bottle of Potion #1.

As they downed the potions, their faces flushed red, and they barely suppressed the urge to moan in satisfaction. Two fearsome auras swept over the entire hotel, but which vanished the very next moment.

Both commanders settled down and began to cultivate in earnest, digesting the effects of their newfound strength.

The ramifications of Zhang Lie's discovery had subsided, at least for the moment.

This event fundamentally changed the worldwide stage of the Void Cup. The competitors who had once been arrogant to Zhang Lie were now perfectly polite and respectful to him, and those teams that encountered the Chinese competitors in the teamwide round would surrender immediately.

They had given up on the top eight positions and were fighting for the two remaining slots to advance to the galactic stage instead. It took only a morning before Zhang Lie and the others were crowned as the top eight hunters of Earth, and after the remaining two hunters were chosen, the worldwide stage of the Void Cup ended in a rather comical fashion.

On Earth, Yan Long, Su Feng, and Hong Tianqi had stepped in to protect Zhang Lie and the other Chinese competitors; however, on Mars, Yang Ze had no such advantage.

After winning battle after battle on the worldwide stage, Yang Ze found himself surrounded by a number of Martian representatives, led by his own father, the head of the Yang clan, Yang Feng.

Yang Ze's face turned serious as he regarded the dozens of representatives before him. He had expected something like this to happen when he dominated the competition, but not so quickly.

"Yang Ze, won't you tell your father how it is that you've grown so much stronger than the other competitors despite the fact that you're all peak first-realm hunters?" Yang Feng questioned him carefully, his tone polite and caring, but shot through with undertones of self-interest.

In particular, his main goal was to identify the reason behind Yang Ze's strength.

"To be frank, I'm a bit disappointed to see you here, old man. I was granted this strength by my master, Zhang Lie, and I have no intention of sharing that information with you. You did house me for sixteen years, so I'll say one more thing: don't try to probe or pry into this affair, or you'll regret it."

"Hoh? Clan Head Yang, it looks as though the rumors are true indeed. Can't you even take control of your own son?" a bronze-skinned man beside Yang Feng spoke up, as if deliberately trying to provoke him. His name was Gu Tong, head of the Gu clan, which was on rather fractious terms with the Yang clan.

"There's no need to concern yourself with Yang affairs," Yang Feng replied acidly.

"Do you think I'm afraid of you, Clan Head Yang? Try me on if you dare!"

Yang Feng was about to retort when he was interrupted by another clan head.

"Shall we get back to business now? Really, the two of you have lived for over a century combined, so why are you still so childish? Yang Ze, explain your strength, or you won't be allowed to remain on Mars any longer!"

"Indeed, I had better leave. Aren't you embarrassed that you all—heads of the major clans of Mars—are ganging up on a lone hunter, a member of the younger generation, like me?"

"Yang Ze, as your father, please, listen to me. Answer our questions, and I can protect your life. Otherwise, even if you're the champion of Mars in this iteration of the Void Cup, you won't be able to survive!" Yang Feng urged, threat and genuine affection mingled together.

After all, if possible, he didn't want Yang Ze to perish here. Given his strength, he would surely be a pillar of the clan if he were willing to remain.

"Protect my life? My life is hardly yours to control, but if you insist, I'll share a few small details. You've seen Team Zenith on the news for killing a mysterious lifeform on the eve of the worldwide stage of the Void Cup, haven't you? Are you aware of the legendary moonlight wyrm in the first realm of the dimensional world? It turns out it's a peak-grade lifeform."

With that, the Martian clan heads turned silent, staring openmouthed at Yang Ze.

A peak-grade lifeform?! That was impossible—the first realm of the dimensional world only supported superior-grade lifeforms at best!

Many of the leaders thought that Yang Ze had to be lying, and that even the legendary moonlight wyrm could hardly have reached peak-grade. After a century of exploration, the rules of the dimensional world had been made clear, and there had never been any suggestion that they could have been broken.

Could the legendary moonlight wyrm really have overcome the boundary between superior- and peak-grade?

On the other hand, if Yang Ze weren't lying, everything would make perfect sense. If he really possessed peak gene fragments as a first-realm hunter, it was only natural that he would be able to dominate over the other competitors.

"You... really possess peak gene fragments?!" Yang Feng asked.

"Of course I do— but there's nothing for you to worry about. No matter what becomes of me in the future, it'll have no bearing or relationship to the Yang clan at all. Well, now that you all know the answer, feel free to leave. It's not a strategy that any of you can replicate, after all."

The gathered clan heads scowled. If Yang Ze was being truthful, then indeed, his route to strength couldn't be replicated.

Clan Head Gu cursed as he turned to leave, followed rapidly by many of the others. Indeed, they had all seen the news regarding Team Zenith, and the moonlight wyrm had been a legend even during their time in the first realm of the dimensional world. Quite a few of them had even dared to challenge it, but none had succeeded.

"Congratulations, Clan Head Yang! To have a scion obtain peak gene fragments in the first realm— why, his future will be immeasurable!" Several of the clan heads congratulated Yang Feng before they left; from their perspective, regardless of whether Yang Ze admitted it or not, the blood of the Yang clan still ran in his veins.

Just as they were departing, however, the clan heads' transceivers beeped almost simultaneously: the news regarding limit fragments had spread beyond Earth and straight to Mars.

They stopped and turned back around, glancing at Yang Ze, wondering what information they could glean from him. After all, he had claimed to be a disciple of Zhang Lie himself.

At the same time, Yang Ze's transceiver also began to beep.

Chapter 216: Assembly of Masks

"Information about Potion #1 has been released to the public. Authorities from the world federation are on their way, so be careful!" The message was naturally from Team Zenith; the sender was nominally Fang Yi, but the tone was undoubtedly Zhang Lie's.

Team Zenith must have been pressured to reveal information about Potion #1, which meant that he would be the hunter most at risk. Zhang Lie and the others would be protected by the Chinese officials, so the only target was him, alone on Mars.

Given Yang Ze's understanding of Zhang Lie, even if some information had been leaked to the public, Zhang Lie certainly would keep core details under wraps.

"Young Master Yang, it's true that we won't be able to replicate your success with peak gene fragments, but what about this potion that we've all just heard about?" Clan Head Gu asked. He was the first to leave, as well as the first to return.

The other clan heads all stared at Yang Ze, trying to glean something from his expression.

Unfortunately, Yang Ze didn't seem at all anxious. He smiled thinly. "It's true that I'm one of Zhang Lie's disciples, but I've only been his disciple for three months or so. Do you think my master would reveal something so important to me? I'll be clear: I consumed one of these potions, but I hardly know anything about its recipe or production."

The clan heads deflated. Indeed, Yang Ze's words were sensible. It wasn't a secret that he had been chased out of the Yang clan, and it had been just over three months since he had left. Based on the reports they had all received, Zhang Lie had only made this discovery recently, and it was reasonable that Yang Ze would know nothing about it.

Of course, even so, he surely had more information about it than the clan heads did. Clan Head Gu reacted quickly, his face threatening as he walked up to Yang Ze. "Young Master Yang, it looks as though you don't quite understand your own situation. I'm warning you, tell us everything you know about these potions—or else! You've heard of the Gu clan's [Heart of Scorching Inferno], haven't you?"

[Heart of Scorching Inferno] was a secret technique of the Gu clan, a vicious fire-attuned technique that inflicted torturous pain on its opponents.

"Clan Head Gu, I hope you won't treat my politeness as weakness. Let me repeat myself: I know nothing about the creation of these potions! Ignoring my status as a competitor in the Void Cup, would you truly dare to torture me knowing that my master's Zhang Lie?"

Yang Ze didn't panic. Indeed, Fang Yi had mentioned that the authorities of Mars would be arriving at the scene shortly, and these clans wouldn't be able to do anything to him at that point.

Yang Ze's stoic behavior left the Gu clan head rather surprised; he had anticipated that the young brat would reveal something given the pressure from all the clan heads gathered at the scene, but he seemed surprisingly resistant.

"Clan Head Yang, can't you persuade your son to say anything? After all, with all the major clans of Mars gathered here, it would be a shame if we were all to go back home with nothing, wouldn't it?" Clan Head Gu slyly passed the buck to Clan Head Wang.

Indeed, given Zhang Lie and the Zenith Dojo's sudden rise to prominence, Clan Head Gu didn't want to offend Zhang Lie, especially not when Zhang Lie was under the protection of China and a few authorities of the world federation. However, he wasn't alone—he had come with over a dozen major clans from Mars.

They all understood what these limit-breaking potions represented. No one from Earth had managed to uncover anything more about these potions, but if they could...

"Right, right! Clan Head Gu isn't wrong. I'm sure he knows something! Everyone, this is our one and only opportunity to obtain some additional information about these potions. No matter what, Yang Ze must give us something to bring back to our clans. Clan Head Yang, I hope you see what you'll have to do!"

The other clan heads quickly came to an agreement.

Yang Feng's face darkened; the other clans had pushed him into an awkward, unenviable position. His gaze sharpened once more as he turned to Yang Ze. Given the other clan heads' pressure, even if Yang Feng truly wanted to protect Yang Ze, it wouldn't be possible for him to do so. "Yang Ze, please give us more details. If you do, I swear I'll protect you no matter what."

Yang Ze scoffed. "I've already told you all, haven't I? I don't know anything about these potions myself."

Disappointed and enraged by his father's behavior, Yang Ze had no qualms about offending everyone present. Tension rose to a breaking point.

"Stubborn brat!" Clan Head Gu called out. "Clan Head Yang, if your son won't listen to reason, we'll have to do something about him! What are you all waiting for? Take him down!"

"Take him down? Who dares!" The moment the other clan heads began circulating their genetic energy, a dominating voice called out from outside the room, causing everyone to whirl around.

A formidable-looking middle-aged man walked into view, wearing a military uniform patterned with flames. The moment the clan heads saw this man, their genetic energy petered out.

Chapter 217: Yang Ze's Return

The world federation's General Li Pu had arrived, quelling the clan heads' unrest with just a single question. Li Pu was the commander of the Martian forces, strong in his own right, and with absolute control of the soldiers in the area. No one would dare provoke him then and there.

"General Li! Wh-what are you doing here?" Clan Head Gu stammered in a rather unwilling tone.

Li Pu slowly walked forward, his eyes piercing. "If I hadn't come, you would all have caused a major diplomatic incident that would have led to your clans' downfall. Clan Head Gu, stop trying to wheedle for information and leave immediately!"

Li Pu's words shocked Gu Jiancheng and the other clan heads. An incident that would lead to their clans' downfall? Surely not, but there was no reason for General Li to lie to them either.

"General Li, could you expla—"

"You have no right to ask. Leave now! From now on, Yang Ze's under the protection of the Martian military. Anyone who dares to threaten his safety will be killed."

Gu Jiancheng blanched as he backed off, as did the other clan heads.

On the other hand, Clan Head Yang remained where he was. "General Li, I can't thank you enough for coming to protect my son."

"It's no matter," Li Pu replied brusquely, though he seemed far less threatening to Yang Feng than with the other clan heads.

"Yang Feng, you old man, are you so shameless? Who wants to be your son? From the day you chased me out of the clan and caused my mother's death, I swore to have nothing to do with you! I apologize, General Li, for causing this mess. Please, send him out as well!"

Yang Feng was so shameless that Yang Ze had no choice but to stand up for himself and publicly denounce his father.

Li Pu stared at Yang Ze curiously. Although he had heard rumors that the relationship between father and son had soured, he didn't realize it had deteriorated to this extent. Indeed, it seemed as though Clan Head Yang had come to threaten his own son with the other clan heads, rather than to protect him.

Li Pu glared at Yang Feng. "Clan Head Yang, please leave!"

Within moments, the only two people remaining in the room were Li Pu and Yang Ze.

"General Li, no matter who it was that sent you here, I owe you a tremendous favor," Yang Ze thanked him gratefully.

"Haha, there's no need to worry. If there's anyone to thank, it's your master. My orders came from the highest authorities of the world federation, and I was tasked to protect you no matter the cost."

Yang Ze was shocked by the revelation. "Is the situation that serious?"

"You don't know what happened during Earth's Void Cup, do you? Other countries tried to pressure China into giving up its secrets, but they all failed. Of the members of Team Zenith, you're the only one who's not under China's protection!" Li Pu explained, causing Yang Ze to treat this situation with far more urgency than he had done before.

"I understand. In that case, I'd better not trouble you for too long, General Li. Would you be able to escort me to a teleportation array? I'll head to Odinstadt and meet up with my master," Yang Ze replied.

He would only feel secure once he was with the others.

"Very good." Li Pu agreed with Yang Ze's proposal almost immediately.

Yang Ze reached out to Zhang Lie, whereas General Li began to arrange for safety precautions as he escorted Yang Ze out.

"What's going on, Captain? Why is there such a huge fuss?" Yang Ze asked as soon as the call connected.

"Are you alright? The response was more shocking than I anticipated, but we've gotten everything in control now. Are you safe over there?"

"Thankfully, General Li came to my assistance in time, or I might have suffered a little."

"Good, good. Are you going to be coming back now, or will you leave after the prize ceremony?"

"Immediately, if possible. My presence here is likely a liability for General Li, and I wouldn't want to detract him from his work."

"In that case, we're prepared to receive you—we just returned ourselves."

Indeed, they would all be safer together in China. Countless factions all over the world were coveting the strength they had displayed, and they had eyes on Zhang Lie, on Team Zenith, and even on the Chu and Yun clans.

After receiving Zhang Lie's approval, Yang Ze immediately began to pack. Surrounded by Martian soldiers, he safely stepped into a teleportation array that would lead him back into China.

By the central teleportation array that connected to the capital, Yang Ze was surrounded by a number of soldiers the moment he stepped out of the array, only to find a few familiar figures gathered nearby.

"Yang Ze, you're finally back!" Zhang Lie called out in welcome, and the other members of Team Zenith rushed forward to greet him.

"I told you to transfer citizenship to Earth, didn't I? Thank goodness you're safe!"

"You were lucky that the captain mentioned that you probably needed special attention!"

Yang Ze couldn't help but contrast these warm words with what his father had to say to him.

Chapter 218: Hong Tianqi's Treasury

"Alright, now that you're back, get ready for a trip tomorrow. We'll all be heading to Hong Tianqi's personal treasury." Zhang Lie smiled even as Yang Ze cocked his head.

"Hong Tianqi? Who?" Instead of responding, Zhang Lie just grinned and left, while the other hunters of Team Zenith flocked forward and eagerly explained what had happened during the Void Cup, causing Yang Ze to belatedly realize why he had been escorted by no less than General Li himself!

Surrounded by soldiers, the members of Team Zenith safely arrived at the military base closest to the capital.

The next day, right at dawn, Yan Long had someone wake all the hunters up. After a simple breakfast, they, accompanied by Yan Long and Su Feng, headed toward Hong Tianqi's treasury after three or four hops into various teleportation arrays. Ultimately, they arrived at a deep, hidden cave, a place where even their transceivers were unable to receive any signal.

"Wait here while I break the seal to the treasury," Yan Long commanded, then leapt forward as he released all his genetic energy, summoning a glorious, incandescent dragon of fire from his body.

As the dragon howled, it shot up into the sky; instead of the resounding crack that the hunters expected, the fiery dragon passed through without any resistance at all.

As the dragon vanished, the ceiling of the cave began to shimmer with light, reminiscent of auroras. Yan Long, who was prepared for this spectacle, immediately shot out rays of light toward hidden locations in the cave, causing runic inscriptions to glow where the rays landed. The light concentrated around the center of the cave, forming a teleportation array around which the runic inscriptions snaked.

Zhang Lie gasped. "As expected, even the security measures alone are—"

"Enter! I can't keep this up for long!" Yan Long interrupted him before he could finish his thoughts.

The hunters rushed through the array, finding themselves in a surprisingly large palace, a palace so large they couldn't see its roof, in a domain so expansive they couldn't see where it ended...

In truth, the hunters could barely believe that such magnificent architecture existed. Even Zhang Lie, who was in his second life, let out a gasp of surprise. The other hunters, even Su Feng, likewise gaped at the sight.

"This is Hong Tianqi's personal treasury. He's given you an opportunity to pick out whatever you like, without any restrictions."

The crowd was shocked into silence again. Whatever they liked?! This seemingly endless palace was filled to the brim with treasure. Just from a passing glance, Zhang Lie noticed a few extremely valuable herbs, with which he could easily brew a batch of Potion #1—or even Potion #2.

He had yet to get used to his new position as the lead researcher of China's limit-fragment development team, and he didn't realize just what benefits that position brought him.

"Any treasure of my choice? Without any restriction on quantity or quality?" Zhang Lie pressed.

"We're rich!"

"Captain, if we really do get to choose whatever we want—"

Yan Long scowled. "Do you need me to repeat myself? Yes, whatever you like, without any restriction whatsoever! Nevertheless, let me remind you to pick out things that are useful to you, rather than waste these resources unnecessarily."

"In that case, we'd better get to work. Our first priority will be herbs, and our second, rare techniques!" Zhang Lie announced, mobilizing the hunters of Team Zenith.

As he reached the shelves, he then turned back to the two commanders. "Commander Su, Commander Yan, you both have copies of the ingredients needed for Potion #1, don't you? Please help me search for them!"

Before they could reply, he headed deep into the treasury. The shelves and cabinets were all made of some dark brown wood, sturdy and aged. The shelf in front of him boasted all manner of techniques, the lowest of which was pinnacle-grade. Zhang Lie didn't have the time to look at them carefully. His gaze swept over the techniques' names. Finding nothing interesting, he rushed toward the next shelf.

The other hunters—even Su Feng and Yan Long—proceeded to do the same. They were quickly able to cover the shelves within a hundred meters of the entrance, but just as they were about to expand their search radius, they found that the shelves farther out contained considerably less treasure.

After all, this was Hong Tianqi's personal treasury, and even though there were quite a number of treasures within, there had to be a limit somewhere. As they gradually walked out of the hundred-meter range, however, robots began to appear beside the hunters, the highest-grade robots available to the military.

Their appearance meant that Martial Sage Hong Tianqi had to be keeping his best treasures nearby. The robots didn't strike; instead, they saluted Yan Long when they noticed him.

"Commander Yan Long!" they shouted.

"Secure the nearby area!"

"Yes, Commander!"

These robots were all equipped with artificial intelligence that made them resemble human beings to a surprising extent. Indeed, as long as their circuitry didn't get destroyed, they would "live" even longer than actual humans.

After hearing Yan Long's command, they swiftly strode toward the entrance of the treasury while the hunters resumed their search, even more carefully than before.

Zhang Lie had found quite a few treasures along the way. In terms of techniques, he had ultimately picked out two techniques that were particularly valuable, the footwork technique [Disorienting Phantoms], and the fist technique [One Punch].

As its name suggested, [Disorienting Phantoms] consumed genetic energy to construct realistic afterimages of a hunter which would disorient the target, whereas [One Punch] was a technique about one lone punch that boasted unparalleled power, converting the user's genetic energy into a devastating blow.

This sounded straightforward, but was extremely difficult to execute in practice. Any ordinary technique could convert genetic energy into force, but this technique was particularly special in terms of augmenting that force.

However, Zhang Lie didn't have time to go through the specifics; after stuffing it into his potbellied-toad pouch, he moved on quickly to other treasures nearby.

Other than techniques, what Zhang Lie was most excited about were herbs. As one of the strongest hunters of Earth, Martial Sage Hong Tianqi's personal treasury was so rich in treasures that even Zhang Lie couldn't help but marvel at the sight. There were large quantities of rare herbs within, along with a few herbs that Zhang Lie hadn't even seen before.

He was particularly excited about having found a few primary ingredients for Potion #4, a potion that would provide a staggering fifty-point increase to the peak gene capacity. Even in his past life, during the golden age of pillmaking, only a scant few hunters had managed to obtain a bottle of Potion #4.

He had anticipated being able to find some rare herbs here, but not in such quantity. Dreamleaf grass, bloodrot fruit, hundred-spruit flower, bark of underworld maple... he had found four of the eight primary ingredients in Hong Tianqi's treasury alone.

His luck in this life was staggering—no, to be precise, this wasn't luck. His prescience from his past life had had overwhelming repercussions on his growth, ones that he could hardly have imagined.

If he weren't so overwhelmingly strong, or if he hadn't been able to demonstrate any results of his research on limit fragments, Martial Sage Hong Tianqi wouldn't have consumed Potion #1 and allowed him access to his personal treasury as recompense.

After finishing searching through the shelves in his area, Zhang Lie turned to Fang Yi. "Fang Yi, quick, show me the herbs that you've found!"

"Captain, what's the matter? Why the urgency?"

"I'll tell you later—show me the herbs! If I can gather them all now, then..." Zhang Lie's eyes were wide open, and the anticipation on his face more intense than Fang Yi had ever seen.

As a result, Fang Yi hastily opened his potbellied-toad pouch and spilled out the herbs within. Zhang Lie's excitement palpably diminished as he looked through Fang Yi's spoils; he hadn't found anything he wanted.

Fang Yi had collected quite a few herbs, some of which were key ingredients needed for Potion #2 and Potion #3, and two of which were herbs he had never seen before, but none of the herbs he had collected were relevant for Potion #4. As a result, Zhang Lie couldn't help but be disappointed.

"Not bad—keep everything and continue searching!"

Zhang Lie ran off in search of the others, leaving Fang Yi on his own. The next person Zhang Lie found was Yang Ze, who was generally rather lucky. After they searched through his gathered herbs, however, they found that Yang Ze, just like Fang Yi, didn't have any herbs that had to do with Potion #4.

Zhang Lie's initial excitement was greatly discounted by these two failures, but the allure of Potion #4 was so large that he still couldn't drop the idea of concocting it entirely. As a result, he continued to look for the other members of Team Zenith to search through their gathered herbs, but neither Sun Mengmeng nor Sun Xiaowu had any relevant herbs either.

Neither did Li Feng; Li Feng did have an auxiliary ingredient, but it was one of thousands that were possible for Potion #4, and it was one of the easier ones to acquire as well.

When Zhang Lie finally found Zhou Ying, he had almost lost all hope, but...

Chapter 219: Exceeds Expectations

"Damask-lotus leaf and jadedrop flower!" Zhang Lie cried out, finding two more main ingredients for Potion #4 among the herbs that Zhou Ying had acquired.

Zhou Ying had even managed to obtain two auxiliary herbs for Potion #4, leaving only two main ingredients that had to be found. In truth, Zhang Lie hadn't expected that he would be able to acquire most of the extremely hard-to-find ingredients of Potion #4 within a single day, and the unparalleled success invigorated him.

When Zhou Ying saw Zhang Lie's excited expression, she realized the value of the herbs she had found, and a smile appeared on her face.

"Good, very good! Zhou Ying, you're very lucky today—keep it up!" Zhang Lie ran off, continuing his search for the remaining herbs.

There were only two more ingredients he needed for Potion #4, which he focused his attention on. It took him over an hour to go through the shelves he had breezed through the first time around, but unfortunately, he found neither of the two remaining herbs.

At the same time, the members of Team Zenith, having finished their respective searches, gathered together by the entrance to the treasury.

Yan Long and Su Feng, however, seemed to have vanished.

Rather than search for them, the hunters decided to focus on cataloging their spoils. Except for herbs, the most valuable things the hunters had found were manuals and techniques, these being the two types of treasures most prevalent in this treasury.

Because of Zhang Lie's warning, the hunters had all picked out techniques that were special in some manner or another, and they had earned a veritable windfall.

"Captain, what was going on just now? Why did you search through our pouches?" Yang Ze asked curiously, and the other hunters perked up as well.

"No, it's nothing. We've had an amazing haul today, and for your excellent performance in the Void Cup, I'll make you each a bottle of Potion #2!" Zhang Lie smiled, distracting everyone with the mention of an amazing prize.

This wasn't the first time they had heard about Potion #2, but it was the first time he had ever mentioned more than its name.

"P-Potion #2!"

"Shh!" Zhang Lie shushed Yang Ze immediately. Even Potion #1 was a close-kept secret to the world at large, let alone Potion #2. The members of Team Zenith weren't stupid; they shot furtive glances at the robots nearby and held their questions for later.

As they waited for the two commanders to return, the hunters began to chat—about the techniques they had found, as well as what Yang Ze had experienced on Mars.

"Yang Ze, did you break off all relations with the Yang clan?" Zhang Lie suddenly asked a serious question that everyone had been evading, causing the atmosphere to become tense for a moment.

Yang Ze frowned, then smiled brightly. "In the end, he only got close to me to try to get me to divulge the recipe for Potion #1. Why not sever ties completely?"

"What? Was he really so shameless? If nothing else, you're still his son— but he still worked together with others against you?!"

"Your father's dumb and blind—you're better off without him!"

The other hunters were immediately aggrieved on his behalf. In order to dispel the serious atmosphere that had descended, they even began to joke about each other, breaking Yang Ze free of his solitude as they did so. To him, these fellow hunters with whom he shared no blood relations were his true family.

Zhang Lie smiled in relief. "In that case, once the Void Cup's over, you should renounce your Martian citizenship and return to Earth."

"Yes, Captain!" Yang Ze nodded, obeying Zhang Lie without question.

Only then could footsteps be heard from afar as the two commanders returned.

"Well? Have you all obtained the treasures of your choice?" Yan Long asked.

"Of course—we've been waiting for so long! How about you, Commanders? Did you find anything good?" Zhang Lie called back.

No other hunter would have been so daring as to tease the two commanders, and Yan Long retorted, "It's all for the sake of your precious herbs, isn't it? We searched the entire area carefully just for them!"

"We did find quite a few, so you'd better take your research seriously, you hear?" Su Feng opened his pouch and poured out the herbs he had found.

Hidden dragon root! To his surprise, Zhang Lie found yet another ingredient for Potion #4.

"Of course!" he agreed in excitement, reaching out for Su Feng and Yan Long's pouches.

"Don't disappoint us!" Yan Long warned, handing over his as well.

"Of course not, Commanders." Zhang Lie peeked into Yan Long's pouch, only to find that most were rare herbs for Potions #1 and #2, with only a rare few for Potion #3. Zhang Lie was a little disappointed, but that disappointment rapidly faded away. After all, he had already managed to find seven of the eight major ingredients for Potion #4, a feat outside of his wildest imagination.

Chapter 220: Relaxation in Busyness

That he had gathered so many ingredients for Potion #4 already meant that he would have to move up his plans. Even after entering the second realm, his growth rate wouldn't stall—no, it might even increase!

Thus ended the expedition within Hong Tianqi's personal treasury.

After bidding farewell to Yan Long and Su Feng, he brought the members of Team Zenith back to the Blacksteel Inn, where he retreated to the best underground laboratory the inn had to offer.

His plans had all been going smoothly to date, and his own strength, and those of his allies, were all improving rapidly. His next goal was to consolidate that strength and to make use of his recently obtained peak gene fragments to enhance the abilities of his framework and techniques.

He would also be busy processing the piles of herbs that he had just obtained; after all, Yan Long, Su Feng, and even the Martial Sage Hong Tianqi viewed him so favorably largely because of his research on limit fragments.

In the near future, there would be countless piles of herbs being shipped to China from countries worldwide, and Zhang Lie was even considering buying a few robots that would be able to perform

basic precision lab work. After all, if he had to concoct all the potions himself, he would soon work himself to death.

Zhang Lie spent his days concocting potions, improving his framework and techniques, mentoring his apprentices and disciples, and supervising his teammates. Before the disaster-grade lifeform appeared in the first realm of the dimensional world, there would be a lull of sorts, the calm before the storm.

It was during this lull that Zhang Lie managed to improve his techniques—in particular, [Eclipse]'s domain, which he had spent so much time and energy on. Thanks to the strength afforded by his newly acquired peak gene fragments, Zhang Lie finally managed to combine [Eclipse] with the three forms of his [Ninecarp Transformation].

The combined [Eclipse] possessed the specialties of all three forms, increased strength, and even more devastating abilities. Zhang Lie couldn't help itching to test out the technique in practice.

After succeeding in strengthening [Eclipse]'s domain, his next goal was on cultivating [Ninesoul Dragonblade], the auxiliary technique that came with [Ninecarp Transformation].

"[First Form: Parting the River]!"

Within the training chamber, Zhang Lie leapt up into the air with a shout, Venombane glinting with tri-colored genetic energy. As he swung his blade downward, a frightening resonance humming by its tip, the simulated river beneath him really did seem to split apart.

Zhang Lie reveled in the destruction that his single attack had caused. He had succeeded, he had finally succeeded! It had taken him over twenty days in the training chamber before his breakthrough, and it was time to observe how his teammates were getting along.

When he opened the door to the training chamber, however, his nose was assailed by a strong herbal aroma. Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others were diligently sorting a pile of spiritual herbs.

"What's going on?"

"What else? You were in there for three whole weeks, so when we got tired of cultivation, we continued to collect more herbs. We just got all these. Didn't we do a good job?" Sun Mengmeng teased.

Zhang Lie's eyes widened. "Indeed, there are probably enough herbs in here to make another dozen bottles of Potion #1 or so—ah, wait, didn't you guys already collect all the herbs from around the Blacksteel settlement when I made you each a bottle of Potion #1? Where did all these come from?"

As far as he knew, most of the herbs in and around the Blacksteel settlement had already been collected by Team Zenith, and it was unlikely that there would be so many herbs left in the vicinity.

"Haha, Captain, there are settlements all over the dimensional world, aren't there?" Yang Ze became cocky after seeing that even Zhang Lie seemed perturbed by just how many herbs they had acquired.

"You've gone past the eastern forests into western territory? Is that where you acquired all these herbs?" Zhang Lie didn't know any other possible explanation for their haul. The dimensional world

was extremely large. The Blacksteel settlement was located near the eastern forests, and they hadn't ever ventured far from it.

In the past, Zhang Lie had warned the members of Team Zenith not to head out of the eastern forests at this stage in order to protect them, but they had clearly violated this warning.

"Captain, we didn't do it intentionally! Li Feng walked out of the border without knowing it, and since we had already done so, we decided to acquire the herbs available there." Since Zhang Lie didn't seem particularly angry, Yang Ze immediately dragged Li Feng down with him.

"Don't worry, it's not a big deal. At any rate, all of you are strong enough that there are only a few places in the first realm that you shouldn't go toward. Well? How did the hunters in the west feel about your presence, and how much were they asking to sell these herbs for?"

Rather than being upset that they had gone against one of his warnings, he was glad that his teammates were independent and forward-looking—after all, it was best for them to be fending for themselves.

Sun Mengmeng replied earnestly, "They didn't think much of us. Most of them thought that we were merchants from the settlements of the eastern forest, but they did seem to value their herbs much more, especially after the revelation of limit fragments in the worldwide stage of the Void Cup. The price that we had to pay for these herbs is already threefold our original value!"

Zhang Lie sighed. "It looks like we had better take the opportunity to seize whatever herbs we can, or they'll all be bought out quickly."