

U. Warlord 291

Chapter 291: Return to Earth

"You'll be able to see what the second realm's like for yourselves soon, too—you're all ready to advance, after all. However, I'm still a little worried about Hanxiang, so I'd like all of you to stay for a little while longer in the first realm. Would you mind doing that?"

"Of course not! We'll treat your sister like our own," Sun Mengmeng promised. The others nodded in assent.

"Very well. In that case, I'll spend some time with Hanxiang today before returning to the second realm. There's work that I have to be doing there."

Zhang Lie's safe return had wiped the anxiety off the others' minds, and they left the conference room with a burden lifted off their hearts.

Zhang Hong followed suit, but just as she was about to head out, she suddenly turned back. "Ah, wait, Dojo Leader! I've almost forgotten about Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen. Ever since you lost contact, they've locked themselves up in a training chamber and been training themselves to death there. I think you had better meet them to reassure them of your safety."

Zhang Lie nodded. "I don't have much time left. Will you summon them to this conference room?"

"Yes, immediately!" Zhang Hong rushed out toward the training chambers in which Zhang Lie's two apprentices were located.

A few moments later, however, she retraced her footsteps.

"I apologize, Dojo Leader, but there's another thing I've forgotten. The starbeasts, aquatic, nightdemons, and night spirits have each sent teams of researchers to Earth, and they're demanding to see you. Will you give them some of your time?"

She knew that these were four of the strongest races in the Milky Way. Even though Zhang Lie—and, by extension, mankind—had won the Void Cup, she still held considerable respect toward them.

"Making a fuss, are they? Let them be. There's no need to be so polite to them; have them wait for my return."

"Have them... wait?"

"Right. Tell them that I'm extremely disappointed with their behavior to date. Those who are willing to wait can do so; otherwise, send them back to their home planet immediately."

"Yes, Dojo Leader!" Zhang Hong nodded firmly, then walked off—this time without returning.

Zhang Lie and Zhang Hanxiang were left alone in the conference room.

"Well, we can finally have a private conversation now, Hanxiang! How was it like to enter the dimensional world for the first time?"

"Whatever emotions I felt, your sudden disappearance superseded them all. I went with the others in search of you for so long, so long that I even ruined a few pairs of shoes!"

"I know, Hanxiang. I'm really sorry—I hadn't intended it to happen. I promise that I'll keep myself safe if I ever disappear again."

"Really?"

Zhang Lie patted his chest. "Of course! When have I ever reneged on a promise to you? But this also means that, no matter what happens in the future, you have to believe in me, do you understand? Trust me: I'm strong enough to take care of myself in the dimensional world and in reality. There's no need to get so nervous in the future if I disappear, alright?"

Zhang Hanxiang was of utmost importance to Zhang Lie, and he knew just how hurt she was by his sudden disappearance, especially because it mirrored their parents'. His goal with this conversation was to calm her down in case such situations were to happen again—and given his personality and his plans for advancement, he was sure that they would.

Zhang Hanxiang felt that her brother had never looked at her so firmly before. She contemplated his words carefully, then smiled all of a sudden. "I understand, Brother. Of course I'll trust you."

The two of them then began to chat about frivolous affairs, but, not long later, their conversation was interrupted by Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen, who bulldozed through the door to the conference room.

"Master!"

"Master, have you really returned? We thought... we thought that..."

"Thought what? That it was time for you two to inherit my legacy? Don't worry, I don't plan on letting that happen just yet!"

When Zhang Hong told them that Zhang Lie had returned and wanted to see them, the two youths had entertained the notion that they were so tired from training that they had seen a mass hallucination, but it was real—Zhang Lie was back!

Their faces shone with unadulterated relief and joy.

Zhang Lie smiled; he hadn't taken in these two apprentices for nothing.

However, his expression suddenly turned serious. "I heard that the two of you have been ensconcing yourselves in a training chamber ever since my disappearance. Is that so?"

Chapter 292: Three Reasons

"Yes, Master!" Zhang Lie's two apprentices lowered their heads.

Zhang Hanxiang gripped her brother's arm. "Brother, you can't blame Jiuxiao and Xianchen for their actions, can you? You were gone for three whole months! They were training so hard in an attempt to avenge you..."

"...avenge? All of you, listen up: I'm not that easy to defeat or kill. If this sort of thing happens again, just calm down and go about your lives as usual. Jiuxiao, Xianchen—I won't have you ruining your bodies like that after my careful tutelage, do you understand? I still need the two of you to help take care of my sister! Alright, all of you, go and rest!"

The three youths scurried off as Zhang Lie returned to the second realm.

Back in the second realm, in the Qi manor, because Zhang Lie had mentioned that he would only be gone for half a day, Xiao Zhengyang had Zhou Liao wait for Zhang Lie's return. Since it was time for lunch, he naturally invited Zhou Liao to dine with him; thanks to Zhang Lie, Zhou Liao had his first meal at Governor Xiao's manor.

Zhou Liao, Xiao Zhengyang, and his wife had a pleasant conversation over a simple but surprisingly delicious lunch.

As one of Xiao Zhengyang's direct subordinates, Zhou Liao deeply respected him for his candor and treatment of his troops. No matter the directive, he would take some time to consider how his troops would feel and what they would need, unlike a few other governors in the second realm, who were perfectly willing to exchange their subordinates' lives for more resources.

As such, even though it was their first time dining together, the mood was convivial and conversation flowed easily. Zhang Lie naturally came up as a topic of some interest.

"Head, why the fuss over Zhang Lie? I'm surprised you're willing to advance him so rapidly."

Xiao Zhengyang gave him a meaningful smile. "Do you really want to know?"

Zhou Liao nodded fervently.

"There are three reasons I value him so highly. First, his strength is immense—even as a newcomer to the second realm, he's at least my equal in terms of strength. Second, as you know, I'm close friends with Commander Yan Long, and he's strongly recommended Zhang Lie to me before. He even told me to give up the governor's seat to Zhang Lie if he asked for it! Finally, Zhang Lie's reputation alone would shine a spotlight on the special forces of Qi. Given these factors, I hope you understand how important it is to treat him well."

Xiao Zhengyang's reasoning shocked the other two at the dining table. Even his wife was stupefied, let alone Zhou Liao. She had never heard him praise a hunter from the younger generation so highly before.

"Head, are you serious? Is he as strong as you claim?" Zhou Liao was flabbergasted by the claim that Zhang Lie was Xiao Zhengyang's equal.

Even Xiao Zhengyang's wife turned to him, as if awaiting his answer.

"I'm sure of it—I even think he's hiding the true extent of his strength from me, so he's even more frightening than what either of you are suspecting. You understand why I don't want him to take part in the official selection process now, don't you?"

Zhou Liao simply couldn't believe what Governor Xiao was saying. That would imply that Zhang Lie was at the peak of the second realm even as a newcomer—how could this be?! He had heard a little about the theory of limit fragments that Zhang Lie had promulgated. Were these its effects? How ridiculous!

At that moment, Zhou Liao decided that he would have to become close with Zhang Lie, no matter what. Who knew if there would be some opportunity for him to benefit from Zhang Lie's strength in the future?

He would, at the very least, let Zhang Lie do as he pleased.

"Zhengyang, did Commander Yan Long really say to make him the governor of Qi if he wanted it?" Lai Yunyun, Xiao Zhengyang's wife, was more shocked by this errant comment.

Xiao Zhengyang turned back to his wife and smiled. "Don't worry, he won't want our drab little city. Someone like Zhang Lie couldn't be tempted even with a thousand such cities."

Neither of the other two at the table dared to probe further. Both of them had only one thought in their minds: never to provoke Zhang Lie! Zhou Liao pledged that he would certainly give Zhang Lie no cause for displeasure.

Somehow, as a result of this lunch, Zhang Lie became one of the most influential figures of the city, backed by the governor, his wife, and the leader of the special forces of Qi.

Not long after the lunch finished, Zhang Lie appeared at the gates to Qi, and Zhou Liao hurriedly rushed off to welcome him.

Chapter 293: A Show of Force

After Xiao Zhengyang's warning, Zhou Liao was far more cordial to Zhang Lie than before—so much so that even Xiao Zhengyang cringed at his behavior, let alone Zhang Lie.

"Zhang Lie, what do you think about returning to the troops now?"

"I'm ready to head out, Team Leader Zhou! Please, treat me just like a regular recruit."

Unfortunately, it seemed as though Xiao Zhengyang had been entirely too successful in highlighting Zhang Lie's strength. Zhou Liao laughed and replied, "If there's anyone that deserves special treatment, it's you!"

He grimaced at Xiao Zhengyang, then rushed off toward the special forces barracks with Zhou Liao.

The barracks' location was secret to the public and all other hunters. Because the special forces tended to conduct dangerous operations away from the city, it was located somewhat far away from city grounds, where regular hunters would have a hard time chancing upon it.

Zhang Lie had been prepared for this, but when Zhou Liao pointed at a ranch and informed him that it was their destination, it still took Zhang Lie by surprise. The ranch covered thousands of square meters of land, and all sorts of low-grade genetic lifeforms from the second realm were being tamed there.

"I can't believe the barracks' facade is a ranch," Zhang Lie murmured.

"Certainly not something anyone would suspect, is it? We haven't had to deal with anyone suspicious for quite a while. Well, Zhang Lie, please enter!"

Along the way, Zhou Liao had informed him that the special forces troops consisted of 88 hunters, which were divided into ten teams. Zhou Liao was the troop leader of the forces as well as team leader of the first team, and he naturally claimed Zhang Lie for his team under Governor Xiao's auspices.

Of course, there would have to be an initiation ceremony.

As Zhou Liao and Zhang Lie headed toward the ranch, two hunters appeared by the door, one male and one female. Their attire made them look like workers on the ranch, but they appeared so silently that they surely had to be hunters.

"Troop Leader!"

"Xia Na, Zhou Ming! Are the two of you on duty today?"

"Troop Leader, isn't that... Zhang Lie? Is he why the governor summoned you?" Upon seeing Zhang Lie, Xia Na's eyes began to shine, as though she had just found a new toy to play with.

"More or less. I'll give you all the specifics in a moment. Inform the troops to gather at the underground drill grounds within ten minutes—I have an announcement to make!"

"An announcement? Hmm," Xia Na wondered.

"You'll find out soon enough!"

"Team Leader, I won't be able to summon everyone—the third team just went out on a mission," Xia Na replied, momentarily turning serious.

"No matter. I'll inform them of the matter separately when they're back. Shall we head inside?"

The interior of the ranch seemed much like any ordinary ranch. Most of the lifeforms that were being raised were darkrune beasts, a common, low-grade, and high-fertility lifeform. For the hunters of the second realm, these darkrune beasts would be able to provide them with an easy supply of basic gene fragments, and their meat was juicy and delicious.

There were a few ranch workers wandering around; most were robots, but the rare few humans that were glancing at him with interest from time to time were, of course, special forces troops.

The ranch itself, as a facade, was nothing out of the ordinary; the facilities were all underground. It was clear how much thought had been put into this base of operations, and it was well equipped with the weapons, information, and technology to handle all sorts of situations.

Zhou Liao assigned Zhang Lie a room, as well as a robot for various administrative and cleaning tasks. He was treated as well as a team leader.

In the next ten minutes, Zhou Liao introduced him briefly to the underground facilities, then brought him to the drill grounds where the other troops had all gathered. Except for the nine members of the third team and Zhou Liao himself, the other 78 hunters were all present.

Zhou Liao strode forward to the front of the assembly, bringing Zhang Lie along with him.

"By order of Governor Xiao, from today onwards, Dragonlord General Zhang Lie will officially be part of the special forces troops as the deputy troop leader!"

The announcement took everyone by surprise, even Zhang Lie. In a rare break with discipline, the troops began murmuring to each other.

"What? Deputy troop leader from the very beginning? Isn't this a little extreme?"

"Becoming the troop leader has always required at least ten years of meritorious service here. It's true that Zhang Lie has made great contributions to humanity, but as a newcomer to the second realm, shouldn't he start from the very bottom?"

"Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous..."

"He might be the champion of the Void Cup, and undefeated in the first realm, but surely not in the second!"

Zhou Liao's proclamation had simply been too shocking. The special forces didn't have a deputy troop leader; this meant that Zhou Liao had created this role specially for Zhang Lie.

Even Zhang Lie couldn't help jumping in. "Troop Leader Zhou, this—"

"Don't worry, Deputy Leader Zhang. I'll handle it!" Zhou Liao interrupted him. Facing the crowd once again, he continued, "I know this might be an unfair announcement, but it's a command from the governor himself, so all of you will simply have to bear with it. If anyone causes any problems, they'll be punished by the governor himself!"

Chapter 294: Come at Me Together

The special forces troops' hushed murmurs halted immediately. It was a clear sign of respect toward Governor Xiao that they wouldn't question any of his decisions, even this questionable one; this was why Zhou Liao had dared to announce that the unusual order was Governor Xiao's doing.

Of course, just because the troops respected Xiao Zhengyang didn't mean that they would do the same to Zhang Lie.

After all, they were the most elite troops of Qi.

In the second realm, because of mankind's relative inferiority in numbers, and because the native inhabitants of the realm tended to congregate in groups, mankind also largely moved around in teams; those hunters who paraded as lone wolves were generally thought to be idiotic, and most perished by the first month. If they were to go out hunting alone, they could easily be overwhelmed by a horde of beasts.

Thus, essentially all successful hunters belonged to a team, whose strength would be evaluated based on its members' strength, genetic armor, framework and techniques, and even soulshards. There were five such ranks: low, medium, high, superior, and special. Naturally, the special forces troops were all part of special-rank teams, and every hunter within such a team possessed extraordinary ability.

They were proud of their skills and abilities, of the experience that had qualified them as special-rank hunters, and this made them look down on Zhang Lie all the more.

They all stared stonily at Zhang Lie, as though trying to provoke him or question his skills. If they had been direct about it, Zhang Lie wouldn't have minded, but their sullen behavior left him rather uncomfortable.

Zhang Lie strode forward. "Team Leader Zhou, these are the drill grounds, aren't they?"

Zhang Lie's intentions were clear. Zhou Liao nodded and motioned for Zhang Lie to continue speaking.

"I know none of you are happy with this turn of events, but I've chosen to accept Governor Xiao's orders. If any of you think yourselves stronger than I am, step forward. We'll have a match right here on these grounds. If any of you can defeat me, you can have my position—but if I am to win, then I expect that you'll submit to my authority."

Zhang Lie's tone was serious, but the troops couldn't help smirking at each other.

A match? Did Zhang Lie really think that, as a newcomer to the second realm, he could take on and defeat the elites who had been here for years? Each of them had ascended from the first realm after maxing out their gene fragments, and they were almost finished with the same in the second realm!

It seemed blatantly obvious that Zhang Lie had no measure of his strength, nor of theirs.

Zhou Liao, selectively forgetting that he had been much the same way, couldn't help but think that the troops were still too inexperienced. He hadn't seen Zhang Lie fight himself, but given Governor Xiao's superlative evaluation, he didn't doubt Zhang Lie's skills. He was rather looking forward to the upcoming fights, and somewhat concerned for those hunters that were about to stride forward.

After Zhang Lie spoke, the troops all turned to Zhou Liao, as though trying to confirm Zhang Lie's authority.

"From today onwards, Deputy Leader Zhang's authority is equal to my own. As long as you can beat him, I'll even hand over my position as troop leader!" Zhou Liao announced.

Indeed, a show of strength would quell any unrest. The reason Zhou Liao himself had been able to become the troop leader was because of his surpassing administrative ability as well as personal strength.

"I don't want to be a team leader, but I'd consider becoming a deputy leader!" The first challenger stepped forward, one that Zhang Lie actually recognized—the second team leader, Xia Na. The moment she stepped forward, the other troops began to do so as well.

"Nana, you're too fast! I'll join you as well!"

"I have to say, I like this kid's personality. Count me in!"

"I don't want to be troop leader, but deputy troop leader, well..."

"Well, I want to see just how strong this kid really is! Champion of the Void Cup, Dragonlord General of China, the pride of humanity, leader of the Zenith Dojo... I'm quite curious just what the person lying behind all these titles really is like."

"Lad, you're only in your twenties, aren't you? Given your performance in the Void Cup, I have to admit you're strong, and your development of these limit fragments is truly impressive, but you're still too young to be our deputy leader!"

Six team leaders stepped forward, each of them expecting to give Zhang Lie a good trouncing. They reached an agreement almost immediately. "We won't bully you. Choose any one of us six; if you can defeat any of us, we'll submit to your authority."

Zhang Lie smirked. "Interesting. Why don't you all come at me together? I'd like to test my limits after my advancement."

Chapter 295: Dragonturtle Tablet

Zhang Lie's words shocked the gathered troops. This wasn't the first time they had met an arrogant hunter, but Zhang Lie was the most arrogant one they had seen.

They were the special forces troops of Qi, and Zhang Lie's opponents were six of their team leaders. Did Zhang Lie really think he could take on all six at once?

Even Zhou Liao was staring agape at Zhang Lie. After all, the six of them were all easily within the top twenty strongest hunters of Qi, and they were used to cooperating with each other. With the six of them working together, even the governor Xiao Zhengyang would be hard-pressed to take him on—let alone a newcomer like Zhang Lie!

"Rather bold of you, lad—I'll make sure not to pummel you too hard later on!"

Zhang Lie's words had clearly struck a nerve. He was looking down on the team leaders gathered here; how could they take this insult lying down?

"Lad, we don't want to bully you. Pick one of us to fight—anyone you want!"

Zhang Lie actually did want to test out what it would be like to face them all at once, but that seemed like it would have to wait. The team leaders were too prideful to gang up on a newcomer like him, even given his earlier provocation.

Zhang Lie pointed at Zhou Ming. "Very well, Team Leader Zhou Ming, I choose you!"

After all, Zhou Ming was one of the only team leaders whose name he knew. The other team leaders were rather surprised by his selection, and they all looked toward Zhou Ming with envy. From their perspective, Zhou Ming was the lucky one among them who would be able to teach this arrogant upstart a lesson!

The troops cleared out a space for the fight between Zhang Lie and Zhou Ming.

Owing to his seniority, Zhou Ming couldn't help feeling obligated to remind Zhang Lie, "If you can't handle it anymore, just surrender. Losing to any of us wouldn't be an embarrassment."

"Thank you for the reminder, but I'll say the same as well—don't feel bad surrendering to me!" Zhang Lie meant his words sincerely, but to the spectators, they sounded like another arrogant provocation.

As far as they knew, Zhou Ming was far stronger than Zhang Lie. It was only expected for Zhou Ming to give Zhang Lie such a warning; for Zhang Lie to do the same to Zhou Ming was the height of hubris.

Both combatants spoke up simultaneously, offering their opponent the first blow; they clearly believed that their opponent wouldn't have a chance after they struck.

"As the junior, you should go first. I'd rather not have others call me a bully," Zhou Ming advised.

No matter what, Zhang Lie would be a comrade in arms in the future, so it would be in his best interest to keep up a cordial relationship with him.

"Are you certain?"

Zhou Ming curled his fingers at Zhang Lie, beckoning him to get started.

"In that case, be careful!" As Zhang Lie dashed forward, a blood moon rose into the air. Black mist shrouded the sun, and five strange beasts—a carp, a serpent, a winged tiger, a turtle, and a qilin—seemed to float across the skies.

Unbelievably thick genetic energy spread through the air, surrounding the turtle. At this moment, the spectators felt as though the force of gravity had suddenly multiplied all around them.

Zhou Ming, Zhang Lie's opponent, had it much worse. It seemed to him as though he were being crushed by a gigantic mountain, one that even made the genetic energy circulating throughout his body feel sluggish. Regardless, he was an elite of the second realm. The moment he felt his genetic energy slow, he activated a number of soulshards.

With a bestial cry, his body expanded, transforming his upper half-body into that of an eagle. Runes surrounded his body, and his red and blue genetic armor was particularly striking.

However, the fact that Zhang Lie had forced him to use his trump card so early made him seem somewhat weak.

"What's going on? Why did Zhou Ming use his soulshards already?"

"What, can't you see what's going on? Zhou Ming was forced to activate his soulshards to defend against that newcomer's attack!"

"Really? How can that kid be so strong?"

The troops whispered to each other, finally realizing that Zhang Lie might be a strong hunter in his own right. As they spoke, Zhang Lie stomped on the ground with one foot, and a runic tablet dropped from the turtle's shell and smashed into the ground.

The underground barracks quaked, and the troops present barely remained upright under the suddenly immense force of gravity. Even Zhou Liao and the spectating team leaders were forced to circulate their own genetic energy, let alone their team members and Zhou Ming on stage.

The troops watching from a distance away flared their genetic energy, but even so, they were still forced to one knee.

Zhou Ming's body slammed against the ground due to a concentrated spike of gravity around him, his limbs unable to budge no matter how much strength or genetic energy he forced through his body. He suddenly felt that, if Zhang Lie were to increase the force of gravity around him a little more, he might very well burst and die.

It was a terrible feeling to experience; his life was in Zhang Lie's hands.

Chapter 296: Five Together

At that moment, Zhou Ming realized just how large the gap between him and Zhang Lie was. The black runic tablet didn't look like it was anything particularly unusual, but that tablet alone had quashed the fighting spirit of all the troops gathered at the drill grounds.

Even Zhang Lie himself was shocked by how strong the tablet was; it was one of the abilities of [Ninecarp Transformation]'s fourth form, the dragonturtle. Zhang Lie hadn't had the opportunity to test out the effects of these tablets, and this was his first trial.

It was fortunate that he had excellent control over his genetic energy—or Zhou Ming might have been squashed into a human pancake.

"Team Leader Zhou Ming, will you concede?"

So securely was Zhou Ming pressed against the ground that he was barely able to force the words out of his mouth. He, who had thought that this match would be an easy win, had given up. He was already pressed against the ground immobile, and it was clear that his opponent had gone easy on him. Not admitting defeat and continuing to fight would just serve to prolong his misery.

The moment he surrendered, Zhang Lie unsummoned the stone tablet and reined in his genetic energy. The immense force of gravity pushing the troops down vanished, and they all heaved a sigh of relief.

"Deputy Leader Zhang Lie, I can't speak for the others, but I'm willing to submit to your authority!" Zhou Ming stood up and glanced at Zhang Lie again in awe. How had he managed to obtain such strength as a newcomer to the second realm? He had lost, well and truly, but against an opponent of such caliber, Zhou Ming didn't feel at all embarrassed. Indeed, he was even rather curious as to just what Zhang Lie's limits were.

Zhang Lie turned to the other team leaders. "Does anyone else want to challenge me?"

Since matters had progressed to this extent, he might as well beat the other team leaders into submission as well. The team leaders were all elites in their own right. Although Zhang Lie's technique had given them a tremendous shock, it wasn't enough to make them cower—or, in other words, having the courage to face him was more important than actually winning.

He had provoked them all; if they didn't have the guts to accept his challenge, how would they be able to stand up to their team members in the future? Furthermore, if all five remaining team leaders worked together and used one of their secret formations, they would stand a chance against Zhang Lie...

"Zhang Lie, I have to admit you're very strong, but even so, here in the special forces, we won't back down from your provocation. I, Ye Tianlang, accept your challenge!" A tall, stoic team leader strode forward. He had been one of the most outspoken of the team leaders against Zhang Lie.

Among the troops, he was known to be the strictest of the team leaders, both to his subordinates and to himself.

"Right, it would be dishonorable to back down now. Count me in! Just because you're a strong opponent doesn't mean that we'll back down. We'll fight!" Ye Tianlang's words spurred the other team leaders to action. They had to fight—as special forces troops, they couldn't back down and hadn't ever backed down because of fear.

Zhang Lie had more or less anticipated this situation. After all, they were members of the special forces; if this display of strength was enough to cause them to back down, Zhang Lie really would have looked down upon them.

So, what surprises would the six of them have in store for him?

"As expected of the special forces of Qi! I'll cede you the first attack," he offered.

The five team leaders shot toward Zhang Lie while Zhou Ming shook his head, sighed, and headed back to his team. As the hunter who best understood Zhang Lie's present strength among them all, he didn't think the gathered team leaders had a chance of victory. Just from the strength of his one technique alone, it was evident that he was in a different realm of strength entirely.

Perhaps the five team leaders' formation could temporarily fend him off, but not for long. Furthermore, Zhang Lie hadn't truly attacked him. All he had done was stomp on the ground and cause a dark tablet to fall from the skies, but that alone was sufficient to render him immobile and the spectators kneeling...

As the champion of the Void Cup, Zhang Lie was known for [The Boundless Blade], and what he had displayed was only a thin sliver of his true strength. From his perspective, the five team leaders had already lost. Nevertheless, it would be impossible to dissuade them from continuing to fight, because Ye Tianlang had made this a question of the special forces' honor.

If he were to try to dissuade them now, he would be mocked for disgracing the special forces' courage.

In the makeshift arena, the five team leaders' faces were all tinged with some embarrassment. Faced with Zhang Lie's youthful appearance, they were reminded very clearly of the fact that they were essentially teaming up against a newcomer.

Sensing their discomfort, Zhang Lie hastily stepped forward and exclaimed, "Don't be shy, and don't hold back—if you don't use everything you've got, you might just suffer an ignominious defeat!"

Chapter 297: Hundred Dragons Soaring

Zhang Lie's words rippled through the crowd.

The team leaders, who had seemed embarrassed just a moment ago, steeled their faces and began circulating their genetic energy. Red, green, blue, yellow, and white circles appeared underneath their feet. Soulshards flashed; genetic armor materialized over their bodies, and the five team leaders seemed to morph into five deities.

Unbelievably dense genetic energy crushed the arena, forcing Zhang Lie to circulate his own genetic energy as well.

"Not bad, not bad!" Zhang Lie laughed, likewise materializing his genetic armor. The crystalline armor was patterned with mysterious runic inscriptions, giving it a surprising sense of grace and beauty despite its lethal nature.

As the armor condensed over Zhang Lie's body, a wave of genetic energy swept over the arena, and an ancient, frightening presence made itself known. In his crystalline armor, Zhang Lie seemed to

have transformed into a ravenous, frightening lifeform, one the likes of which they had never seen before.

If the lifeforms that they had faced in the past were like tigers in their prime, then Zhang Lie at present seemed like a tyrannosaurus rex.

His genetic energy took the form of the deep sea, boundless and violent. The floor of the arena seemed to compress a few inches under his might. Under such immense pressure, even the five team leaders were shocked. None of them could have imagined that Zhang Lie, at full strength, could reach such vaunted heights.

They didn't dare let him launch the first attack. Cooperating, they struck first. "[Heaven's Dance: Rampant Storm]!"

The skies lost their color, and wheels of five-colored light shot toward Zhang Lie. The wheels of light looked like individual projectiles, but their trajectories were unusually harmonized. They simultaneously struck at Zhang Lie from all directions.

"Very well—take this! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Zhang Lie concentrated his genetic energy around his right arm, then released it in one gigantic torrent. Black dragons shot out of his right arm, one after another, forming a horde a hundred large that blanketed the skies in darkness.

The black dragons smashed against the wheels of light. The five team leaders, working in unison, had a reserve of genetic energy that went even beyond his own. The seven wheels of light immediately destroyed nine of the black dragons, but while there were only seven wheels, the dragons kept pouring out of Zhang Lie's arm; Zhang Lie would win by sheer numbers alone.

"Just who is this crazy kid?" one of the team leaders murmured, gobsmacked by the sight of the dragons filling the air. They were five seniors fighting together against a junior, and they even claimed the first attack—how was it that the tide of the battle had turned against them so quickly?

"Don't give up now! Exhaust all your genetic energy. We'll use the strongest attack of the formation!" Ye Tianlang shouted, his face pale.

Indeed, the team leaders knew that, unless they fought back with all their strength now, they could very well lose just from Zhang Lie's first attack. In that case, how could they afford to call themselves special forces?

"[Heaven's Dance: Chaos Incarnate]!"

The team leaders, who were standing at the points of a pentagon, suddenly began to shift their formation. As they did so, the five-colored genetic energy melded into a rainbow-hued genetic energy which gave Zhang Lie a sense of foreboding the moment he saw it.

The five team leaders' movement formed a gigantic hoop of rainbow energy, which whirred so quickly that space began to distort in the center of the hoop. As the team leaders moved faster and faster, rainbow-colored streams of genetic energy whipped out of the hoop, causing any of the black dragons they struck to dissipate immediately.

The rainbow hoop clashed again and again with the torrent of dragons spewing forth from Zhang Lie's arm. The frightening genetic fluctuations that resulted from such a clash caused the entire underground barracks to quake; regardless of who won, both parties had more than adequately displayed their strength from the magnitude of the blows that were being exchanged.

Within dozens of seconds, Zhang Lie's attack was fully repelled by the five team leaders, but they all began to frown. After all, if they were alone, none of them would be able to defend against Zhang Lie's blow. The five of them working together had been barely enough to match Zhang Lie, and just countering his blow with this formation had sapped far more of their genetic energy than did Zhang Lie's attack.

[Heaven's Dance: Chaos Incarnate] was a peak-grade technique, and the expenditure of genetic energy required to maintain it was similarly immense. Just activating it for those dozens of seconds had consumed almost a third of the team leaders' genetic energy, and it was only natural that they were starting to feel exhausted already.

At this point, the five team leaders didn't think they had any chance of victory—they just wanted not to lose too badly...

Chapter 298: Defeat in One Strike

Zhang Lie didn't care what the team leaders were thinking; he just wanted to test his limits against an opponent that could withstand his attacks. This was the first time that he had met an opponent who could counter his [Hundred Dragons Soaring] head-on, which made his excitement spike.

"Impressive technique! Now, take this!" A violet shortsword materialized in Zhang Lie's right hand, and water-attuned genetic energy gathered in a torrent about the tip of the blade. "[First Form: Parting the River]!"

A sword strike split the skies.

Immense pressure struck the gathered team leaders. Zhang Lie's [Hundred Dragons Soaring] had been an annoying technique for the team leaders to deal with, but this sword strike posed a lethal threat. It was evident to them that, if they didn't defend against this blow, they might well lose their lives.

"Implode the formation!" Ye Tianlang called out decisively, and the other team leaders all nodded in agreement.

The rainbow hoop stopped spinning and began to swell. As the sword strike landed, the hoop exploded, marking an end to the strongest formation of the special forces of Qi. The explosion of the rainbow hoop was sufficient to deter Zhang Lie's strike for a brief moment, but it ultimately was unable to sap much of its momentum.

As the blade continued to fall, the team leaders each activated their soulshards and surged genetic energy through their bodies in an attempt to defend against the blow, but the fact that even sacrificing their formation had done so little indicated that their struggle now was futile.

Only then did they truly realize how Zhang Lie had managed to become the deputy leader of the special forces immediately upon his arrival to the second realm: he was strong, far stronger than they were, at least as strong as the governor of Qi himself!

With such strength, the governor would easily hand him the position of the troop leader if that was what he wanted—after all, in the dimensional world, strength was might.

The team leaders felt as though they had been narrow-minded fools, so confident in their own strength that they didn't recognize Zhang Lie's! From the overwhelming pressure they felt, it became apparent to them all that, if this attack were to land, none of the five of them would survive.

The force from exploding the rainbow hoop had turned the drill grounds into a pitted mess, with dust and smoke rising into the air, so while the spectators could sense how ferocious this attack was, they were unaware of just how the five team leaders were faring.

They were barely able to force themselves to stand, to resist the might of Zhang Lie's attack.

Only Zhou Ming and Zhou Liao sensed the team leaders' struggles. However, Zhang Lie's attack was so swift that they couldn't get a word out by the time it was about to land. The two of them began to panic: surely the team leaders wouldn't be able to survive this blow.

However, as they watched on, they witnessed an unusual sight. Despite the strength of the blow, it didn't seem to leave a lasting impact on the arena, and the five team leaders' genetic fluctuations hadn't changed one bit.

The strike that seemed as though it had split the very skies vanished like an illusion as Zhang Lie reined in his genetic energy at the very last moment. After all, he had no intention of taking the lives of these team leaders, all of whom would be under his command in the future.

The five team leaders' eyes widened in relief and shock. The reason they had struggled so hard was because the attack was of such awesome strength that they didn't think Zhang Lie would be able to cancel it partway through, but in the end, they had underestimated Zhang Lie once more. From the ease with which he retracted his genetic energy, he obviously possessed superlative control over it.

The five team leaders, just like Zhou Ming, had all been won over by his strength.

Zhang Lie clapped, then said, "Your formation is surprisingly strong. It looks like we won't be able to determine a victor; since we're going to remain teammates in the future, why don't we just call it a tie?"

A...tie?! The team leaders flushed red with embarrassment. Not only had they been soundly defeated in a five-to-one match, Zhang Lie had had to rein in his attack to spare their lives—and now he was sparing their dignity as well!

Even Zhou Ming and Zhou Liao, watching the match from beside the arena, were red-faced.

This wasn't something that Xia Na could accept. She was just about to clarify that they had lost when Su Nan, who understood her well, tugged her arm. "At this point, we'd better accept his goodwill, don't you think?"

Chapter 299: Qualification to be a Lone Wolf

"As expected of the champion of the Void Cup—with such strength, you're more than qualified to be our deputy leader. Even with such a numerical advantage, we were still overwhelmed by your attack. I apologize for doubting your abilities."

In the end, it was Ye Tianlang who stepped up as the team leaders' representative. Gone was the pride from his voice; it had been replaced by awe and admiration. If nothing else, the fact that he had spared them a loss of life and dignity was worthy of respect. If they had been victorious, they certainly wouldn't have treated him in like manner.

The troops, who weren't privy to the details of Zhang Lie's strength but had gleaned a little understanding of it during the battle, were all staring gobsmacked at him. After all, they hadn't expected their team leaders to lose, especially not five against one. Few of them were at the level where they could appreciate the strength of Zhang Lie's last technique.

Ye Tianlang strode forward. "Listen up, Team Five! From now on, Zhang Lie's our deputy leader. His commands are my commands! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Team Leader Ye, Deputy Leader Zhang!" his troops chorused.

"Ah, there's no need for such formalities. Let's just treat each other as friends, shall we?" Zhang Lie's face revealed none of the domineering aura that had pervaded his techniques, but the more polite he was, the more worried the other team leaders seemed to become. Following Ye Tianlang's lead, they immediately had their subordinates greet Zhang Lie as Deputy Leader Zhang.

From that day onwards, the troops would have a new, legendary deputy leader: Zhang Lie!

After resolving this internal conflict, Zhou Liao led Zhang Lie into the barracks.

"Troop Leader Zhou, if you're busy, please feel free to tend to your affairs. I've more or less familiarized myself with the barracks by now, and I'll be fine alone."

"It's no problem at all. After all, you're our new deputy leader, and you're more important than anything else on my agenda."

The two of them chatted as they walked to Zhang Lie's new residential unit, which Zhang Lie had picked out for himself. He was very pleased with it. The furnishing was understated but functional and well-made. More importantly, there were a rare few rays of sunlight, a luxury in the largely underground barracks.

The moment the two of them sat down, Zhou Liao jumped back up, suddenly seeming to recall something. "Ah, that's right!"

He turned to Zhang Lie. "You need your own team members! As a deputy troop leader, you should have a team in your own right. Just you wait. They're in the middle of selecting new recruits for the special forces now, so I'll have them add nine new slots to the roster. The governor's intention is to double the size of the special forces this year."

Zhang Lie seemed shocked. "Team members?"

"Of course! As the deputy troop leader, surely you need some troops of your own," Zhou Liao responded.

"No, no, I'm quite alright! Just my Team Zenith and the Zenith Dojo are troublesome enough to manage, let alone new recruits!" From Zhang Lie's perspective, fostering new recruits would be a demanding and unrewarding task.

"What? Surely not, Deputy Leader Zhang—even you shouldn't be trying to hunt alone! Don't look down on these recruits. They're some of the strongest hunters in Qi, in the second realm!"

Zhou Liao was really quite surprised by Zhang Lie's refusal. After all, in ordinary circumstances, the other team leaders would badger him asking for more people; on the other hand, Zhang Lie was refusing the recruits that Zhou Liao was promising him.

"Troop Leader Zhou, I really am grateful for your consideration, but I won't have a need for them. I expect the other members of Team Zenith to make their way over to the second realm within the next three months. At that point, I'll have them all come over to Qi, and that'll be my team."

Zhou Liao's eyes widened.

"Team Zenith, the one whose hunters all made it to the top twenty? Who took second and third place in the Void Cup? No, wait—how will they be able to ensure that they come to Qi? The will of the world chooses the starting location in the second realm randomly!"

Zhou Liao was certainly well aware of Team Zenith, the members of which had made a name for themselves during the Void Cup. He had even considered leaving them a few spots in the special forces troops once they advanced to the second realm, but as he had mentioned, the starting location in the second realm was chosen randomly, and there was no guarantee they would start in Qi.

Furthermore, if they were sent to some other city, it would be difficult to make their way over. The route from city to city wasn't all that easy to traverse, and the city to which they were sent would hardly let them go so easily. After all, considering Zhang Lie's strength, the hunters of Team Zenith would likely be eagerly sought after by the governors of the various cities.

"Don't worry. I'll be able to gather them here without fail!"

Zhang Lie's response shocked Zhou Liao. Just how on Earth did Zhang Lie plan on achieving such a feat? To be quite honest, Zhou Liao simply couldn't understand Zhang Lie at all. Whenever he felt that he had gained some measure of understanding, Zhang Lie would reveal one bombshell after another.

Zhou Liao suddenly frowned. If Zhang Lie really could control where hunters from the first realm ended up...

Before he could speak, however, Zhang Lie interrupted his train of thought. "Troop Leader Zhou, I'm able to direct the members of Team Zenith to where I want them to go, but this method likely won't work for anyone else."

Zhou Liao sighed, then raised another objection. "Deputy Leader Zhang, there are only seven of you in Team Zenith, aren't there? Our policy is to have at least nine members in a team, so won't you consider adding two more recruits?"

Zhang Lie wasn't very willing to do so, but from the look in Zhou Liao's eyes, he would badger Zhang Lie to no end if Zhang Lie refused.

"Very well, but I want final say over these two new members."

Zhou Liao beamed. "Of course! If they want to join your team, they'll surely need your approval first."

He left the room whistling, and Zhang Lie finally had the time to draft out a development plan for the second realm. He had already begun planning for it the moment he regressed, but his unexpected advancement meant that some changes would be necessary.

He had three main objectives in the second realm.

The first objective was to acquire an asura thorn in preparation for the research and development of a peak-grade limit-breaking potion. This was something he had begun doing the moment he managed to kill the disaster-grade lifeform in the first realm, and the asura thorn was one of the most likely ingredients he would need for the potion. This thorn was something that all members of the sura race had on their right elbow, and it served as the mechanism by which the sura were able to consume the lifeforce of other lifeforms.

An asura was an ascended form of the sura, one so rare that perhaps only one out of tens of millions of sura would ever succeed at the ascension. The asura prized their thorns as much as their very lives, and for Zhang Lie to acquire such an ingredient for his research would be a challenging endeavor indeed.

The second objective was to weaken the sura race as much as he could, to prevent the occurrence of the disgusting human-furnace experiments that the sura race would conduct in the future.

The second objective wasn't as shocking as the first, but it would require far more of his energy and time. After all, strengthening the entirety of the human race wasn't something that could be done in a flash, and it would require careful planning and groundwork on his part.

Finally, his last objective was to cap his peak gene fragments in the second realm and to develop the corresponding peak limit fragments. No ordinary hunter would be able to conceive of such a feat. Indeed, most hunters in the second realm wouldn't even have heard of peak-grade lifeforms, and even fewer would be able to obtain peak gene fragments.

Of course, these weren't objectives he would have to worry about just yet. What was most pressing for him was to go out hunting and acquiring enough basic, mutated, and superior gene fragments from the second realm to give him the ability to venture out hunting on his own.

It was common wisdom for human hunters not to strike out on their own in the second realm, but Zhang Lie recalled a member of the sura race who had been famous for being a lone wolf, which suggested that Zhang Lie would be able to do the same once he reached a certain level of strength.

Chapter 300: The Forest Feast

What sort of strength would Zhang Lie need to venture out into the depths of the second realm on his own? In his previous life, that lone sura had essentially managed to conquer one of the human cities all by himself, killing the governor and his cadre of bodyguards, along with all the special forces units from that city.

Zhang Lie was strong, but not yet that strong. Just based on what he had seen in Qi, he would be hard-pressed to deal with Xiao Zhengyang alone, let alone the other forces sent his way.

In order to have the strength to destroy a city on his own, he would have to at least cap out his mutated gene fragments first.

Zhang Lie summoned up his hunter profile.

Zhang Lie: a peak-grade lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ninecarp Transformation, Fifth Form: Qilin

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

Genes: Basic, 0; Mutated, 0; Superior, 0; Peak, 0; Disaster, 0

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

When Zhang Lie saw that his gene fragments had been wiped clean, he couldn't help feeling a little upset. Just like in his past life, all his gene fragments from the first realm had been incorporated directly into his genetic code, so he would have the opportunity to acquire more gene fragments once again—up to his old maximum limit of 160 basic gene fragments, as well as 150 mutated and superior gene fragments.

Those potions had improved the limits of his body, and those limits were preserved even after his advancement into the second realm. This was the reason why Zhang Lie had been so intent on crafting these potions from the very beginning.

Those who managed to increase their limit fragment capacity in the first realm would have an advantage that carried forward even into higher realms; for instance, he was stronger than even the seasoned veterans of the second realm.

Once his teammates advanced after consuming Potion #3, the superior-grade limit-breaking potion, they might not be as strong as he was, but he would put them on the same level as Zhou Liao and the other team leaders.

After all, the members of Team Zenith had had just about the very best resources from the beginning. He had already done the hard work to pave their road forward; they would simply have to put in the work to remain on it.

After he sketched out a plan, he had a quick lunch, then informed Zhou Liao that he would be hunting around the outskirts of the city to obtain some gene fragments. Zhou Liao wasn't surprised by Zhang Lie's actions—he was just shocked that Zhang Lie had informed him at all.

Of course, his approval or knowledge of the affair wasn't important, but he was still glad that Zhang Lie had done so, that Zhang Lie was willing to respect his authority. With Zhang Lie's strength, he would easily be able to hunt at the outskirts of the city alone, but since he had informed Zhou Liao, Zhou Liao felt obligated to provide him with some support.

As a result, Xia Na's Team 4 and Zhou Ming's Team 7 were assigned to escort Zhang Lie out of the city grounds. When Xia Na and Zhou Ming were informed about this task, they didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Would someone like Zhang Lie even need their protection?

That said, they were more than happy to work with Zhang Lie. In fact, the moment Xia Na's call ended, Ye Tianlang sidled up to her. "Xia Na, during the fight just now, I was the most outspoken against Deputy Leader Zhang Lie, so—"

"Hold it right there! I know what you're going to ask, but I'm not going to accept, no matter what you're offering. Also, do you really think Deputy Leader Zhang Lie is such a petty person?"

Naturally, Ye Tianlang was hoping to get the opportunity to work more closely with Zhang Lie, but Xia Na had seen through him immediately. He turned toward Zhou Ming, who immediately looked away.

"Xia Na, didn't you want my black demon horn? I'll trade it to you for this opportunity!"

"Zhou Ming, there was a female hunter whose contact information you wanted while we were on our last mission, remember? If you let me go, I'll send you her contact information and arrange a date for you with her, what say you?"

All the other team leaders were eyeing this opportunity—they had been won over by Zhang Lie's strength, fame, and the possibility of learning more about these limit fragments that were surely the key to his overwhelming power.

The fight between him and them had been a clear demonstration of the strength of these fragments, and they were certain that, as long as they built up a good relationship with him, they too would have access to these fragments.

Naturally, all of them would vie for this opportunity, but Zhou Ming and Xia Na felt much the same way. The two of them rejected everyone else's offers, then walked off toward Zhang Lie's quarters under everyone else's envious gazes.

What the two of them didn't know was that, shortly after their departure, Ye Tianlang left on "patrol" with his Team 5, and the other team leaders all found some strange reason of their own to leave the underground barracks, all headed toward where Zhang Lie would be hunting.

The sun shone brightly that afternoon. Compared to the first realm of the dimensional world, the second seemed far more vibrant. Under the escort of the two team leaders, Zhang Lie passed through dozens of checkpoints before finally being admitted to the forest outside Qi.

The forest was filled with redwood-like trees, ones so tall that Zhang Lie couldn't see their tip. Allegedly, the reason Qi had been built in such a location was precisely because of the richness of resources in the area. Of course, that was as much an advantage as a disadvantage—such a resource-rich environment was the habitat to many a strong lifeform and indigenous tribes, so there would frequently be beast stampedes and invasions by those hostile tribes.

That said, the forces of Qi had been able to overcome and surmount these difficulties, and the city had survived a number of such incursions without falling.

"Deputy Leader Zhang, the region within fifty kilometers of Qi is populated solely by regular and mutated-grade lifeforms," Xia Na explained.

Zhang Lie nodded. "Given this sort of environment, the lifeforms around are mostly wolf-type or tiger-type, aren't they?"

"Yes, that's right. Generally, we have reports of wolf-type lifeforms prowling the vicinity of the city," Zhou Ming added.

"Very well. It's been a long time since I've had fresh roast meat, so let's enjoy ourselves today."

Zhou Ming and Xia Na's eyes brightened. The more time they spent with Zhang Lie, the faster they would be able to acquire information regarding these limit fragments.

On their command, their team members darted through the forest, vanishing from sight. They had clearly received orders to start hunting the moment they were dispatched. Zhang Lie didn't protest, thinking that this was a routine operation to check the nearby forest for any potential threats, but moments later, he found to his surprise that the special forces troops had all returned, each with a dazed lifeform or another trussed up with them.

"Deputy Leader Zhang, this is a thornback greywolf, a regular lifeform. It's about as strong as a mutated-grade lifeform from the first realm!" one visibly nervous hunter stepped forward and introduced his prey to Zhang Lie.

It was a wolf-type lifeform, but one quite a few sizes larger than even a Siberian tiger from Earth. Its fur was sharp and bristly, like steel needles, and it tended to roam the forest in a pack. Given that this hunter had managed to stun a creature of this size without alerting the rest of the pack, he was clearly deserving of being in the special forces.

The other hunters also quickly stepped forward with their respective prey.

"Deputy Leader Zhang, this is..."

"Deputy Leader Zhang..."

In a matter of moments, Zhang Lie found sixteen different lifeforms placed in front of him, regular and mutated-grade, some stunned, others on the verge of death.