

U. Warlord 301

Chapter 301: Joining Team Zenith

With all this half-dead prey placed before him, Zhang Lie would be able to obtain the gene fragments he needed just by dealing the finishing blow and then consuming their flesh.

"Team Leader Zhou, Team Leader Xia, what's this?" Zhang Lie asked knowingly, believing that the team leaders certainly wanted something from him if they were willing to go to this extent.

Xia Na gave him a brilliant smile. "It's nothing, Deputy Leader. Since we're here, we thought we might as well help you out.

Zhou Ming agreed. "Right! Troop Leader Zhou instructed us to take good care of you."

"Deputy Leader Zhang, won't you land the killing blow? One of my team members is an excellent chef, and I'll have him demonstrate his abilities for you!" Zhou Ming urged.

Thinking about it for a moment, Zhang Lie decided to accept their kindness. With a snap of his fingers, all the genetic lifeforms arrayed before him lost their lives.

Zhou Ming and Xia Na's subordinates immediately got to work, retrieving a set of cleavers and carving knives, chopping up the carcasses on the spot, and starting a campfire.

Zhang Lie, Zhou Ming, and Xia Na sat by the side of the fire as they began to chat. The two team leaders only asked about mundane, anodyne topics until the scent of roasted meat wafted over to them. Only then did Xia Na ask casually, "Deputy Leader Zhang, just how did you obtain such strength? We've both had the foundational breakthrough, but our strength certainly isn't at your level."

So this was the reason behind their actions—they wanted to learn how to become as strong as he was. Zhang Lie smiled. "It's a little too late. The earlier you obtain these limit fragments, the better. You'll see what I mean when you advance to the third realm."

Both of them understood the hidden implication behind Zhang Lie's words almost immediately.

"You mean... the benefit we get from these limit fragments persists from realm to realm?!" Xia Na exclaimed in shock.

Zhang Lie nodded in assent, causing both hunters to stagger. Zhou Ming pressed, "In that case, will we still have a limit of 110 basic gene fragments even in the third realm?"

"110? Yes, that's right!"

Xia Na and Zhou Ming were gratified to hear his answer, but they then realized what he meant by their already being behind in terms of strength—by the time they performed the fundamental breakthrough, they were already in the second realm, and they had lost the ten additional limit fragments from the first.

Moments later, Xia Na calmed down and asked the question she cared most about. "Deputy Leader Zhang, are you so strong simply because of the limit fragments that you acquired?"

"About half my strength, perhaps. I obtained quite a lot of treasures within the first realm," Zhang Lie replied with a smile.

His strength could largely be tied to the mutated and superior limit fragments he possessed, along with the peak and disaster gene fragments he had so fortuitously obtained.

The acquisition of his peak gene fragments had been widely publicized, because a few hunters had seen the moonlight wyrm carcass that he and the members of Team Zenith had brought back to the Blacksteel settlement before the start of the Void Cup.

Indeed, many media sources had even been guessing about the extent of his strength, and some had, fortuitously, gotten it right. One news outlet had proposed that, from Zhang Lie's dominating performance in the Void Cup, he had to have at least 160 limit fragments, with 50 mutated and 50 superior limit fragments added to the mix.

However, this seemed hardly possible. After all, it was widely believed that Zhang Lie had been very lucky to be able to develop his Potion #1, which provided basic limit fragments. How could he have come up with the corresponding potions for mutated and superior limit fragments as well?

After this conversation, however, Xia Na chose to believe that he had indeed done so. Zhang Lie, champion of the Void Cup, strongest of the younger generation of Chinese hunters, might well have exceeded experts' expectations worldwide and come up with Potions #2 and #3 on his own.

Taking a deep breath, she asked, "Deputy Leader Zhang, can I join your team? I want to be a member of Team Zenith!"

Xia Na's eyes shone as brightly as if she had found an oasis after wandering the desert for a week.

Unfortunately, Zhang Lie didn't give her the answer she was hoping to hear. "Team Leader Xia, do you understand what I had in mind when I called my team Team Zenith? The zenith of strength requires a strong foundation built from the first realm, and I've carefully cultivated that in every member of Team Zenith. Unfortunately, I can't accept your request—we're already in the second realm, and your limit has already been restricted as a result."

"Ah." Xia Na's eyes dimmed. She knew that Zhang Lie was right, but even so, she couldn't help feeling as though she had been deprived of something important.

Chapter 302: Rapid Gains

Before Xia Na could get despondent, however, Zhang Lie continued, "However, there are still two spots left in my special forces team. If you're interested, you can go through the special forces' recruitment process once again, but that means that you may have to give up your position as team leader."

Xia Na looked up in shock. "Do you really mean it, Deputy Leader Zhang?"

"Why would I lie? Of course I mean it."

Zhou Ming, caught in a moment of hesitation, was unable to participate in the rapid back-and-forth conversation between the two of them.

Zhou Ming had intended on asking about the possibility of joining Zhang Lie's team after Xia Na finished her conversation with him. While they talked, he mulled over the relationships he had

developed with the team members in his care, and he wasn't certain he could leave them all just like that.

However, this indecision caused him to miss the most important opportunity of his life, and he continued to regret it even years down the line.

"Team Leader Zhou, the meat's ready to be served!"

He was too late to make his request now; the scent of roast meat had Zhang Lie salivating. Zhang Lie stood up and headed to the campfire.

"Ah, Deputy Leader Zhang, please have a taste!"

Seeing Zhang Lie head over, the chef handed him two large skewers of roast meat, glistening with sizzling golden-yellow drops of oil, which Zhang Lie began to consume immediately.

Zhang Lie could clearly feel the cells in his body rejoicing as he acquired more and more gene fragments. It had been a long time since he had had such a satisfying meal; after all, in the dimensional realm, after he finished acquiring his superior limit fragments, there had been a long stretch of time during which he hadn't been able to gain any strength from eating.

Now, however, with his gene fragments reset...

Zhang Lie began stuffing his mouth with skewers of meat, one after the other, enjoying the immensely pleasurable sensation of satisfying mind and body. In just five minutes, he had managed to consume as many basic and mutated gene fragments as he could from what had been hunted, and he smiled as he pulled up his status window.

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, 137; Mutated, 49; 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 Wyrms (peak)

He hadn't even had to hunt—just eat! Zhang Lie now understood why some tycoons were willing to import living genetic lifeforms from the dimensional world to Earth even at such great expense; the allure of growing strong without any effort was simply too great.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but think back to the time he had spent in the white-grub cave in the first few months of his reincarnation. How boring and tedious his life had been! If he had found the superior-grade white grub any later, he would have given up. Suddenly, he found himself very relieved that he had persisted all the way through the second realm, and that he had acquired the superior-grade white-grub soulshard.

As good as it felt to have others hunting on his behalf, however, he knew that this wasn't something he could afford for this future development. After all, gene fragments represented only a fraction of his strength; a hunter who obtained all his gene fragments by hunting prey himself would surely be stronger than one who didn't.

He would have to be careful about not acquiring too many mutated gene fragments at once so that he could acclimate to his strength. He certainly didn't want to injure his team members by accident.

As a result, after he reached 50 mutated gene fragments, Zhang Lie began consuming only regular-grade meat.

Just as the hunters were enjoying their feast, a few familiar figures emerged from the other side of the forest.

Chapter 303: A Satisfying Feast

Naturally, those figures who appeared from the forest were the team leaders of the special forces troops who had found all sorts of excuses to head over.

Ye Tianlang's expression of feigned surprise looked particularly comical. As a principled man, it was particularly strange to see him acting in this fashion, but he wasn't alone. The other team leaders all quickly appeared in succession.

"Xia Na, what a surprise to see all of you here!" Su Nan forced herself to start an awkward conversation. It was hardly a surprise—they had all known beforehand that Xia Na would be bringing Zhang Lie into the forest to hunt.

As one of Su Nan's good friends, however, Xia Na didn't expose her. She smiled graciously. "Right, we've been helping Deputy Leader Zhang hunt some gene fragments."

"Is that so? How's the progress? Do you need some help?" Su Nan asked, her face flushing red from embarrassment as she marched swiftly toward Xia Na.

"It's been quite successful so far, but I think we're missing some mutated-grade lifeforms," she suggested delicately, glancing at the skewers of meat arrayed by the campfire.

Zhou Ming frowned. "Haven't we just started hunting? What's the rush?"

He shot one of his subordinates a glance, and they hurriedly prepared to continue the hunt. Before they could do so, Ye Tianlang, who was standing beside Su Nan, announced, "There's no need, Deputy Leader Zhou, just prepare to cook some more!"

Even Zhang Lie, who was about to stop them, was surprised by Ye Tianlang's words.

Zhou Ming frowned. "Why not?"

"Because the rest of us have already hunted one of just about every species of mutated-grade lifeform in a hundred kilometers of the forest!" Ye Tianlang gestured forward with his right arm, and the special forces troops of Teams 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9 rushed out from the forest, each carrying one or two mutated-grade lifeforms, no two of which were alike.

In the end, about a hundred dying mutated-grade lifeforms were laid down in front of Zhang Lie, some of which he hadn't encountered even in his past life.

It looked as though he had really underestimated the impact of his fight with the various team leaders.

A hundred mutated-grade lifeforms—in practice, no matter how high his mutated gene capacity, just twenty such lifeforms would have been sufficient, but these team leaders had hunted down every species they were aware of in the hundred kilometers of forest all around!

Zhang Lie didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. He had intended not to obtain any more mutated gene fragments at the moment, but by this point, it would be far too harsh to reject them outright.

"Deputy Leader Zhang, just kill them all and I'll handle the rest. We'd like to apologize again for our actions before the start of the fight, so please treat this as an apology from all of us here."

Ye Tianlang was well aware that Zhang Lie's arrival in Qi could be the biggest opportunity they would have in the second realm.

"Thank you for this gesture, Team Leader Zhang—and all the rest of you. Of course I won't be offended by what happened in the past." Zhang Lie smiled and snapped his fingers again, killing all the lifeforms gathered before him.

"Shall we have a big feast for everyone, then? I hope someone's brought wine," Zhang Lie suggested casually, making everyone feel as though he had already forgotten the fight from earlier in the day.

Indeed, the outcome of the fight had been a big shock to them, but to him, it might not mean anything much.

"Wine? All forms of alcohol are forbidden on a mission, Deputy Leader Zhang!" Ye Tianlang responded automatically, causing Zhang Lie to frown.

"Surely this doesn't count as a mission? Even if it does, as the deputy troop leader, I'll make an exception for this occasion."

"Ah, no, of course not—this is certainly a special case!" He turned behind him. "Old Hong, you keep a few vintages with you at all times, don't you? Why don't you share them with all of us?"

A bearded hunter stepped forward. "Team Leader Ye, my alcohol—"

"Come, now, I'll refund you tomorrow for everything that was consumed today!"

Old Hong was known to be an alcoholic, and he couldn't bear the thought of giving up his most prized alcohol. That said, before he could fully voice his objection, Ye Tianlang stopped him short.

From his perspective, getting a chance to talk with Zhang Lie was far more valuable than a few jars of alcohol. Hong knew that as well, but he still hesitated briefly before he quickly brought out a dozen jars of alcohol from his storage.

"Deputy Leader Zhang, this is a special brew from my hometown. I wouldn't be willing to share this with just any guest, but for you... please, have a taste!"

Zhang Lie nodded. "Of course! Well, then, let's get started—we have meat and alcohol ready for everyone!"

The mood quickly turned festive. The team leaders sat down by the campfire as their subordinates began preparing the meat, and all sorts of delicacies were quickly delivered to them.

At the same time, Zhang Lie's gene fragment count rapidly began to increase. Not half an hour later, when Zhang Lie next pulled up his status window, the change was obvious.

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, 160; Mutated, 150; 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 Wyrms (peak)

In just one day, he had capped out his basic and mutated gene fragments again—and all he had to do in the meantime was eat and drink!

Chapter 304: The Tianji Council

During their feast, Ye Tianlang and the other team leaders questioned Zhang Lie about just why he was so strong. Zhang Lie generously told them what he told Xia Na, but unlike before, he didn't offer any of the remaining team leaders a place in his team.

"Thank you for this feast, everyone. I had a really good time," Zhang Lie thanked the other team leaders as he stood up and patted his stomach.

"No, no, don't thank us!" Old Hong patted Zhang Lie on the shoulder, but the moment he touched Zhang Lie, he felt a frightening force that seemed to strike at his very soul.

He yelped and snatched his hand back in pain.

Zhang Lie stepped ten paces aside. "Ah, sorry, I've consumed so many gene fragments today that I'm a little unused to my strength at present."

He had only intended to move a little distance away, but his strength had ended up propelling him quite a bit farther.

"It's been a long time since I've had such a satisfying feast as well. We owe this feast to your arrival, Deputy Leader Zhang!"

"Ah, shut it, you bootlicker!"

"Right, it's all thanks to you, Deputy Leader Zhang. If Troop Leader Zhou were here, I'm sure he wouldn't have permitted such a feast."

The various team leaders grew bolder and more uninhibited owing to their alcohol consumption, and Zhang Lie much preferred this candor and honesty to their original reserved and aloof demeanor.

After the feast, the troops began to clean up. The forest was an important region for resource acquisition for all the hunters of Qi, and they had to be responsible for maintaining it in good condition.

They disposed of the remaining inedible parts of the lifeforms' carcasses, then packed up the rest of the meat. Unlike in the first realm of the dimensional world, hunters who didn't participate in the hunt would still be able to obtain a modest number of fragments from consuming the lifeforms' meat.

As the troops cleaned up, a wave of hunters walked out of the northern gate, led by a man in his thirties. He wore armor specially crafted in Qi, with a black, triangular emblem by his chest on which was embroidered the words "Tianji Council".

His thirty or so subordinates wore much the same outfit, though with a different color, and had haughty expressions on their faces. The Tianji Council possessed the greatest authority in Qi after the governor himself; in some sense, they possessed even greater authority.

As the supervisory council of Qi, they were able to strip the governor of his power with a unanimous vote, and they also oversaw law and order within Qi. They reported their findings to the respective council leaders and negotiated a solution to whatever issue they identified. If neither party could agree on a resolution, the matter would be brought to the governor himself.

In practical terms, no one wanted to mess with the supervisory council, because they caused trouble no matter where they went.

By the gates of Qi, Wang Po was very happy that he had finally found the woman of his dreams whom he had met during a chance encounter. She was a member of the special forces! No wonder he had been hard-pressed to find any information on her despite his status on the supervisory council.

He had missed the opportunity to greet her and introduce himself last time around, so he certainly couldn't waste this opportunity now. Wang Po smiled as he considered how to make the best impression on her that he could.

As they walked out of the gates to Qi, Wang Po asked again, "Are you sure you saw her in the northwestern forests?"

"Absolutely. I saw Miss Xia Na and another team leader bring their troops into the forest following a young hunter!"

"A young hunter? Who?"

"I'm not sure. His face was unfamiliar to me—perhaps he's part of her mission."

"In that case, let's head over. Stand at attention, lads— if I succeed, I'll reward all of you handsomely!"

"Yes, Captain!" his subordinates chorused.

At the same time, Zhang Lie and the others, who had just packed up, received news that members of the Tianji Council were heading in their direction from the northern gates.

"What's going on?" Zhou Ming frowned in disbelief. Their campfire was done on Zhang Lie's whims; it hadn't been planned beforehand, and it hadn't lasted a very long time either. Could someone have ratted them out to the Tianji Council?

Surely not, but in that case, how could they have known about the campfire? After all, nighttime in the second realm was more dangerous than in the first realm, and under usual circumstances, traveling beyond the city limits at night was strictly prohibited to hunters.

The Tianji Council had to be aware of this point, so the only reason they were at the northern gates now had to be because of them.

Chapter 305: The Embarrassed Wang Po

"What should we do? I bet those guys are coming after us!" Xia Na murmured.

The band of hunters had all consumed quite a fair bit of alcohol, so despite the fact that they had cleaned up, it was obvious that they were slightly tipsy.

"We won't be able to hide it, but I can't imagine they'll care very much. It's hardly a problem!"

"It'll put a damper on Deputy Leader Zhang's first day here! Don't you consider that a problem?"

"Well, we're special forces troops, aren't we? I'm sure we can fend them off."

Zhang Lie didn't know about these members of the Tianji Council, not having encountered them in his past life. "What's going on?"

"Put simply, the Tianji Council's in charge of law and order within Qi, and anyone who violates the law is within their purview. As you know, we—the special forces—aren't supposed to be drinking while on official business, so..." Zhou Ming spoke up.

"Is that it? I said I'd be responsible, didn't I? Let me handle it." Zhang Lie wasn't at all nervous; this didn't seem like a serious offense to him. They were in a relatively safe region of the city, and none of them had consumed enough liquor to get drunk. Furthermore, their campfire was far from the usual hunting trails, and they certainly hadn't caused anyone else any problems.

Zhang Lie didn't think that this was an issue at all. Furthermore, even if it really were one, surely Governor Xiao would protect him, and even if not, Zhang Lie, who had just capped his basic and mutated gene fragments, had nothing to fear.

Once he digested the strength of the limit fragments that he had just acquired, he would have the strength to venture out into the wilderness of the second realm on his own, without the protection afforded by a city. If it came down to it, he believed he could even take down one of the more powerful races in the second realm.

Zhang Lie's words shook the special forces troops, but almost immediately afterwards, Xia Na urged him against the idea.

"Please don't, Deputy Leader Zhang! You're a newcomer, so you might not know just how annoying the Tianji Council is to face. Please, let us handle it. It's only a minor issue, but none of them know who you are. If you try to step in, it might complicate things further," Xia Na explained.

"If that's the case, I'll leave it to you, then." Indeed, there was quite a bit Zhang Lie didn't know about Qi, and Xia Na would be far better equipped to deal with the issue.

As the troops walked out of the forest, they immediately found themselves facing the Tianji Council, a party of 32 hunters led by a man in his thirties. He was smiling cheerfully, and it hardly seemed like he was there to cause trouble.

As Zhang Lie scrutinized the hunters, the fourth captain of the Tianji Council, Wang Po, was likewise scrutinizing the special forces troops. He frowned. There had been some mistake in his intel—there were at least sixty or seventy hunters in their ranks.

Hadn't his men told him that there were only two teams of special forces troops in the forest? It looked more like all the forces had been dispatched on some mission or another. Furthermore, what confused Wang Po even more was the hunter standing in the middle of the crowd, Zhang Lie.

He was sure he had never met Zhang Lie before, but his face seemed oddly familiar.

"Isn't that... Zhang Lie?!" one of Wang Po's men shouted from behind him, causing Wang Po to rear back in shock. Right, that fellow, simultaneously familiar and not, had to be Zhang Lie, champion of the Void Cup, dragonlord of China, the pride of mankind!

What was he doing here? When had he advanced to the second realm? Had he joined the special forces of Qi?

After a momentary shock, Wang Po's excitement turned into sullenness. The encounter that he had planned for Xia Na would be entirely disrupted by Zhang Lie's presence. Compared to someone like Zhang Lie, his name and title meant nothing, so Wang Po was naturally quite annoyed.

"Captain Wang?" In the end, Xia Na stepped up after recognizing the other party. She stood in front of Zhang Lie, as though she were protecting him, causing Wang Po's frown to deepen. Nevertheless, as he turned to face Xia Na, he replied jovially, "That's right, Troop Leader Xia Na!"

"What might you be doing here? Does the Tianji Council have official business by the northern gates? Ah, no—how do you know my name? I don't believe I introduced myself when we first met."

Glancing at Xia Na's pretty face, Wang Po found his negative emotions dissipating. "Regarding the first question, that's a secret for the moment. As for the second, well—as a captain of the Tianji Council, it's easy enough for me to find out who you are!"

Xia Na's charm and grace drew her fair share of admirers, and Wang Po was clearly one such. There were countless hunters who were besotted with the two female team leaders of the special forces troops, but this was the first time a captain of the Tianji Council had ever tried to make a move on them.

In that case, could the hunters have been mistaken? Perhaps the reason members of the Tianji Council had gathered by the northern gate wasn't to cause them trouble for their drunkenness, but because their leader wanted to arrange a meeting with Xia Na!

Chapter 306: Law of Qi

The special forces troops sighed in relief. Xia Na herself understood Wang Po's intentions, but she had no impression of him at all beyond her minor interactions with him during her last mission.

She replied, "Very well, Captain Wang, I'm impressed by your diligence. Now, if you don't mind, I won't trouble you any longer. We'll be heading straight back to Qi— our troop leader's waiting for us!"

Xia Na's response was little more than an outright rejection, but this wasn't an outcome that Wang Po was willing to accept. After all, he had never failed to get his hands on any of his prey before, and Xia Na wouldn't be the first.

Wang Po turned his attention to Zhang Lie. "What's the hurry? It's still early in the day! If I'm not mistaken, the hunter standing behind you must be the famous Zhang Lie! It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Zhang. Many of my subordinates are fans of yours. Would you be willing to sign an autograph for me?"

He had been rather curious why Xia Na would be willing to protect her like a mother hen with her chicks, and why the team leaders of the special forces troops seemed to be trying to suck up to him. After all, he might be a famous hunter in the first realm, but he was only a newcomer in the second!

The team leaders of the special forces were all prideful and haughty, so why were they treating him so well? Could their mission be to protect this newcomer with significant latent potential?

Only by figuring out their relationship to Zhang Lie could he decide on his attitude toward him.

"Please don't joke around, Captain Wang—he's a key element of our mission!" Xia Na replied, motioning for Zhang Lie not to speak with the back of her hand.

"A key element of your mission? If you've all been out in the forests by Qi, is your mission to help him acquire basic and mutated gene fragments in the second realm, then? My goodness, I simply can't believe that the champion of the Void Cup himself would need such a large group of forces accompanying him! This has to be the funniest joke I've heard all year!"

Xia Na's protective attitude toward Zhang Lie caused Wang Po to turn jealous, and his attitude toward Zhang Lie became far more dismissive than before.

The team leaders' faces flashed in anger, and even Xia Na herself replied coldly, "Captain Wang, I don't believe our mission has any relevance to you. Furthermore, please note that Mr. Zhang Lie has just been given the role of deputy troop leader of the special forces. He bears greater authority within Qi than you, so please show him the respect afforded to his station. No one can besmirch the honor of the special forces—not you, and not the Tianji Council!"

Wang Po was dumbstruck. By order of the governor, the deputy troop leader of the special forces?! What sort of situation was this? He hadn't heard about it at all! Didn't the special forces only have a single troop leader, Zhou Liao? What was this deputy troop leader business?

Furthermore, if this was a command by the governor himself, why hadn't the Tianji Council received any news of this sudden development? Could Xia Na be trying to protect Zhang Lie? No, given how the team leaders surrounding Zhang Lie were behaving, that was hardly likely.

Could he really have become the deputy troop leader of the Qi special forces, then? Just how did he manage to get such an important position as a newcomer to the second realm? Even if his contributions within the first realm were massive, this was the second realm—how could he have gotten the various team leaders to submit to his authority?

In fact, the Tianji Council had been made aware of Zhang Lie's instatement as of that afternoon, but by that time, Wang Po had already left headquarters.

"Surely it's a stretch to suggest that I'm besmirching the special forces' honor, Miss Xia Na! You're not joking about Mr. Zhang Lie's position, are you?"

Wang Po's chest suddenly felt suffused with jealousy when he saw how ardently Xia Na defended Zhang Lie. He strode forward, staring at Xia Na all the while, as though trying to discern something from her look.

"Of course I'm not joking, Mr. Wang Po. I'm sure the records have been sent to the Tianji Council headquarters by now."

Xia Na's firm response caused any remaining doubt in Wang Po's mind to evaporate. Had Zhang Lie really become a deputy troop leader the moment he ascended to the second realm? Wang Po became furious. He had spent ten long years to get his position, but Zhang Lie had achieved more in a single day!

In rage, Wang Po sucked in a deep breath—and smelled alcohol on Xia Na. Alcohol?! No—the special forces troops were forbidden to drink while on duty!

Wang Po, who had forgotten his initial motive entirely, couldn't help but smile.

"Haha, alright, I apologize for doubting your new position, Deputy Leader Zhang. However, as the deputy troop leader, shouldn't you be responsible for these troops? Why are you hiding behind a woman?" Wang Po called out.

Of course, Zhang Lie had to respond to this provocation. "A humorous joke, Captain Wang! It's simply my first day on duty, and I'm still unfamiliar with Qi as a whole. Team Leader Xia and the others are all excellent leaders, so I'm letting me show me the ropes for the moment. Is something the matter?"

Zhang Lie naturally stepped forward as well. He tried not to cause trouble, but he certainly didn't intend on being a punching bag. Even in the Void Cup, he had deftly handled the aggression of the winged. Why would he fear a captain of the Tianji Council, who was nothing in comparison?

Wang Po laughed in anger. "Are you aware, Deputy Leader Zhang, that special forces troops are forbidden to drink while on duty?"

Chapter 307: Come Over Here

"Forbidden, you say? So what if I do know, and so what if I don't?" Zhang Lie smiled.

Wang Po smirked. "If you committed the crime knowingly, then the punishment will be increased by one level. I'm sure that, even if you weren't aware of this statute, the team leaders under your command are—and if none of you were aware, then I'd better invite you all to the Tianji Council headquarters for a lesson or two."

Wang Po's goal was to detain Zhang Lie for a little while and teach him a lesson during that time, but that was it. Given Zhang Lie's position and his favor with the governor, Wang Po wouldn't dare to do anything more than that. After all, as a hunter who had been in Qi for over a decade, he knew just what he could do and what he couldn't.

Unfortunately, he had underestimated just how highly Governor Xiao valued Zhang Lie, as well as Zhang Lie's strength and temper. Zhang Lie didn't know just what the Tianji Council headquarters was like, but it was evident that it would be a bad idea

"I was the one who asked for alcohol. They did remind me about the regulation against drinking, but I ignored it," Zhang Lie corrected him. "That said, I don't intend on following you to your headquarters."

"No? In that case, you're defying the law, and I have the authority to arrest you! Anyone who aids you will be charged with the same crime!"

Zhang Lie only scoffed. "Troops, listen up. No matter what happens, without my express order, none of you are to move."

He turned back to Wang Po. "Seize me if you dare, Captain Wang!"

He began circulating his genetic energy as a frightening aura descended around him. Zhang Lie felt like a roaring, boundless ocean, mysterious and dark, surging with energy.

The sudden release of his aura shocked Wang Po and the special forces troops. "Y-y-you, if you dare to resist the law, you'll be expelled from Qi!"

Zhang Lie's aura was so potent that it made Wang Po's legs quiver, but he would lose face if he backed down now, so he had to double down on his threat.

Glancing at Wang Po's shocked expression, Zhang Lie smiled again. "Resisting arrest? I'm doing nothing of the sort. Aren't you going to bring me back to Tianji Council headquarters? Come over here and get me, then!" Zhang Lie taunted, but Wang Po didn't make a move.

Instead, Wang Po turned to the two hunters by his side. "Wang Nan, Wang Hai, drag him over!"

Given their surname, they were likely related to Wang Po by blood; indeed, none of his other men would be so foolish as to listen to his orders now.

Although Wang Nan and Wang Hai were quite cowed by Zhang Lie's presence, they couldn't bring themselves to refuse Wang Po's command. After hesitating for a moment, they slowly began to approach Zhang Lie.

Just as the two of them lifted their feet, however, the ground shook. A black runic tablet fell in front of Zhang Lie. The moment the tablet touched the ground, the two hunters felt their bodies stiffen and grow heavy, as if a mountain had fallen on their backs. They stumbled forward and sank down, along with the forces behind Zhang Lie and Wang Po.

The hunters were forced to circulate their own genetic energy, but even then, those from the Tianji Council found themselves unable to stand upright, with their spines slowly curving downward.

As for the special forces troops, they retreated almost immediately as the black tablet dropped from the skies. They did so following Zhang Lie's rapid hand gestures, and they had already experienced the strength of that tablet earlier today during the exhibition match.

As the force of gravity grew stronger and stronger, the hunters of the Tianji Council, including Wang Po, found themselves lying splayed out on the ground. Except for Wang Po, who was barely able to move his fingertips, the other hunters couldn't move their bodies at all.

Only then did Wang Po realize just what sort of existence he had provoked, as well as why the haughty special forces troops were willing to accept him as their leader. Zhang Kue was strong, far stronger than he had given him any credit for!

Just like the team leaders of the special forces troops, who had been beaten into submission, Wang Po didn't expect that Zhang Lie's strength would carry over from the first realm. However, he had just found himself proven wrong. Who could have thought that Zhang Lie would be so strong?

Wang Po was simultaneously outraged and shocked. He too had once been heralded as a genius, and never in his decade in the second realm had he suffered such gross indignity. Zhang Lie would pay for what he had done!

Almost without hesitation, he sounded the emergency alarm that he carried with him at all times, which would alert the entirety of the Tianji Council. Once they arrived, no matter how strong Zhang Lie was, he would have to submit to their authority!

Chapter 308: Head of the Council

Within the Tianji Council headquarters, the council head Wang Yanyi was just about to head home when the emergency alert sounded from a device he kept in a pouch by his waist. He lowered his head—the alert came from his own nephew!

He immediately dispatched a few hunters toward the source of the alert.

Outside the forests of Qi, Zhang Lie didn't panic when he saw Wang Po sound an emergency alarm. In truth, he was quite curious just who was backing such a useless lout like Wang Po. The team leaders standing behind him, however, began sending reports back to the underground barracks the moment they noticed Wang Po's actions.

When Zhou Liao heard of the news, he immediately sent a group of hunters to inform the governor of the matter at once.

The confrontation seemed as though it would snowball.

"Deputy Leader Zhang, please don't go much further than this. Wang Po's a weakling in his own right, but his backer, Wang Yanyi, won't be easy to deal with," Xia Na advised.

"That's not a problem. I'd like to see just what they think they can do to me."

Zhang Lie's advancement into the second realm had been an accident. He had intended on keeping a low profile for some time, but found himself disdained everywhere he went—first by the special forces troops, and now the Tianji Council, as though his winning the Void Cup was an insignificant accomplishment.

He had finally gotten to let loose, but even that was being ruined by some power-tripping asshole who was vying for Xia Na's attention.

He increased the force of gravity in the area until Wang Po was unable to move even his fingertips, but because of his newfound strength, he had accidentally increased it so much that Wang Po began

bleeding from all his orifices. If Zhang Lie hadn't noticed the problem and relaxed slightly, Wang Po would likely have exploded.

Saved though he might be from a gruesome death, Wang Po was scared stiff. He was strong even by Qi standards, and he had never, ever felt so helpless before. Under usual circumstances, everyone from Qi would give him face owing to Wang Yanyi's name.

After all, the Tianji Council was in charge of overseeing the city's councils, and Wang Yanyi was its head. The head of the Tianji Council was as strong as the governor himself, and they had once been called the twin heroes of Qi. Who would dare provoke such an existence?

Wang Po had never imagined that he would end up facing someone who wasn't cowed by his uncle, or that he would be so strong. He knew very well just how close he had been to death in that instant.

He could move no part of his body. Half his head was pressed against the ground, and he was only able to suck in air through one nostril. He prayed that his uncle would get here soon and relieve him of his misery, but what he didn't know was that even Wang Yanyi might be hard-pressed to get him out of such dire straits.

After all, given how things had developed, it was only natural for Zhang Lie to use him as an example to avoid being looked down upon by anyone else.

About a minute later, in a beam of blue light, a man in his fifties suddenly appeared beside Wang Po.

"Be careful, Team Leader Zhang! This is Wang Yanyi, head of the Tianji Council and Wang Po's uncle. He's ruthless and vindictive!" The moment he appeared, Xia Na used a technique to send him a private message.

Zhang Lie nodded, then motioned for the troops to remain calm with the back of his hand.

As for Wang Yanyi, he began frowning the moment he surveyed the scene. Someone in his position would be able to recognize Zhang Lie in the blink of an eye, but the fact that the members of the Tianji Council were lying spread-eagled on the ground meant that they had no choice but to be on opposite sides of this conflict.

He turned to Zhang Lie with a frown. "Are you Zhang Lie? What's going on here?"

As he began circulating his genetic energy, the members of the Tianji Council found the weight on their bodies significantly lessened.

"I am," Zhang Lie declared. Noticing what Wang Yanyi was doing, he began to counter Wang Yanyi's aura by increasing the strength of his own.

The blood moon hung radiant in the air as the force of gravity surrounding the members of the Tianji Council multiplied to an extent even more frightening than before. Even Wang Yanyi himself barely avoided stumbling, but as he checked himself, he shot into a fit of rage.

Who would dare countermand his authority?

For a second-realm hunter, he was indeed on the strong side, but Wang Yanyi himself had hardly made a move. The only reason he had held off was because he noticed that Wang Po and the others seemed to be in bad shape.

"Lad, there's no need to be so rash. I'm Wang Yanyi, head of the Tianji Council, and these are my men. Let them go, and we can discuss your grievances."

As an experienced second-realm hunter, he was certain that he would be able to break this unusual gravitational pull, but it was likely that Wang Po and the others would be seriously injured as a result. This wasn't a sight he was willing to see, so he could only back down and try to resort to diplomacy.

"I'm willing to let them go, as long as they apologize to me."

Wang Yanyi narrowed his eyes. Although he didn't know how Wang Po had offended Zhang Lie, Wang Po's decade of experience in Qi gave him confidence as to his nephew's judgment.

"Lad, I know of your exploits in the first realm, so that's why I'm asking you this again—are you truly unwilling to let them go?"

Chapter 309: Matters Blowing Up

Killing intent exuded from Wang Yanyi's body. Any other hunter in Qi would have been scared stiff, but unfortunately for Wang Yanyi, Zhang Lie was fearless even in the face of Wang Yanyi's unbridled aggression.

"I won't let them go. Will you attack me, then?" Zhang Lie stomped on the ground, causing the bodies of Wang Po and the others to shudder. Some of the hunters from the council were even knocked unconscious by the trauma.

"You! Zhang Lie, if anything happens to these hunters here, I'll have you torn apart limb from limb!" Wang Yanyi yelled out in anger.

"Limb from limb? Zhang Lie's under my protection. Who dares try to attack him?" Just as Zhang Lie was about to deliver a retort, a loud cry was heard in the distance. The next moment, Xiao Zhengyang, governor of Qi, landed beside Zhang Lie with a thunderous expression on his face.

As he did so, the reinforcements that Wang Yanyi had summoned arrived: dozens of elders from the Tianji Council.

Who could have predicted that this scuffle would have resulted in such a big disturbance? From the perspective of the special forces troops, this altercation had been a minor matter. If Wang Po hadn't continued antagonizing Zhang Lie, the situation surely wouldn't have devolved to this extent, but with so many influential hunters of Qi arriving at the scene, there would be no easy resolution to the affair.

After all, between Xiao Zhengyang and Wang Yanyi lay an uneasy peace, one that could be disrupted by even a small affair. Their personalities were at odds with one another, and they disagreed on quite a number of issues.

As a result, it was almost inevitable that they would take opposing sides in this conflict.

"Ah, of course! None but the governor's men would be so daring as to attack the Tianji Council!" Wang Yanyi called out, refusing to back down.

Xiao Zhengyang crossed his arms. "Don't be so sure of that just yet. Before investigating the matter, how can you be so certain about what's going on?"

He turned and asked, "Zhang Lie, what's going on? You can free the Tianji Council hunters now—don't worry, with me around, no one will dare to touch you!" Xiao Zhengyang thumped his chest.

Zhang Lie sighed and smiled. "It's no big deal. The special forces troops went hunting with me in the forest to obtain some basic and mutated gene fragments, and we had an impromptu feast with alcohol as a result. Despite the fact that we weren't bothering anyone, this fellow, Wang Po, insisted on detaining me for breaking the law! Of course I would resist his subjugation. The reason I forced them all onto the ground was because I was curious about just who their backer was, and, well, you've seen the rest."

Zhang Lie dispelled the force holding the Tianji Council hunters down, then summarized his actions innocently.

"Well, Wang Yanyi?" Xiao Zhengyang fully believed Zhang Lie's words—given Zhang Lie's strength and new position in Qi, there was no reason for him to lie. Indeed, he was very happy that Zhang Lie was willing to explain the situation to him, because it demonstrated that Zhang Lie respected him.

"A one-sided narrative! Wang Po, explain your side of the story!" Wang Yanyi commanded.

Wang Po, still bleeding from all his orifices, had just clambered up dazed from the ground. Upon hearing his uncle's words, however, he immediately knelt back down.

"Head, please stand up for me! Not only did Zhang Lie allow his men to drink on duty, he even resisted arrest violently. If you had been any later, I might already have perished!"

The blood streaming down Wang Po's face naturally evoked sympathy.

"Well, Governor Xiao, I believe you've heard Wang Po's testimony. As Zhang Lie mentioned, he did imbibe alcohol with the rest of the troops while on duty. Surely you must agree that detaining Zhang Lie is a reasonable thing to do in this scenario. What right does Zhang Lie have to refuse? As the governor of Qi, surely you don't intend on ignoring law and order!"

"Furthermore, even if Zhang Lie does have some accomplishments to his name in the first realm, he's still a newcomer to the second, and his actions today clearly show that he has no sense of respect for the authorities of this realm. From my perspective, he certainly does need some reeducation—a stint in the Tianji Council headquarters would do him some good!"

"What do you say, Governor Xiao?"

Essentially everyone notable in the Tianji Council was present, so Xiao Zhengyang certainly couldn't let Zhang Lie go just like that. Otherwise, the Tianji Council would be publicly derided as a powerless authority.

Furthermore, given his understanding of Xiao Zhengyang, though he was direct and forthright, he surely wouldn't choose to go to war with the Tianji Council for Zhang Lie alone.

Unfortunately, Wang Yanyi was entirely mistaken—he had underestimated how highly Xiao Zhengyang valued Zhang Lie, as well as Zhang Lie's own strength.

Chapter 310: Are You Satisfied

"Of course not!" Zhang Lie and Xiao Zhengyang replied simultaneously. Zhang Lie added, "I'm not going back to the Tianji Council headquarters with you, one way or another."

Xiao Zhengyang frowned as he challenged Wang Yanyi. "You claim that Zhang Lie and the others were drinking while on duty, but how do you know that they were on duty?"

Wang Yanyi was at a loss for words at how shameless Governor Xiao's words were. Indeed, if Xiao Zhengyang, who was responsible for the special forces, were to attest that the troops weren't on duty, then there wouldn't be any problem at all.

Just then, at that critical moment, the troop leader of the special forces, Zhou Liao, arrived with his team.

Wang Yanyi immediately turned to him, trying to get him to say something incriminating, but his old rival, Xiao Zhengyang, naturally knew what he was thinking.

Before Wang Yanyi could speak up, Xiao Zhengyang continued, "What's the matter? Don't you think I'd know if my own men were on duty? As for you, Wang Yanyi, why are your men trying to track my troops' location?"

Wang Yanyi was silent. If Xiao Zhengyang were so adamantly denying Zhang Lie's crime, then there was nothing he could do—no matter what, Xiao Zhengyang would protect Zhang Lie to the utmost.

After all, the law in question about drinking while on duty was rather vague, and Zhang Lie's case would be in a gray area. A deeper investigation into what had happened would be fruitless, but what shocked Wang Yanyi was the accusation that the governor had then made.

"Governor Xiao, dropping Zhang Lie's charges for the moment, on what grounds do you claim that my men have been investigating your troops' location?"

This was far more serious a crime than drinking while on duty. After all, the special forces were, in some sense, the governor's guards. Trying to investigate their whereabouts was akin to snooping into the governor's business.

Wang Yanyi had entertained such notions before, but the time wasn't yet right to put them into practice, and he certainly didn't intend to take responsibility for his nephew's actions.

"Why don't you ask your nephew about how he managed to determine who Xia Na was, as well as how he knew when the special forces had left the city? There have been quite a number of curious coincidences lately, haven't there? Your men investigating my troops' location, then convening the Tianji Council elders here..."

Xiao Zhengyang's tone was deathly serious, causing Wang Yanyi's face to turn ashen.

"Wang Po!" he shouted. Would all his planning be waylaid by his lecherous nephew? "Speak! Are the governor's words accurate?"

Wang Yanyi was almost certain that Wang Po had done so, but surely not on behalf of the Tianji Council.

"Unc—, I mean, Head, I did do so, but only because I wanted to introduce myself to Team Leader Xia Na. I had no other intention!" Wang Po stammered, knowing that the situation had snowballed beyond his control. If he were to hide anything else now...

The elders behind Wang Yanyi, along with the special forces, all exhaled in relief. Wang Po had a terrible poker face, and it was obvious when he was lying.

When Xiao Zhengyang questioned Wang Yanyi just now, the ones who were most surprised were the elders arrayed behind Wang Yanyi himself. If he had really plotted everything, then that meant he was about to stage a direct confrontation against the governor. In that case, who would they support—governor or council head?

Politics was a natural development in any city, and the elders' stance would determine their fate, as well as those of their families. To be frank, except for those elders deathly loyal to Wang Yanyi, none of the others wanted to make such a decision. From their perspective, choosing either option would be a risk, whereas maintaining the status quo was much safer.

"Well, Governor Xiao, I hope it's clear that Wang Po had no nefarious intentions in mind!" Wang Yanyi informed him.

Xiao Zhengyang laughed. "I had forgotten about your nephew's penchant for women. That said, as the head of the Tianji Council, you bear responsibility for his actions. Don't you think he needs to be punished?"

Zhang Lie barely stifled his laughter. How the tables had turned!

"Very well. For trying to keep tabs on the special forces, Wang Po, fourth captain of the Tianji Council, will be locked up for a span of ten days and be demoted from his post. Governor Xiao, does this satisfy you?"