

U. Warlord 31

Chapter 31: Basic Gene Capacity

Now that Zhang Lie was lacking for points again, he intended to sell a piece of information and deal with a set of his stockpiled goods. Thus, when he left the inn, instead of rushing out of the settlement, he lounged near the gates while paying attention to the hunters entering and leaving.

Only when he saw a certain female with her team did he follow them out of the settlement. Once they were out of earshot from any random passersby, he exclaimed in theatrical surprise, "What? How did I manage to achieve a breakthrough with my foundational framework?"

He wasn't speaking very loudly, but the shock and surprise in his voice caused the female and her teammates to glance toward him out of the corner of their eyes. Several of the hunters immediately narrowed their eyes in disdain: after all, they were long past the stage where they had to care about their foundational framework.

However, the female leader seemed to be somewhat interested in the news. "What do you mean by a breakthrough? Surely you haven't managed to go past the tenth stage?"

Zhang Lie panicked and stuttered, "N-No! I must have made a mistake!" His hands shook as he turned rigidly and strode quickly back into the settlement.

The female hunter seemed even more interested after this turn of events. She stopped walking and, amidst her teammates' confusion, followed Zhang Lie back into the settlement.

Beneath his black cloak, Zhang Lie was smiling deviously, but he pretended to be even more panicked when he noticed that the female hunter had followed him back into the settlement. Not knowing what to do, he furiously dashed away.

The female hunter's curiosity was well and truly piqued: what on Earth had happened to this mysterious hunter in black? She chased him into an alley in the Blacksteel settlement.

When Zhang Lie found that he had stumbled into a dead end, he screamed like a little girl. "We're inside the settlement! You'd better not do anything to me!"

The female hunter scoffed. "And what do you think I'd do to you? I'm sure you know why I've been chasing you. Don't worry, we hunters of the Chu clan never bully the weak, and I, Chu Lan, would certainly never do something so demeaning. Tell me about the foundational framework. If I think your information is valuable, I'll pay you points in compensation. What do you think?"

Chu Lan's face was intent but not unkind, and Zhang Lie knew that he'd picked the right person for this. Of course, he couldn't drop the act now. He shivered and asked, in an exaggerated tone, "Really? Will you really give me points? How many?"

"Well, it'll depend on the value of your information, of course!" Chu Lan replied.

Zhang Lie's face fell. "In that case, isn't it only worth as much as you want to pay me?"

"As I've said, don't worry. Don't you know how honorable Chu hunters are? I can afford to pay you for the information." Chu Lan repeated her guarantee, but Zhang Lie refused to believe her.

"How insincere you are! This information is worth at least five million points, and it's not something I can reveal so easily!"

Upon hearing Zhang Lie's words, one of Chu Lan's teammates, who had followed her back into the settlement, nudged her. "Chu Lan, isn't this fellow a fool? Five million points? You must be crazy! Do you know how much money that's worth? Half a billion dollars! What information could you possibly have that's worth that much?!"

Zhang Lie glanced scornfully at the hunter who had spoken, then laughed. "And if I were to say that it's about a breakthrough in your foundational framework that will raise your basic gene capacity?"

Chu Lan gaped. Was it really possible to increase one's gene capacity?! No, there was no way that could be true! And yet the possibility continued to entice her. It was common sense to think that the capacity was fixed at a hundred for every hunter, but... what if the information really were true? This sort of information could really be worth half a billion dollars!

After all, upon advancing to the second realm, a hunter's gene fragments would determine their potential going forward. As a result, the most dedicated hunters would hunt for enough basic, mutated, and superior gene fragments to reach the capacity for all three before advancing to the second realm. The stronger a hunter's foundation, the further they would be able to go.

For instance, quite a few pinnacle- and higher-grade techniques required a certain baseline number of gene fragments to study and use.

If this mysterious man truly did possess information that would allow hunters to raise their gene capacities, then half a billion would be a bargain. After all, this would mean that all the hunters from her clan would have an advantage over all other hunters.

Chu Lan, who had a relatively high position within the Chu clan, could hardly resist such temptation. "Are you sure you're telling the truth?" she asked.

Zhang Lie laughed again. "You think I'm lying? Well, then, I suppose I'll just have to work with another group of hunters instead!"

"Ah, no, wait! We were the first group to talk to you, weren't we? Furthermore, if your information is reliable, then the Chu clan would certainly be willing to pay you more for your trouble. Please, give me a moment. I'll inform the young master about this now, and he'll be personally meeting with you about this transaction. I promise you, the Chu clan will give you a fair price for this information!"

Chu Lan's excitement had spread throughout her body. If this were true, and if they were able to negotiate a deal, then the entire Chu clan would benefit greatly. After contacting Chu Feng, they quickly worked out a meeting place.

Unexpectedly, however, Yun Bing was near the scene, and when she overheard the commotion, she insisted on being part of the negotiations. As a result, the two-party discussion now became a three-party one.

Chu Feng had arranged the meeting at a tavern owned by the Chu clan, in one of the private meeting rooms upstairs. Zhang Lie, Chu Feng, Yun Bing, Chu Lan, and Yun Gang sat facing each other.

Zhang Lie stared at Yun Bing, not having anticipated this turn of events. The other four hunters were all staring at the mysterious Zhang Lie.

Chu Feng, as the host, was the first to speak up. "Would you be willing to take off your hood now, since there are no outsiders around?"

Zhang Lie immediately shook his head. "No, I can't! You're all from large clans, aren't you? What if you renege on your word before we finish the transaction? What's more, there's no need for me to reveal my identity in this process, is there?"

Seeing how careful Zhang Lie was to keep his identity a secret, the other hunters all felt more confident about the veracity of his information.

After all, to them, the very idea of being able to raise their gene capacity was nothing more than a dream. However, for some reason, upon seeing how careful this hunter was acting, they couldn't help but believe his claims.

Yun Bing even chuckled. "I have to admit that you've gotten me even more curious. How would you like to carry out the exchange?"

He thought for a few moments. "I'll answer three questions about raising one's gene capacity. As long as they don't reveal too much about the secret, I'll answer truthfully. Then, if you're still interested, you can choose to listen on as I explain the procedure. Of course, if you want to do this, you'll have to pay me a deposit.

"Subsequently, I'll help you carry out the process on certain hunters, so you can witness it for yourself. Once all that's over, you'll pay me the rest of the promised fee. Well? If these terms are fine with you, then let's get started."

"In that case, I'll ask the first question! By how much can you raise your basic gene capacity following this method?" Chu Feng very much appreciated Zhang Lie's directness, and he immediately asked the question that was on everyone's minds: how large was the effect?

After all, if this procedure would only raise it by a small fraction, then was it really worth half a billion dollars?

Zhang Lie, having anticipated this question, immediately answered, "Ten fragments. After a breakthrough with your foundational framework, your basic gene capacity will increase by ten. However, these additional ten fragments will provide a greater benefit than even ten mutated gene fragments! Do you all understand what this means?"

The gathered hunters were silent. Ten fragments, only ten fragments, but the fact that these ten fragments were in excess of the usual capacity would cause them to augment a hunter's constitution by more than even ten mutated gene fragments would!

Imagine having ten more mutated gene fragments than your opponent! Unbelievable!

Ten basic gene fragments didn't do much for a hunter's fighting ability, but ten mutated gene fragments gave a noticeable boost, one visible with the naked eye. Every edge mattered, and this advantage could well be decisive.

All four hunters present from the Chu and Yun clans had only one thing on their mind: they had to obtain this information, even if it cost them a billion dollars! It would have severe implications for not just the Yun and Chu clans, but even for the entire world federation and Earth as a whole.

After more than a dozen seconds of stunned silence as the hunters processed this information, they all looked toward Zhang Lie with ardor in their gaze.

Yun Bing was the first to speak. "No wonder you claim that this information is worth more than half a billion dollars. If this really were true, then we would certainly all benefit greatly. But surely there must be some restriction or requirement for this breakthrough? My question is to know what those requirements or restrictions are."

Chapter 32: Making Preparations

"There are certainly requirements that you have to meet, but I won't be able to reveal them fully without providing too much information. However, I can inform you that none of you present can experience a breakthrough as you are now: once you study any genetic technique, you can no longer advance beyond the tenth stage of your foundational framework. As a result, none of you will be able to test this procedure on yourself."

Zhang Lie's words again caused the hunters to stiffen. Yun Bing, Chu Feng, Yun Gang, and Chu Lan all looked at him in shock. In that case, all their excitement would be for naught!

Yun Gang narrowed his eyes in thought. "In that case, what if I were to purge my techniques? Would I be able to break through then?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "That would work, but I'm sure this would be a difficult decision for hunters like you."

Indeed, it was an extremely difficult decision to make. The gathered hunters would be able to raise their gene capacity, but only after sacrificing the techniques that they'd spent years working with...

In the long term, it would certainly be better to purge one's techniques, but doing so would cause their growth to deteriorate in the short term. This was truly a dilemma.

The four hunters all began to frown. Moments later, Chu Lan, the only hunter who had yet to speak, came to her senses and asked the last question.

"What's the chance of success upon undergoing this procedure? I want to know whether it's guaranteed that we'll be able to experience a breakthrough if we follow the information you're providing."

The other three hunters all broke out of their reverie and turned to Zhang Lie.

"I can't guarantee anything: after all, I can only speak for myself. All I can provide is an explanation of the circumstances under which I experienced a breakthrough, as well as a positive confirmation of such a breakthrough. I can't promise any measure of success."

Zhang Lie's words caused the hunters to deflate.

If there were an unknown probability of success, then they wouldn't risk jeopardizing their strength, especially not right before the Void Cup. What would they do if the procedure didn't work for them?

Yun Bing, Chu Feng, and the others had gotten a good grasp as to what this mysterious hunter's breakthrough implied. Although they wouldn't be able to benefit much from it, it would be extremely meaningful for their clans. It was certainly a piece of information worth half a billion dollars—no, perhaps even more than that.

Chu Feng murmured, "I have to say, this revelation is both astounding and saddening to me. Of course, from the perspective of our clans, we're certainly very interested in the details of the procedure. What do you propose with regards to payment?"

Zhang Lie rubbed his fingers together. "Simply pay up, and I'll keep talking. Since there are two clans involved, how about 1.5 million points from each clan as a deposit?"

1.5 million points would be a 30% deposit, which seemed rather high.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng eyed each other, but neither objected.

"A 30% deposit isn't unfair, but how would you guarant—"

"There's no need for a guarantee. After you hand over your deposit, I won't leave your sight until the first successful breakthrough among each of your candidates." Zhang Lie predicted and resolved Yun Bing's objection, and his proposal was acceptable to her.

The two clan representatives both transferred 1.5 million points to Zhang Lie, and he immediately received a notification of that transfer.

"Very good. In that case, let's begin. Each clan should prepare five candidates whose foundational frameworks are at the tenth stage, but who haven't yet begun cultivating any genetic techniques.

"Furthermore, you'll need to gather a hundred white-grub cores, ten pounds of kelpfish roe, and ten pounds of bluewater frog meat. Are there any questions so far?"

Seeing how Zhang Lie had immediately gotten down to business, Yun Bing and Chu Feng motioned for Chu Lan and Yun Gang to handle the preparations themselves.

Chu Lan and Yun Gang immediately stood up and made to leave.

"Lastly, construct a small training ground outside the settlement, and bring both the candidates and the ingredients there," Zhang Lie added, before Chu Lan and Yun Gang left.

That remark caused the four hunters to look askance at him again.

Outside the settlement? That meant that they would all have to leave the safety of the settlement grounds. And that meant that he, a lone hunter, had the confidence to take on their clans...

Zhang Lie didn't notice anything amiss with his words. When he saw the gathered hunters hesitate, he asked, "What's the matter? Don't you want to get things started as quickly as possible?"

Yun Gang and Chu Lan bowed and left.

Almost without stopping, Zhang Lie turned back to Yun Bing and Chu Feng and started to describe the conditions for the breakthrough.

"There are three conditions to keep in mind. The first and most basic requirement is to reach the tenth stage of the foundational framework without having started practicing any genetic techniques.

"The second is to consume sufficient quantities of white-grub cores, kelpfish roe, or bluewater frog meat. I'm not sure about which is the active ingredient here, but all three are easy to acquire in bulk, so this shouldn't be a problem.

"The third is to have enough adrenaline flooding your system; in other words, the candidates need to experience some form of shock or threat."

Zhang Lie stopped talking, but Yun Bing and Chu Feng continued looking at him expectantly. After a moment, they asked, almost simultaneously, "Is that it?"

"Were you expecting it to be even more difficult? After all, none of these three requirements are easy to meet, and certainly not all three at once. Indeed, the last requirement is the only one that introduces uncertainty into this process. Whether or not a hunter will succeed in breaking through will depend on this third requirement."

Since they had paid, Zhang Lie had no reason to hide what he had gleaned from them.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng now understood the risks and benefits of this supposed breakthrough better. In simple terms, it was a low-risk, high-reward procedure for hunters who had just entered the dimensional world.

Having missed this opportunity themselves, Yun Bing and Chu Feng were naturally thinking of trying to get their relatives to benefit instead. Yun Bing had a sister, and Chu Feng had a pair of siblings, and these three hunters were all relatively new to the dimensional world.

In particular, Yun Bing's sister, Yun Meng, was precisely at the critical juncture for the first requirement, and while Chu Feng's siblings had progressed slightly beyond that, they didn't have much to lose from starting over.

They would surely benefit from this opportunity.

Chapter 33: The Training Begins

To the south of the Blacksteel settlement was a strange forest densely populated with blue maple trees. All sorts of lifeforms lived in this curious habitat, and most hunters didn't dare to get anywhere close to the area.

Somewhere by the outskirts of the forest, on a plot of barren ground, an encampment consisting of a few tents had been hastily constructed. Of course, this was where the Yun and Chu clans had decided to construct a temporary training ground following Zhang Lie's request.

Both clans had supplied considerable manpower for this project, and by the time Zhang Lie, Chu Feng, and Yun Bing arrived at the area, it was already filled with hundreds of Yun and Chu elites.

In the tent in the very center were ten youths. The oldest among them seemed to be less than twenty years of age, and all of them had only been in the dimensional world for less than a month. Most importantly, they were all at the tenth stage of their foundational framework, and had either yet to start studying any genetic techniques or had purged them from their framework decisively.

Among them were Yun Bing's sister, Yun Meng, as well as Chu Feng's brother, Chu Leng. Chu Feng's sister, Chu Xun, was also present, but she refused to believe in this so-called breakthrough. As a result, she stood to the side of the main ten-hunter party, rather than with them.

When the three of them walked up, however, she immediately strode forward and began to sniff them.

"Brother, is this the mysterious hunter you were talking about? He seems like a mysterious fellow, but he doesn't smell too old. He's in his early twenties, I'm sure of it! And he must recently have been in the Blackgold Inn, because I can smell the perfume that their female servants use! Are you sure he's not a fraud?"

The girl's words shocked Zhang Lie. How could she be able to tell how old he was with just a casual sniff? And to think that she would even be able to identify where he had been!

Was her nose really that sharp? Zhang Lie glanced at her with shining eyes.

Chu Feng laughed in embarrassment. "This is my sister. Please don't mind her, she's been coddled since she was young, so..."

"Haha, I don't mind! How astute her sense of smell must be!"

He then spoke to Chu Xun directly. "It seems like you don't believe in the breakthrough I've discovered?"

Chu Xun shook her head. "It's been just about a century since the dimensional world was first discovered. How can something like this breakthrough not have been found even after so long?"

"In that case, shall we have a bet?"

Chu Xun frowned, then asked cautiously, "A bet? Why should I make a bet with you?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "You don't believe in my breakthrough, do you? In that case, let's bet the following: if I were to successfully induce a breakthrough in at least one person here, you'll have to help me sniff something out, but if I fail, then you can do whatever you want with me! What do you think?"

Chu Xun thought about the terms for a moment and then decisively shook her head. "No, I won't take this bet! If you were to lose, then my brother would destroy you anyway!"

Zhang Lie raised an eyebrow, not expecting that she would be so quick-witted. "In that case, let's do it this way. If you agree to help me sniff something out, I'll guarantee you a successful breakthrough. How about that?"

Yun Bing, Chu Feng, and the elites of the two clans all perked up. This fellow had said that he couldn't guarantee any measure of success! But now that he was interested in Chu Xun's nose, he had made her this guarantee...

It was likely that he had deliberately sought out the Yun and Chu clans for this venture as well, and it was very likely that there was still some critical piece of information regarding the breakthrough process that he hadn't divulged.

"Promise him!" Chu Feng nudged her.

As if sensing how serious her brother was, Chu Xun frowned and reluctantly said, "Fine. I wasn't going to accept the bet, but given my brother's request, I'll reluctantly go along with it. However, I'm telling you now: I won't sniff anything funny from you!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "Don't worry, Miss Chu, I have better uses for your talents."

Only after settling the agreement with Chu Xun did Zhang Lie turn to look at the ten gathered candidates. In front of each candidate was a pile of food. There were ten white-grub cores, half a pound of kelpfish roe, and half a pound of bluewater frog meat.

Of course, except for the white-grub cores, everything else was cooked.

Zhang Lie was very pleased by the clans' efficacy. Loudly, he proclaimed, "I believe all of you know the reason you were gathered here today! Your first task is simple: devour all the food in front of you!"

The candidates blinked, then turned skeptically to Yun Bing and Chu Feng.

After all, Zhang Lie, clad entirely in black, did not seem remotely like a trustworthy figure.

Yun Bing's sister, Yun Meng, even asked, "Sister, there's nothing special about any of this, so why are we consuming it? Isn't it just like junk food?"

Yun Bing grimaced. "Yun Meng, listen to him! You'll understand what it does in just a bit. You might not believe him, but you'll believe your sister, won't you?"

Yun Bing's admonishment and endorsement finally made the other candidates follow suit.

The food didn't taste too bad, but there was just so much of it... well, it wasn't as though they had any choice.

The moment several of the candidates finished eating everything, Zhang Lie had the Yun and Chu elites bring them into the training ground.

What awaited them would be a moment of life-threatening danger. Black-clad elites were already waiting in preparation surrounding the training ground.

The six candidates who had finished eating first entered through six separate entrances. Those hunters who led them there informed them that their goal was to reach the heart of the training ground. The first hunter to get there would be the first to experience a breakthrough, so the six candidates began rushing toward the center of the training ground immediately.

Chu Xiu was a little nervous: as a member of a branch family of the Chu clan, he was honored to have been selected for such important training. After all, he had been told that this supposed breakthrough would be a tremendous boon to both him and the clan at large.

Grateful for the opportunity, he promised to give the training his all. His skills were above average among the six candidates, so he was the first to reach the interior boundary.

As he darted by a small bush, Chu Xiu could see the flag planted at the center of the training ground. Just then, a dark shadow far faster than he was shot out of the bush, and a dagger flashed toward his jugular.

Adrenaline flooded Chu Xiu's body, and he reacted near-instinctively. He had no time to process why or how an assassin had managed to infiltrate this place. As genetic energy burst out of his body, he twisted his body just enough to avoid the blow.

It was at that moment that the will of the world spoke to him.

Chapter 34: Yun Bing's Probing

With this announcement, Chu Xiu's basic gene capacity increased by ten.

A breakthrough! The breakthrough really did happen! But before Chu Xiu could react, the assassin that had struck him bound him and took him away. Despite his breakthrough, Chu Xiu simply couldn't do anything against him. The power disparity was simply too large.

If not for the fact that the assassin was going easy on him, Chu Xiu would be dead by now.

The elite 'assassins' were all clan hunters who had reached their mutated gene capacity and had developed their genetic techniques to a considerable extent. They were naturally capable of handling rookies like Chu Xiu.

They were instructed to do what they did for one purpose only: to have these rookies experience a chilling life-or-death situation. They didn't know—and didn't need to know—the reason why.

Following Chu Xiu, the other five hunters also each barely evaded a killing blow, but unfortunately, except for one hunter from the Yun clan who had broken through like Chu Xiu, none of the remaining four did.

After approximately five minutes, when they all walked out of the training ground, Yun Bing and Chu Feng both glanced at them anxiously. By their side, Zhang Lie smiled, perfectly confident.

"Young Master, it worked! Chu Xiu managed to achieve a breakthrough!" Chu Lan exclaimed exuberantly.

"Miss, our Yun Yi had a breakthrough too!" Beside her, Yun Gang did the same, not wanting to lose out to her.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng both finally relaxed. It succeeded, it really had! This supposed breakthrough really was real! In truth, Yun Bing and Chu Feng had both harbored some doubts about the process, because they knew just what this breakthrough would imply: the dawn of a new era, of exceeding one's base limits!

They rushed up to Chu Xiu and Yun Yi, who had just broken through.

"How are you feeling now, Chu Xiu?" Chu Feng asked.

"My supply of genetic energy has increased greatly, and all my senses and constitution have been enhanced. My body feels amazing! That master was right: the effect of the breakthrough really does feel far superior to obtaining ten more mutated gene fragments!"

Chu Xiu felt as though he was in a dream, but the changes to his body reminded him over and over again that this was all real. A breakthrough really was possible, and he had done it!

And while Yun Yi, who was beside him, didn't say anything, Yun Bing was able to confirm the breakthrough with her senses and with the excitement glimmering in his eyes. Honestly, she could barely believe it herself!

"Now that they've successfully broken through, shall we settle our accounts?" Zhang Lie's mercantile voice immediately dampened the cheery atmosphere.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing both turned toward him, their eyes piercing. The effect of the breakthrough was so stunning that they were all curious about who this mysterious cloaked man really was.

"What's the matter? Don't you know it's impolite to stare?" Zhang Lie couldn't help making a joke.

"We're outside the settlement grounds, and we now understand the breakthrough procedure. What's there to stop us from refusing you payment?" Chu Feng responded, half-jokingly.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Don't frighten me, Young Master Chu—I get scared quite easily! Of course, in that case, I wouldn't be able to get anything more from you, but what if I were to release this method to the public? In that case, it seems like you'd lose far more than I would."

In truth, Zhang Lie wasn't afraid that the Yun and Chu clans wouldn't pay up, since he had stockpiled the bottleneck in the procedure. Following the terms of the transaction would be far more beneficial to the Yun and Chu clans than to him.

Furthermore, he had already obtained three million points from them so far, and that alone was worth the trouble. If they wanted to renege on the contract, so would he.

"Oh? But are you certain that you would be able to leave without our permission?" Yun Bing's eyes glinted as genetic energy bubbled out of her body.

Upon seeing her behavior, the Yun and Chu elites quickly gathered around them.

"Haha, Miss Yun Bing, honestly, you're a rather bad actor. Ignoring the fact that you're lacking any sign of killing intent, are you sure you'll be able to take me down? Do I look like someone who hasn't accounted for this possibility?"

Zhang Lie pulled out a black potion from his potbellied-toad pouch. The moment he did so, everyone present, including Yun Bing and Chu Feng, felt a premonition of exceeding danger.

This was undoubtedly his backup plan if something were to go awry.

Even without Yun Bing or Chu Feng's commands, the gathered hunters stopped trying to crowd Zhang Lie in. The unknown was the most fearsome thing of all, and the man in front of them was so mysterious that, despite Yun Bing and Chu Feng's strength, even they didn't dare step closer to him.

Yun Bing immediately retracted her genetic energy, afraid that Zhang Lie would accidentally uncork the black potion in his hand.

"Alright, alright, put that away! It looks like I was right: your finding Chu Lan wasn't a coincidence at all, was it?" Chu Feng waved his hands, indicating that his and Yun Bing's behavior was just a joke.

"Oh? Why don't you ask this Chu Lan whether I reached out to her, or whether she refused to stop chasing me until I told her about my circumstances? Furthermore, shouldn't you be grateful for this opportunity? Isn't it in poor taste to be trying to probe me?"

Zhang Lie talked Chu Feng into stunned silence, still waving his potion bottle about.

Yun Bing smiled. "Aren't you a mysterious fellow? I must admit to some curiosity as to what's underneath that cloak."

Zhang Lie smirked. "You think you can handle me?"

Under ordinary circumstances, Yun Bing would have scoffed and turned away from this ribald teasing, but against Zhang Lie, she only laughed. "Is that so? You do seem to be quite confident in your charm. In that case, why not reveal your true appearance?"

Zhang Lie clicked his tongue. "Perhaps we can discuss that some other time, after we've finished this transaction."

"Indeed. I am quite shocked by the efficacy of this breakthrough, but it doesn't seem to have a high probability of success. Will those hunters who failed have a second chance?" Yun Bing asked the most pressing question on everyone's minds.

After all, this was what would determine whether this breakthrough could be manufactured en masse.

Chapter 35: Yun Clan's Wager

"Of course! There's no restriction on how many times you can try, as long as you don't start cultivating a technique in the meantime. All that matters is reaching a certain threshold density of adrenaline in your body, and you'll be able to break through! Also, from time to time, they'll have to keep supplying their body with those three foods."

Zhang Lie's response left Yun Bing, Chu Feng, and the gathered elites relieved.

Simply stated, they would remain eligible for a breakthrough as long as they replenished their body's supply of those foods and didn't cultivate any technique in the meantime. In theory, given enough preparation time, anyone should be able to break through.

"In that case, I don't have any further questions. I'll transfer the remaining portion of the points to you within the day. However, you promised my sister that you would guarantee her breakthrough, so aren't you going to wait until her trial is over?"

After receiving the answer he wanted, Chu Feng promised to pay up, and Yun Bing nodded in agreement. Of course, Zhang Lie hadn't forgotten about the bet he had made with Chu Feng's sister, Chu Xun: her nose would be very useful to him, after all.

In the main tent, Yun Meng and the others, who ate relatively slowly, had finished their preparations. Because of the successful precedent, they were eagerly expectant as they walked toward the training ground.

Their distrust toward Zhang Lie had now morphed into curiosity about his identity. After all, this mysterious breakthrough had originated from his hands. They were all excited for the training because they had no idea what it would entail, blissfully ignorant that what awaited them would be a trial by fire.

There were four candidates remaining, and Chu Xun also joined them. Zhang Lie motioned for the five youths in front of him to get started, but when Chu Xun walked by him, Zhang Lie suddenly stepped forward and whispered in her ear.

Then, before Chu Feng and the others could react, he pushed her into the training grounds.

After two or three minutes, when they all came back out, Chu Xun really had managed to break through, as did Chu Leng. However, the remaining three Yun hunters, including Yun Meng, didn't succeed.

Honestly, Zhang Lie was a little disappointed by this result. After all, the life-or-death situation that had been manufactured was about as close as you could get to the real thing. However, of the eleven candidates, only four had succeeded, a statistic that wasn't at all impressive.

That said, this wasn't something that Zhang Lie much cared about: Chu Xun's successful breakthrough implied that he'd succeeded in his bet against her.

"Haha, Young Master Chu, Young Miss Chu, congratulations. In that case, remember to let me borrow your nose in the future!"

Chu Feng was overjoyed to have both his siblings break through, and he immediately responded with a smile. "Of course! The Chu clan won't go back on its word. Furthermore, regardless of our arrangement, I owe you a favor on behalf of the Chu clan."

"In that case, I'll accept it with gratitude." Zhang Lie smiled, waving a hand in parting as he walked away.

"Please wait!" Just as Zhang Lie turned to leave, however, Yun Bing pulled him back. "Aren't you being too partial? Of the four breakthroughs, three were from the Chu clan! How can I report back to my clan like this?"

Her hand reached underneath the cloak and clasped Zhang Lie's arm. The contact seemed to spark something between them, and Zhang Lie could even sense a hint of coquettishness in Yun Bing's tone.

In truth, even Yun Bing hadn't expected that she would act so... familiarly with this man. However, she had no choice. Looking at how disappointed Yun Meng was, she knew that if she didn't reach for the opportunity now, her sister's breakthrough could well be significantly delayed.

"Miss Yun Bing, I know the situation doesn't seem favorable to you, but as I've said, I can't guarantee any measure of success!"

"But didn't you promise Chu Xun that you would guarantee her breakthrough?" Zhang Lie insisted that matters were out of his control, but Yun Bing immediately brought up his bet with Chu Xun.

Zhang Lie sighed. "Chu Xun, tell them what I told you right before you entered the training ground."

"You liar, you big, fat liar! He told me to be as relaxed as possible, and I was scared half to death!" Chu Xun, already stewing, flared up the moment Zhang Lie brought the matter up.

Of course, this was exactly what Zhang Lie wanted the others to hear.

"There really isn't any sort of trick to the process—all I did was lower her alertness to increase the shock she would receive. Do you all understand now?"

Zhang Lie's explanation was indeed quite simple, but Yun Bing refused to believe him. Perhaps it was because this mysterious fellow had shocked her so many times today that she had developed some sort of blind confidence in him.

"I don't care! I insist that Yun Meng be able to break through today!"

The Yun and Chu elites were both shocked to see Yun Bing, famed for her composure and demeanor, to be acting in this fashion.

Zhang Lie had no choice but to relent. "Miss Yun Bing, I can give it a try, but again, I emphasize that I can't guarantee any measure of success."

Yun Bing visibly brightened. "Wonderful! In that case, please do so. I—"

Zhang Lie broke her off. "I can try again, but what are you offering me to do so? When I helped Miss Chu here, I was doing so because of my interest in her sense of smell, and I expected that I would find it helpful to me in the future. What will you offer me?"

Yun Bing stilled, not expecting Zhang Lie to make every action a business transaction. "What would you like? Points, techniques, soulshards—as long as it's a reasonable offer, the Yun clan will accept it!"

Zhang Lie smiled. "The Yun clan is generous, but I'm not in dire need of resources at the moment. How about this: I'll offer my help in exchange for your help at some point in the future. Would you accept these terms?"

Yun Bing thought for a moment. "This is a fair offer, but I'm telling you now, I won't help with anything malicious!"

"Don't worry! If anything, I'd be asking for your help dealing with certain lifeforms, not other hunters," Zhang Lie reassured her.

Hearing his words, Yun Bing nodded in agreement.

Zhang Lie finally turned to Yun Meng, who was eyeing her sister hopefully. "In that case, we'll head into the training ground again!"

Chapter 36: Authority of the Sea

"Please wait!" Just as Zhang Lie was about to bring Yun Meng back into the training ground, Yun Bing called him back again. "It won't be any more taxing on you to help multiple hunters rather than just one, will it? Since there's no guarantee of success, how about helping out more people at once?"

Zhang Lie quirked an eyebrow, but didn't dispute Yun Bing's assertion.

His tacit acceptance of her words had Chu Feng unable to resist offering him the same deal, in hopes that he would be able to help out those candidates from the Chu family who had failed the first time around.

In the end, all eight candidates who had failed were repeating the trial.

Within the training ground, looking at the eight candidates who had their eyes tightly closed, with Galewind in his right hand, Zhang Lie began charging up a genetic technique, [The Boundless Blade].

As the technique neared completion, the candidates felt the immutable force of an immense ocean bearing down on them. The surging waves and a gigantic carp seemed to encircle them, instantly plunging them into peril.

They felt as though they were fighting for their lives amidst wave after wave of attack. Some were swept away by the ocean, others consumed by the fish, and others barely, just barely, resisting the attack.

Zhang Lie held the technique for only ten seconds, but that ten seconds felt like an eternity for the candidates. As the waves and fish vanished, they opened their eyes, blinking in shock.

Where was the ocean? What was that fish? When they opened their eyes, they noticed nothing amiss, as though what they had experienced was nothing but an illusion.

Yun Meng, waking up from that illusion, found that she had broken through without even knowing it. As she sensed the changes to her body and constitution, she looked toward Zhang Lie with glimmering eyes. She was very curious about the hunter ahead of her.

Aside from Yun Meng, three of the eight candidates also successfully managed to break through, a relatively impressive performance.

They exited the training ground, and Zhang Lie bade them farewell amidst Yun Bing and Chu Feng's flattering remarks.

Thus ended the 'first' encounter between Zhang Lie and the Yun and Chu clans.

Everything had gone according to plan, and he had been relatively impressed by Yun Bing and Chu Feng's management abilities.

As for Yun Bing and Chu Feng, the mysterious Zhang Lie had left an indelible impression upon them. Just the possibility of a foundational breakthrough was shocking enough, let alone his words and actions. If news of this were to spread, it would affect the Blacksteel settlement, the dimensional world, and even the entire world federation.

As they watched Zhang Lie's figure disappear into the forests, Yun Bing murmured, "Chu Feng, what do you think about this mysterious fellow?"

Chu Feng smiled. "Haha, if even you think he's mysterious, what more could I say? In my opinion, I hope he remains as mysterious as possible. After all, our clans are on good terms with him now, and who knows if he'll have even more shocking secrets?"

"No, wait—not both our clans, but just the Chu clan! You were lucky to be in the vicinity when we began negotiations. After all, the one he reached out to was our Chu Lan. Imagine if you hadn't been around!"

Yun Bing laughed. "Alright, alright. Count this a favor from you to me. If something like this were to happen to the Yun clan, I'll make sure to notify you. I do find it strange that this mysterious hunter doesn't seem particularly strong."

Chu Feng nodded. "Judging from [The Whispering Wind], his framework seems to be nothing out of the ordinary, and I wouldn't place him among the top fifty hunters on the gene leaderboard.

"He did handle this transaction surprisingly well, though. If he isn't a scion of some other clan—even perhaps someone we know—then I'm sure he must be an experienced businessman who's just entered the dimensional world.

"But no matter what, we're on friendly terms, so you're not thinking of doing anything untoward, are you? Surely we have more important things to be working on at the moment!"

Yun Bing smiled. "You mean, securing the means of production of white-grub cores, kelpfish roe, and bluewater frog meat?"

Chu Feng nodded. "Exactly! No, wait! Your clan was the one who prepared all the materials—has your clan already started controlling all three regions?!"

Yun Bing shook her head. "Not quite. We've only secured two of them, because the last has no value whatsoever anymore."

Chu Feng was confused. "Why not?"

"Do you remember that hunter at the bottom of the gene leaderboard?"

Chu Feng nodded. "You mean the fool who spent three months in a cave killing the lowest-level lifeform?"

"Well, in hindsight, he certainly doesn't look like a fool. He spent three months killing white grubs. And, not only that, Yun Gang found that, whenever he returned to the settlement, he'd tug along a huge bag of white-grub cores with him. Surely he's gathered hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of white-grub cores within the last three months?"

Yun Bing's words shocked Chu Feng. "What?! In that case, has he already hunted those white grubs to extinction? No, more to the point, did he do that knowingly?!"

Yun Bing shook her head. "Not to extinction, but not far from it. Whether or not he had any insider information, I couldn't say, but it looks like we'll need to be having a talk with him soon."

"Things really are getting more interesting, aren't they? We'll certainly have to have a talk with him. Do you think he has anything to do with that mysterious hunter?"

"We'll find out the moment we talk with him, I'm sure."

Chu Feng nodded. "Alright, I can handle searching for him, but you'd better share some of that kelpfish roe and bluewater frog meat with me."

Yun Bing smiled again. "Don't worry. Our two clans are the only ones that know about this secret. The supply of food is more than enough for both of us."

Zhang Lie knew that, after his departure, Chu Feng and Yun Bing would certainly make plans to scale up the breakthrough procedure.

After all, that was part of his plans. If not, to whom would he sell the hundreds of thousands of white-grub cores currently in the settlement cellar?

He knew that the two clans would rapidly start trying to find him. However, Zhang Lie didn't intend to be found quite so easily. He'd leave them hanging for a while, until their supply of white-grub cores was entirely consumed.

Only when they desperately needed more and had no other choice would Zhang Lie show up.

After leaving the Forest of Blue Maples, Zhang Lie headed to the Night Forest.

This time, he wasn't intending on returning to the venombane glade, but was rather heading to the northern part of the forest, to a location known as the blackwater sands.

The reason he was heading there was, naturally, because there was an ingredient that Zhang Lie had to collect from that location. It was where another main ingredient for Potion #2, the black coral, could be harvested.

Of course, the reason such a potent herbal ingredient had yet to be discovered was because the black coral was guarded zealously by a superior-grade lifeform known as a dreadtoad, which made its home next to reefs of such coral.

The dreadtoad was a toad-type superior-grade lifeform that boasted a particularly strong aural attack. Because of the aquatic environment in which it operated, the sound waves it produced would even be augmented in strength.

As a result, the blackwater sands were widely regarded as an extremely dangerous hunting ground even for seasoned hunters.

Chapter 37: Deep Within the Cave

The blackwater sands formed the river bank for the largest river in the night forest, the blackwater river. Because all sorts of lifeforms gathered around the sands, it was an ideal hunting ground for many hunters of the Blacksteel settlement.

By the time Zhang Lie, still clad in black, arrived at the blackwater sands, it was already well past noon in the dimensional world. With Venombane in his hand, Zhang Lie activated its stealth ability and entered the sands.

There were no less than ten hunting teams in the vicinity, and the tang of blood could faintly be sensed in the air. In the distance, he could see a trail of bloodstains.

He retracted his genetic energy as he followed the trail to a large black cave in the distance. The cave opening was as tall as he was. The cave walls seemed to be particularly slick and shiny, and no plants grew in the area.

There were no hunters within a hundred meters of this cave, and only scant few tracks by the lifeforms in the vicinity.

Zhang Lie didn't dare to get too close to the cave, because it meant that he would have to fight against the dreadtoad in an environment that naturally concentrated its aural attack.

Its cries would be magnified in such an enclosed space, and even Zhang Lie, with nineteen superior gene fragments, would hardly be able to survive such an attack.

However, the fact that he had nevertheless come to harvest some black coral meant that he had a way to lure these dreadtoads out. In fact, it was a simple method, a variant of which he had already demonstrated against the potbellied toads in the past.

He would have to change the bait, though. Because there were so many lifeforms in the region, it would be better for him to thin out their numbers first.

By the forest right outside the sands, Zhang Lie began roasting a flamewind pig over an open fire, the flesh visibly sizzling and crisping. The smell of roasting pig immediately attracted the lifeforms that had been skulking or hunting for food in the area.

Not only that, it even attracted two teams of hunters over. However, the sight that they saw immediately caused them to huddle together in the distance, not daring to show themselves.

With a pop and a bang, just as a large two-headed black snake was closing in on the pig, one of its heads was skewered by a shortsword, and the other exploded.

A hunter with translucent white armor was enacting a legendary hunt right before their eyes.

Whenever other lifeforms approached that fire, by the time they got within a hundred meters, that silver shadow would immediately appear by their side, then strike them a lethal blow.

Most of these lifeforms were mutated-grade, and some were even at the apex of mutated-grade: the goldensteel mantis, the white-tipped nightscorpion, and the three-eyed ghostwolf. Within just a few short minutes, there were already a dozen such carcasses by the fire.

No matter what lifeform he faced, that silver hunter seemed to be able to kill it in one blow.

He seemed to possess a soulshard of unusual stealth, and there was no premonition before his sudden appearance and subsequent dispatch of yet another lifeform. His strikes were rapid and unrelenting, and the violet shortsword in his hand seemed to penetrate everything it touched. Even mutated-grade lifeforms known for their tough exoskeleton were like papier mache against that blade.

The two hunting teams were stupefied by the slaughter ahead of them. Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng could hardly have expected that a moment's hunger would allow them to witness such an expert at work. With this level of strength, he surely had to be in the top twenty hunters of the settlement!

If they could develop a good relationship with him, their entire hunting team's strength would surely double, at the very least...

Just then, the shrill cry of a dreadtoad rang out, breaking the two teams of hunters out of their reverie and causing them to retreat instantly.

A dreadtoad! This was a boss-level mob in the blackwater sands, a superior-grade lifeform which had once vanquished three teams of hunters just with one shrill cry. Could that mysterious hunter be here to kill a dreadtoad?

Surely not—superior-grade lifeforms were usually hunted with a team! At the very least, they hadn't ever seen a hunter kill a superior-grade lifeform alone in all their time in the dimensional world. Who on Earth was that hunter?!

In truth, they were all mistaken: just like them, Zhang Lie had retreated upon hearing the dreadtoad's cry. However, unlike them, after leaving its attack range, he rushed toward the dreadtoad's lair. Within moments, Zhang Lie entered that cave: the Blackwater Cave.

It was exceedingly damp and dark, and if not for the fact that Zhang Lie had reached his mutated gene capacity, he would likely have trouble even seeing what lay in front of him.

Curiously, the cave was very clean. Except for a few small plants growing by its walls, there was nothing else around. Many of these plants were potent ingredients in their own right, but Zhang Lie only had time for the black coral.

The deeper in he went, the deeper the water became. Halfway into the cave, Zhang Lie found himself having to swim to go further. Luckily, Zhang Lie's framework was water-attuned, and he was able to morph into the form of a carp and swim through the water, moving even faster than he did while running.

In less than a minute, Zhang Lie was deep within the cave, where he saw branches of black coral underneath a gigantic oval rock. It was all black coral, the highest-quality black coral!

This was one of the main ingredients needed for Potion #2! Zhang Lie had expected that there would be black coral in the region, but not in such quality or quantity. After all, this wasn't the main

region in which black coral could be found, and the reason Zhang Lie had come here was because it was the closest.

Despite seeing the high-quality black coral, Zhang Lie didn't try to harvest it immediately, because there was another dreadtoad on that oval rock.

Luckily, Zhang Lie noticed that this dreadtoad didn't have a set of protruding golden vocal pouches, which implied that this dreadtoad was female. This was why it hadn't been attracted by the scent of roasting pig.

Genetic lifeforms were, in some sense, mutated versions of regular animals that could be found on Earth. Several of their habits would be similar to those of terrestrial lifeforms, and such was the case for the dreadtoad in front of him.

In general, the male toad would forage for food, whereas the female toad would be responsible for reproduction. Most importantly, compared to a male toad, a female toad, which didn't have vocal pouches, was far less threatening to fight.

Only when Zhang Lie decided the risk was minimal did he carefully swim toward the bottom of the oval rock.

Chapter 38: Preparing for the Hunt

This female toad was having an afternoon nap, and it didn't notice that, beneath the rock on which it was resting, there was a stealthed 'fish' swimming around.

Of course, Zhang Lie was being very careful not to startle it. He rapidly swam to the underside of the rock, trying to make as minimal a motion as he could, then began harvesting the black coral that grew along the underside of the rock.

No matter how careful Zhang Lie was, he still ended up making a tiny cracking noise while harvesting the fifth branch of coral.

Zhang Lie's heart leapt into his throat. He would have no choice but to run away if he were caught. After all, the toad on top of the rock was a superior-grade lifeform. If they were out in the open, Zhang Lie might have considered trying to hunt it down, but since he was in the toads' lair, if he were to be caught now...

Luckily, while the toad stirred, it didn't awaken.

If Zhang Lie had panicked and run, he would almost certainly have alerted the toad with the commotion, and then he would have to furiously rush out of the cave while trying to avoid the male toad that was out eating his roasted pig.

The next few minutes went as planned, and Zhang Lie managed to harvest a dozen or so branches of the highest-quality black coral he could find. Wary as he was of the male toad's return, he didn't dare linger in the lair. He swam back out to the mouth of the cave at his fastest speed.

What surprised Zhang Lie was that, even as he returned to the fire pit, he saw no trace of the male toad. Furthermore, the carcasses of the lifeforms that he had slaughtered near the fire had all vanished.

There were traces of a fight left at the scene by two relatively large-sized lifeforms. However, even after glancing around a few times, Zhang Lie couldn't identify either of the parties that had fought.

As he surveyed the remnants of the fire, the two teams of hunters from before were slowly converging on his location. The two teams were both being very cautious, wanting to approach him but not quite daring to do so.

It wasn't surprising that Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng would behave this way, after all: the scene of him hunting down all those lifeforms had been too striking. They were all outside settlement grounds, and anything could happen.

Just as they took another step, Zhang Lie suddenly appeared in their midst.

"Cap-Captain!" one of the hunters shouted, causing all of them to look toward Zhang Lie warily, hands on their weapons. That was something any seasoned hunter would do instinctively upon sighting an enemy.

However, after the two team captains glanced at Zhang Lie, they motioned for their subordinates to lower their weapons. Judging from his fight, the two of them were certain that, if this hunter wanted to kill them, they'd all be dead.

When Zhang Lie saw the male captain's face, he was very shocked. This—this fellow was Fang Yi! Fang Yi, the original Monarch of a Thousand Transformations!

In Zhang Lie's past life, Fang Yi was the lucky hunter who had eventually obtained the superior-grade white-grub soulshard, as well as one of the strongest hunters who had emerged from the Blacksteel settlement.

In other words, Zhang Lie's armor really should have belonged to him.

Fate was a curious thing, wasn't it? He hadn't anticipated that he would encounter him now, and especially not in this fashion.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Sun Mengmeng!" Zhang Lie's attention remained on Fang Yi until the female team leader called out a greeting.

"Haha, hello. I'm guessing you know what I'm here to figure out?" Zhang Lie replied.

"You want to know what happened here, don't you?" Sun Mengmeng's eyes were twinkling.

"Yes, all of you were here while I was hunting those lifeforms. Do you know what happened while I was gone?"

"Well, you returned the moment we got close! From a distance, all we heard were some dreadtoad cries and bestial roars. Given the devastation here, I'm guessing some other superior-grade lifeform made an appearance. Based on my experience in the region, I suspect it's the big cat up on the mountain!" Fang Yi interrupted the conversation before Sun Mengmeng could reply.

"A big cat? What big cat?"

"A thunderfur polecat, a lifeform that looks very much like a cat. It has two antlers on its head that can give off lightning!" This time, before Fang Yi could respond, Sun Mengmeng rushed to provide the relevant information.

It was then that Zhang Lie finally understood what the cat was, as well as what had transpired in his absence. The two superior-grade lifeforms must have fought over his roast pig!

"Do you want to hunt down a superior-grade lifeform together?" Zhang Lie offered.

The two hunters sucked in a deep breath. Superior gene fragments and superior-grade soulshards were the dream of all hunters in the first realm of the dimensional world. Who could resist such a temptation?

"Of course!" Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng replied at once.

The two of them certainly weren't going to turn down such an opportunity! Based on their current progression, it would take at least a few months before they were able to challenge even the weakest superior-grade lifeform.

"Report your gene fragments as well as your role in the team!"

The terrain here was rather difficult to work with, and the superior-grade lifeforms in the region weren't easy prey, either. Several helpers would make life far easier for Zhang Lie.

Of course, Zhang Lie also wanted to give Fang Yi an opportunity, in partial recompense for the one he'd taken away. Both in his past life and this one, Zhang Lie had had a good impression of Fang Yi.

As for Sun Mengmeng, well, she was quite lucky to be present. She would obtain this opportunity by being at the right place, at the right time, with the right strength, and with the right attitude.

"Fang Yi; basic genes, 100, mutated, 60; main attacker!"

"Sun Mengmeng; basic genes, 100, mutated, 50; assassin!"

"Yang Ze; basic genes, 100, mutated, 30; trapsetter!"

"Li Feng; basic genes, 100, mutated, 30; main tank!"

"Sun Xiaowu; basic genes, 100, mutated, 40; main attacker!"

"Zhou Ying; basic genes, 100, mutated, 30; ambusher!"

Their teams consisted of six hunters in total, with a considerably wide range of attacking styles, though the number of gene fragments they had were rather subpar. Even as helpers, only the two team leaders would barely meet the minimum criteria. The other hunters would have to lay traps and support them from the sidelines.

"Good. In that case, let's talk strategy!"

Chapter 39: The Hunt Begins

Zhang Lie's strategy wasn't all that complicated: he simply informed them about key points they would need to be careful about. Except for Zhang Lie, all of them were facing a superior-grade lifeform for the first time, and he didn't want any of them to die during this hunt.

After ten minutes, Zhang Lie, along with Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's teams, found the two fighting lifeforms in a large, mountainous valley: a multi-colored speckled dreadtoad, as well as an antlered thunderfur polecat.

Each of the two lifeforms had sustained substantive injuries, reflecting how serious the fight was. Their fighting had stirred up such a dense cloud of dust that the gathered hunters could only barely see their figures from the outside, and they had no idea how the fight was progressing.

"All this for one roasted pig?" Fang Yi was stupefied at the scene.

"Could a single flamewind pig lure out so many lifeforms, even a superior-grade dreadtoad? It seems to me that you aren't much smarter than the roasted pig! Of course our captain had to have added some sort of special spice to it! Can't you tell?"

Sun Mengmeng's banter with Fang Yi made Zhang Lie recall certain images from his past life.

"Haha, in that case, doesn't that mean that we'll have an easy fight? To think our captain's planned for all this in advance!" Fang Yi was quite a good bootlicker.

Zhang Lie laughed. "If you have time to praise me, why not think about how to deal with the aftermath of their fight? Given our team's strength, even if I did do something to that pig, and even if they're both battered from the fight, we can only hunt one of them down. Of the two lifeforms, which would you rather hunt?"

Sun Mengmeng immediately replied, "The thunderfur polecat, of course! After all, the aural attack from that dreadtoad's far too hard to handle."

Fang Yi thought for a moment before replying, "Great minds think alike, and I agree with you. However, in order to deal with that polecat, we need to think of a way to slow it down. Otherwise, we might well end up with nothing! Captain, I'm sure you must have thought of a strategy by now, haven't you?"

Fang Yi's bootlicking was starting to discomfit even Zhang Lie. He blinked, then shook his head.

"No, you were both wrong from the beginning. Our prey should be the dreadtoad, not the polecat. This valley is extremely large, and the dreadtoad's aural attack will be dramatically weakened in such an open environment. Furthermore, as a toad-type creature, it only has limited means of attack.

"On the other hand, the thunderfur polecat is a sly creature that can move rapidly, and it's not certain that we'll be able to stop it from running away even in its wounded state. Thus, to be safe, our target will be the dreadtoad. Go and make your preparations!"

Zhang Lie would be the main attacker for the fight, and since he had decided on the dreadtoad, the rest of the team would naturally defer to him. After all, he was the one who would be leading the attack. Furthermore, his skill and knowledge was certainly greater than theirs, and his analysis allowed them to see the errors in their judgment.

In truth, what they would be able to do against these two superior-grade lifeforms was very limited. However, they might have to face more than just lifeforms during the fight.

Just as they had discovered the two superior-grade lifeforms, others could easily do the same. In order to avoid any sudden ambushes by other teams of hunters, Zhang Lie would need sentries to keep guard.

As a barrage of lightning struck a curiously dark wave of sound, the force of the explosion and the resulting outpouring of genetic energy made a mess of the greenery about the valley. Even from a distance, one could hear the cries of a toad and the roars of a beast.

As expected, both lifeforms were brutalized by the fight. The right half of the dreadtoad's face was charred black, and a hole had opened up by the thunderfur polecat's stomach.

The lifeforms both began to flee, as if they had simultaneously come to their senses and decided that the fight wasn't worth it. The only reason they had started fighting was for that roasted pig. By this point, they both knew that their opponent wouldn't be easy to deal with, and if they were to keep fighting, they might well lose their lives.

Any lifeform—regular or mutated, terrestrial or otherwise—would try to flee if its life were in danger, not continue to fight. As long as they were alive, they still had an opportunity to grow stronger, but if they were dead...

"Our plan starts now! Disperse!" The next moment, Zhang Lie activated his venombane-scorpion soulshard and vanished from sight right in front of the other hunters' eyes.

Following his shout, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the other hunters immediately began to attack. Sun Mengmeng, who had long since nocked an arrow, fired her shot immediately.

The arrow, burning with genetic energy, flared like a firebird as it flew toward the dreadtoad. Perhaps because the dreadtoad was simply too injured, or perhaps because this arrow had flown in from its injured right, Sun Mengmeng's arrow landed directly on its face, stunning it and exploding in a baptism of fire.

The right half of its face, already scorched, now began to char, turning even blacker.

However, because Sun Mengmeng didn't possess any superior gene fragments, the damage she could deal to superior-grade lifeforms would be rather limited, and all that her attack managed to do was to draw the toad's attention.

The moment the dreadtoad turned to Sun Mengmeng, half a dozen flying knives and spears flew toward its face.

In the dimensional world, every hunter had to prepare at least one long-ranged technique, be it arrows, flying knives, spears, or even thrown axes. After all, under many circumstances, hunters couldn't face bestial lifeforms directly. In that case, they would have to rely on long-ranged attacks to accomplish their objective.

The dreadtoad destroyed this slew of attacks with an aural wave. Even though they did no damage to the dreadtoad, they successfully enraged it.

Its fight with the thunderfur polecat was against an opponent of equal bearing, but this fight now, against these pitiful humans, would be perfectly one-sided. The punishment for these puny humans who dared provoke it would be death.

It jumped toward where Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, and the others were located, evidently trying to take out its frustration with its previous battle on them.

Chapter 40: Toad in a Hole

The dreadtoad was acting exactly as planned.

By the time it landed where they were, Sun Mengmeng and the others had all dashed away.

Zhang Lie's instructions at this point was very clear: after loosing a volley of missiles at the toad, run away immediately. Given the skill that Zhang Lie had displayed, no one dared disobey his instructions.

After all, no hunter would be foolish enough to risk dying unnecessarily. Their prey was a superior-grade lifeform, and any incaution during a fight could easily lead to their death. And since they didn't have enough strength to fight such a lifeform head-on, they would have to make do with their intellect—well, they were just kiting the toad from spot to spot.

Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi, who had dashed in the direction of its right flank, again began harassing it with ranged attacks. Their behavior completely enraged the dreadtoad.

It croaked a few times, and its skin seemed to be covered by a mysterious blackwater film. It tensed its legs, as if intending to leap after them once more.

Just as it rose into the air, a silver figure appeared out of nowhere. He swung his violet sword and stabbed it deep into one of the toad's legs. The toad's upward momentum rent a dreadful wound in its leg, one that stretched all the way from the upper part of its leg to its feet.

Zhang Lie had succeeded in his sneak attack!

Even a superior-grade lifeform like the dreadtoad could be severely wounded with Venombane.

Furthermore, Venombane possessed extremely severe poison, and the blood that was leaking out of the wound, initially a pale blue color, had turned a ghastly green.

And because of its initial momentum, the dreadtoad's body was careening unwillingly toward Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi.

However, the cry it had released the moment it leapt still caused Zhang Lie significant problems. The aural waves led to a localized hurricane that quickly swept over Zhang Lie, who was planning on retreating after his sneak attack.

It tore his surroundings to shreds, and Zhang Lie's chest felt so stuffed up that he thought his entire body was about to explode. Fortunately, he had prepared for this eventuality, and he had manifested two large earmuffs in his white-grub helmet to protect himself.

Genetic energy permeated his body, fortifying it from the wind. With his right palm, he activated [Fists of the Silent Sea], defending against the assault of the wind with the impermeable force of water.

The repeated clash of water and wind successfully managed to hold back the storm for a single instant. In that instant, Zhang Lie dashed away with [Rippling Walk].

It was then that the dreadtoad finally landed right where Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng were waiting. However, not only had it lost its target once again, it had even ended up in the trap that had been carefully laid out for it: a deep hole tens of meters deep, filled with all sorts of sharp weapons.

As a superior-grade lifeform, the dreadtoad could shrug off blows from regular bladed weapons without any harm. Of course, this was only true if it were uninjured, and it certainly was not uninjured.

The dreadtoad had to expend much of its genetic energy in order to suppress the poison coursing through its veins. As a result, it couldn't toughen up its skin, and it had jumped straight into a pit of spears unprotected.

But a superior-grade constitution wasn't a joke, and this seemingly serious injury was actually little more than superficial.

However, the next few moments would be a life-or-death trial for the dreadtoad. Because one of its legs was injured, and because of the poison, the dreadtoad was unable to leap out of the hole. This meant that it, unable to retreat, could well die an ignoble death at the hand of these puny hunters it despised.

Before it could react, a torrent of violet liquid surged toward its head. The dreadtoad cried out, diffusing the attack with its aural waves, turning the violet liquid into mist.

At the same time, arrows, spears, and thrown axes began to fill up the hole. The dreadtoad began to cry out over and over again, dispersing each attack with yet another aural wave. However, this would dramatically speed up its rate of genetic energy consumption.

Wreathed in violet fog, the dreadtoad didn't seem to realize that its body was slowly becoming paralyzed. It tried to jump out of the hole again, but its heavily injured leg, along with its lack of genetic energy, caused it to falter.

The dreadtoad had no choice but to calm down and focus on purging the poison from within its body.

Outside the hole, after hearing nothing coming from within for quite some time, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng were both chomping at the bit to rush toward the hole to claim their spoils.

Fang Yi asked Zhang Lie impatiently, "Captain, we haven't heard anything, surely the toad's almost dead by now?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "Haven't you heard the saying that a wounded animal is the most dangerous? And a wounded lifeform is even worse than that. If you want to commit suicide, feel free to go ahead!"

Upon hearing his words, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng both stilled, but they could barely resist the temptation of superior gene fragments and the possibility of a superior-grade soul shard. Sun Mengmeng couldn't help asking, "But didn't you say that the poison on your blade was particularly domineering?"

"Poison still takes time to activate, especially against superior-grade lifeforms, after all. Furthermore, you do realize that both of you will die if the dreadtoad launches an aural wave straight at you, don't you? Caution should be your top priority."

Zhang Lie explained himself again patiently, well understanding the reason for their impatience. Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng, not daring to head toward the hole but too impatient to stand still, ended up pacing around him.

"Alright, alright, stop moving around! There's still a long while to go yet, so if we want to minimize the risk, you'll all have to be patient. Fang Yi, keep guard with the rest of these hunters and make sure no one's around to disturb us. Sun Mengmeng and I will be sufficient to handle the dreadtoad!"

Fang Yi immediately turned toward him, his eyes probing.

"What, you don't trust me?"

"No, no! Even without us, I'm sure you'd be able to take down this dreadtoad. We'll set up a patrol immediately!" Fang Yi reacted near-instantaneously.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Don't worry, I don't have any intention of cutting you out. I'm claiming its soulshard for myself, of course, but I certainly will share a portion of the meat with everyone.

Fang Yi, along with his team, sighed in relief.

After all, faced with Zhang Lie's dominating power, they wouldn't be able to refute anything he said or did. Even if he refused to share any of the spoils with them, what could they do? They would even have to thank him for not killing them.