

U. Warlord 311

Chapter 311: In Rage

"Locked up? Demoted? Do you think that that's sufficient?" Wang Yanyi's proposal was met with stark refusal from Xiao Zhengyang.

"Wang Po will be stripped of his position, never to return to the Tianji Council. Any further misdemeanors on his part will lead to immediate expulsion from the city!" Xiao Zhengyang proclaimed, so decisively that even Wang Yanyi didn't dare rebuke him.

From Wang Yanyi's perspective, although Zhang Lie had been a nuisance, Wang Po had certainly been at fault. Trying to find out who Xia Na was wasn't a problem, but for him to continue investigating her despite knowing that she was a member of the special forces was a different matter entirely. If he protected Wang Po now, there would surely be suspicions that he was the mastermind behind the entire affair.

When he heard the governor's punishment, Wang Po slumped lifelessly to the ground. His position as captain of the Tianji Council granted him superior genetic resources; without those handy, he would have to hunt down genetic lifeforms on his own, or purchase their flesh for an exorbitant price. At that point, he wouldn't be able to keep up his life of leisure and women.

Of course, neither Xiao Zhengyang nor Wang Yanyi cared about his emotions. To them, he was a minor figure, nothing more.

"As you say, Governor Xiao," Wang Yanyi acceded somewhat reluctantly.

"Good. He's family, after all, you'd better make sure this sort of joke doesn't happen again!" Xiao Zhengyang rubbed salt in his wound.

"Yes, Governor Xiao, I'll keep that in mind. Of course, I expect you'll do the same with your special forces." He stepped toward Wang Po, picked him up as though he were a little chick, then motioned for the Tianji Council hunters to leave.

Just as everyone thought that this fiasco was finally over, however, someone cried out.

"Hold it!" Zhang Lie stepped forward with a smirk on his face. "Do you think you can leave just like that, after insulting my authority and status? After trying to take me to task for a crime I didn't commit?"

Ever since he grew into power, Zhang Lie had responded aggressively to all provocations directed his way. To date, none had gotten the better of him—not the major clans of the Blacksteel settlement, nor those of the capital, nor the winged. He didn't plan on letting Wang Po and Wang Yanyi go so easily, either.

These were Zhang Lie's own thoughts; everyone else stared at him in stupefaction. Did he really think he could beat the head of the Tianji Council? Wang Yanyi was scarcely weaker than Governor Xiao himself!

Those hunters and elders of the Tianji Council thought that Zhang Lie was crazy, whereas those from the special forces believed that his strength had gotten to his head. It was true that Zhang Lie was very strong, especially for a newcomer to the second realm, and he had won both their approval and the governor's.

However, this didn't imply that Zhang Lie would be able to go face-to-face against someone like Governor Xiao or Council Head Wang themselves. After all, Wang Yanyi was an experienced hunter at least on Xiao Zhengyang's level, and there surely was no way that Zhang Lie could stand up to him at the moment.

On the other hand, when Xiao Zhengyang heard Zhang Lie's words, he grew visibly excited. He was the only person currently present, except for Zhang Lie himself, who had an accurate assessment of Zhang Lie's abilities. From their race to the capital during his first meeting with him, he knew just how frightening Zhang Lie really was. Now that Zhang Lie had finished acquiring his basic and mutated gene fragments from the second realm, his strength would only grow by leaps and bounds.

Xiao Zhengyang was very excited to see what a match between Wang Yanyi and Zhang Lie would be like; his strength was comparable to Wang Yanyi's, and it would be interesting to see who would win. In addition, he was very curious just what havoc Zhang Lie could wreak at full strength.

Wang Yanyi, who had turned around and was preparing to leave, wondered if he had misheard Zhang Lie's words. "What did you say? Surely I must have misheard you."

"You heard me right the first time, old man! Didn't you say that you were going to teach me a lesson? Let's have it right now, then!"

Zhang Lie's disdainful gaze caused Wang Yanyi's face to swell in anger, but instead of replying to the arrogant brat, Wang Yanyi turned to Xiao Zhengyang, expecting that Xiao Zhengyang would surely step forward now to protect Zhang Lie.

Surprisingly, Xiao Zhengyang did nothing of the sort. He stared back at Wang Yanyi, as if egging him on. Wang Yanyi had expected Zhang Lie's disdain to be born of ignorance, but Xiao Zhengyang's attitude made him doubt himself.

Did Xiao Zhengyang really think that this newcomer could stand up to him?

Chapter 312: Four Tablets

"If you want a fight, you'll have it!" Wang Yanyi gritted out, genetic energy spiraling out of him in such a huge wave that it felt like a tornado had spun into existence.

His deep green genetic energy was sharp and fierce, and a frightening sight to behold. Wang Yanyi's face warped with killing intent, causing many of the spectators to take a step back without realizing it.

Of course, Zhang Lie and Xiao Zhengyang, who was prepared to rescue Zhang Lie from Wang Yanyi if need be, did not.

As the spectators continued to retreat, within moments, only the three hunters remained in the patch of land outside the forests of Qi. If not for Xiao Zhengyang's presence beside Zhang Lie, Wang Yanyi would undoubtedly have charged forward already.

"Please step back, Governor Xiao. I've just acquired quite a lot of gene fragments all at once, and I'm afraid I can't control it all entirely just yet!"

Xiao Zhengyang cocked his head. "Are you confident?"

"Well, I suppose we'll see."

Owing to his trust in Zhang Lie, Xiao Zhengyang stepped back, leaving just Wang Yanyi and Zhang Lie in the center of the battlefield.

Wang Yanyi relaxed. At this point, Zhang Lie would be completely under his control.

"Lad, whatever the result of this confrontation, your courage is certainly impressive. Take one punch from me and we'll call it quits," Wang Yanyi announced arrogantly, as though he had already won.

Zhang Lie smiled as he circulated his genetic energy. A black pillar of light pierced the skies, and a blood moon ascended into the air.

[Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]! Gravity seemed to increase tremendously around the battlefield, and even Wang Yanyi barely avoided stumbling.

"Decent strength," he commented, then gathered wind-attuned genetic energy around him as he transformed into a titan of wind. With a ferocious howl, the wind elemental, so large it seemed to touch the sky itself, stood tall against Zhang Lie's gravity. It cocked its right arm and charged an attack so potent that space seemed to warp around it.

Wind-attuned genetic energy formed a gigantic fist. It shot forward so quickly that it created a vacuum in the air behind it.

"Good attack!" Zhang Lie slammed his palms into the ground as four tablets from the dragonturtle fell into place all around him, striking the earth like meteorites from the sky.

With a resounding crash, the four tablets enclosed Zhang Lie within. As they landed, the entire patch of land outside the Qi forest sank a few dozen meters, and the already staggering force of gravity increased tenfold.

The incredible force caused Wang Yanyi's fist-like attack to pop like a balloon, and even the wind elemental into which Wang Yanyi had transformed was crushed by its weight. The wind-attuned genetic energy vanished as the shocked Wang Yanyi slammed into the ground.

His body and expression seemed just like Wang Po's from before: he was lying spread-eagled on the ground, blood seeping from his nose and mouth, incapable of moving even his fingertips. The genetic energy that he had summoned had either been forcibly returned to his body or dissipated into the air.

Wang Yanyi felt as though the entire weight of the heavens was pressing down on his body, that, if the weight were any greater, his body would explode on the spot. He gritted his teeth as he experienced what Wang Po had faced for himself.

With all four tablets in the ground, the dragon's presence grew stronger. It endowed Zhang Lie with authority, presence, and might—all would bow before him.

Even those spectators watching from afar were affected by the frightening force of gravity. Most of them found themselves lying crawled on the ground. Xiao Zhengyang, only 300 meters away from Zhang Lie, quivered as he barely remained kneeling on one knee despite flaring genetic energy from his body.

The spectators' eyes filled with shock and awe. They thought that they had a good sense of Zhang Lie's strength, but what lay in front of them painted a different picture entirely. No—despite all that he had shown them, they had greatly underestimated Zhang Lie. He was able to force Wang Yanyi himself to the ground, freezing him in place like a common insect!

So immense was his power and authority that he had even subdued them and the governor himself, standing quite some distance away from the battlefield.

Even more shockingly, Zhang Lie was only in his twenties. All the spectators, even Wang Yanyi or Xiao Zhengyang, couldn't help but feel a sense of inferiority when compared to him. What had they been doing in their twenties?

Zhang Lie seemed to be in another dimension of strength entirely. Xiao Zhengyang believed that this level of strength would be sufficient to deem him a lord-class hunter, one of which hadn't appeared among the humans of the second realm for years. A youth who was a lord-class hunter, and one who had done so even without unlocking the entirety of his potential...

Only now did Xiao Zhengyang understand why Yan Long was so adamant about telling him to provide Zhang Lie with everything he desired.

From Yan Long's perspective, it would be ideal to support Zhang Lie's growth as much as possible so that he could lead mankind into a dominant position even in the second realm. Furthermore, despite the ridiculously immense strength that Zhang Lie had already demonstrated, for some reason, he felt as though Zhang Lie was still hiding part of his strength.

Chapter 313: The Dust Settles

To be frank, Zhang Lie was quite disappointed by the outcome of the match. How could the head of the Tianji Council himself have fallen to one technique—and one that affected him indirectly, if that?

Zhang Lie simply didn't have a good grasp of his strength relative to the other hunters of the realm. After all, obtaining peak gene fragments in the first realm had been an impossibly fortuitous encounter, and disaster gene fragments even more so.

What Zhang Lie had achieved was impossible to match without foreknowledge, and even Zhang Lie himself had been surprised that he had accomplished so much.

"Council Head Wang, listen up—don't try to extend your authority more than you already have. Clearly, you're not powerful enough to do more than this!" Zhang Lie lectured.

"You..." Wang Yanyi was about to retort, but the combination of the increased gravity and his roiling emotions proved too much for his battered body to bear. He spat out a mouthful of blood, then fell unconscious.

Zhang Lie reined in his genetic energy and glanced at him in disdain. "How could you have fainted just like that? I haven't even attacked you directly yet!"

The spectators didn't dare to imagine what a direct hit from Zhang Lie would feel like. The team leaders of the special forces found their backs drenched in sweat, unbelievably grateful that they hadn't provoked Zhang Lie too much. Otherwise...

In fact, Wang Yanyi felt much the same way. Although he had been beaten and shamed by Zhang Lie, his predominant emotion at the moment was fear, not anger. Only those who faced Zhang Lie for themselves would understand just how frightening he was as an enemy.

Wang Yanyi was very glad that, although he had unleashed killing intent toward Zhang Lie, because of Xiao Zhengyang's presence, he had only tried to defeat, rather than kill, his opponent. Otherwise, Zhang Lie might very well have struck him a lethal blow in return.

Was this really a newcomer to the second realm? Zhang Lie was stronger than any of the sura that Wang Yanyi had faced!

Even if he were to work together with Xiao Zhengyang, he didn't think they would be able to harm Zhang Lie at all. After having felt Zhang Lie's genetic energy for himself, he understood very well just how large the gulf between them was.

Yes, Zhang Lie was arrogant and prideful, but he had the strength to back it up, so Wang Yanyi had chosen to faint in order to not lose even more face in front of the spectators.

Wang Yanyi's inspired fainting brought an end to the demonstration, and the hunters of the Tianji Council scurried off with their head in tow.

After that, the governor and the special forces troops all looked at Zhang Lie as though he were a god.

"Governor Xiao, I apologize for causing so much trouble on my first day," Zhang Lie murmured with a sigh.

"It's no problem, no problem at all! They were the ones who started it, anyway. And with this performance, I doubt you'll have any trouble in the city any longer." Xiao Zhengyang's eyes shone as he looked at Zhang Lie, as though he were some massive treasure that he had unearthed.

Zhang Lie sighed again. "Please, don't mention it. I still have to process the gene fragments that I just absorbed today to increase my sensitivity and control. If I had done so, I'm sure I'd have been able to keep Wang Yanyi conscious for a little while longer."

Despite vanquishing Wang Yanyi in one blow, Zhang Lie was still complaining about his lack of finesse... Given the strength Zhang Lie had demonstrated, he was surely at the level of a lord-class hunter, beyond the governors of the human cities themselves.

Xiao Zhengyang didn't dare to rebut him. "Well, it's alright. It isn't as if he'll leave Qi, so feel free to challenge him the next time you see him."

"Forget it—he can't even take a single blow from me! Give me some time to adapt to my newfound strength. When I'm ready, I'll challenge you instead!"

Xiao Zhengyang was very adept at plaguing his enemies, but he seemed to have made a mistake this time around. Upon hearing Zhang Lie's words, Xiao Zhengyang felt his legs turn to jelly, and he barely avoided slumping to the ground. No, thank you, he wanted to live a few more years! He might be a little stronger than Wang Yanyi, but only barely. If Wang Yanyi had lost to Zhang Lie so easily, he wouldn't fare much better.

"Haha, perhaps if I'm free!" With so many people gathered here, it would be embarrassing to refuse Zhang Lie's request outright. Instead, Xiao Zhengyang decided that, the moment he returned to his manor, he would enter secluded cultivation until Zhang Lie left for the third realm...

The confrontation between the special forces and the Tianji Council seemed to be over, but there would surely be ramifications for Zhang Lie's actions that extended well into the future. Indeed, by the time Zhang Lie returned to his rooms, he found a missive from the governor's manor. Because of Zhang Lie's "honorable actions defending the authority of the special forces", he was promoted to senior advisor for the governor.

In other words, Governor Xiao would reach out to him if he encountered a dilemma that he wasn't sure how to resolve. It was a behind-the-scenes position that wouldn't bring Zhang Lie much fame, but he would have definite authority in Qi.

In fact, if it were possible, Xiao Zhengyang would have promoted him even further, but what he had done was already extreme enough. It was, after all, still Zhang Lie's first day in Qi.

Chapter 314: Special Forces' Meeting

The arrival of the missive elevated Zhang Lie's position in Qi once again. Of course, by this point, power within Qi was immaterial to Zhang Lie. He perused the missive, then put it aside. If he really wanted to do anything, no one in Qi could stop him, so the position was meaningless.

That said, when those of the special forces heard about the news, Zhou Liao quickly paid him a visit, insisting on housing Zhang Lie in the best cottage in the settlement and being so genial a host that Zhang Lie was getting goosebumps.

To be frank, Zhang Lie didn't care much for such luxury—his childhood had been one of poverty, and he had learned to dispense with them. If not for how eager Zhou Liao seemed, he wouldn't have agreed to move to that other cottage. Subsequently, he refused all other offers from Zhou Liao.

The two of them decided that Zhang Lie would get first pick of two or three hunters for his special forces team from the final roster of selected applicants in around a week's time, and Zhang Lie intended to have his new gene fragments fully digested by then.

After leaving Zhang Lie's new cottage, Zhou Liao convened a meeting with all nine team leaders of the special forces, excluding Zhang Lie himself.

By then, the third team, which had gone out on a mission, had conveniently returned, so all the troops were present. However, the third team leader, Zhuo Yihong, was rather nonplussed by the other team leaders' behavior.

After all, he still hadn't heard about what had happened in Qi that day, nor the dramatic changes that Zhang Lie's arrival in Qi heralded.

"Alright, everyone's here! I only have one item on the agenda: Deputy Leader Zhang's selection of hunters for his team."

Everyone but the third team leader perked up.

"The governor has agreed to let all of you team leaders participate in the selection, but if you intend to do so, you need to choose a new team leader in your stead. In other words, if you want to participate, you'll need to prepare to give up your position as team leader in case you get selected."

Zhou Liao had anticipated the team leaders' exuberant response—indeed, if not for the governor expressly forbidding him from participating, he might well have done so himself.

The other team leaders hastily nodded. After witnessing Zhang Lie's ridiculous strength for themselves, it was obvious that they would choose to join his team rather than remain team leaders—well, obvious to everyone but Zhuo Yihong. He didn't understand why this sort of thing needed an announcement, nor why everyone else seemed so excited about it.

"Troop Leader Zhou, could you explain what's going on? I'm quite confused by all this fuss, and who's this Deputy Leader Zhang? Furthermore, what's this about troop selection? Have team leaders always been allowed to participate?"

"Ah!" Zhou Liao rapped his own head. "I forgot that you wouldn't have known about what happened today. You've heard of Zhang Lie, of course?"

Zhang Lie's name had spread far and wide over the first three realms, and essentially everyone of note had heard of him.

"Of course! Champion of the Void Cup, the one whom everyone seems to exaggerate about?" He blinked as the other team leaders, Zhou Liao included, turned to him as though he were a fool.

Zhuo Yihong reared back in surprise. "Is something wrong? Was it something I said?"

"Team Leader Zhuo, I recommend seeing Zhang Lie fight for himself before you make such a judgment about his strength, or you could easily land yourself in hot water! Anyway, yes, the Zhang Lie that you've described is now the deputy leader of the Qi special forces!"

"Really?"

"The governor instated him in this position himself! Of course, as the deputy leader, he'll need his own team, and we've combined that with the recruitment process for the special forces this time around. The reason the team leaders are eligible to participate is because Governor Xiao wants to give you all an opportunity, but whether or not you want to take it is up to you.

However, Deputy Leader Zhang has just informed me that he only has three available spots in his team, so even if you participate, you aren't guaranteed a spot."

Zhuo Yihong frowned again. "Troop Leader, I'm still confused about something. Why would any of us want to give up our positions as team leaders just to be a regular member in his team? Surely none of us are fools?"

Chapter 315: Preparing for the Selection

Everyone stared at Zhuo Yihong as though he were the fool, at which point he immediately exclaimed, "What, not this again? Surely you all aren't thinking of doing just that?!"

"On what grounds do you think that Deputy Leader Zhang isn't strong? How can you be so certain when you haven't seen him fight for yourself? Do you think we're all fools?"

"Did you know that Zhang Lie managed to take down the head of the Tianji Council, Wang Yanyi, with a single area-of-effect technique? Just one blow, and Wang Yanyi was rendered immobile on the ground!" Zhou Liao's voice rose into a crescendo.

"What? Surely you must be joking, Troop Leader Zhou?"

"Enough, Team Leader Zhuo! It's clear this meeting won't benefit you. Go learn about what Deputy Leader Zhang did today first, and I'll send you the meeting minutes later." Zhuo Yihong's repeated interruptions caused Zhou Liao to lose his patience.

"Yes, Troop Leader!" Zhuo Yihong hesitated for a moment, realized the truth of Zhou Liao's words, and walked out with a belly full of questions. The meeting resumed without him.

All seven remaining troop leaders motioned that they would participate in the selection process, which implied that the three openings in Zhang Lie's team would likely go to three among them. Compared to most of the recruits, the team leaders were overwhelmingly strong—though there were always one or two recruits that were at the same level of strength, so it wasn't impossible that some of the team leaders might lose out to other promising candidates who weren't yet part of the special forces.

The selection process would take place in an external training ground outside the barracks, in a squat black building. There would infrequently be announcements that a new recruitment session was about to occur, and there had been a wave of hunters flocking to the area because of Governor Xiao's declaration that he wanted to expand the size of the special forces.

Of course, even under usual circumstances, hunters went in and out of the building all the time. There were often injuries and casualties among the special forces, and additional hunters would be needed to fill the gaps in each team.

When Zhou Liao and the others arrived at the building, all the recruits let out excited grins. Troop Leader Zhou Liao was a famous name in Qi, and every one of the recruits knew his face. Many of the recruits felt as though something might be amiss; this wasn't their first time participating in the selection process, and the team leaders hadn't appeared in force the past few times.

Soon after the team leaders appeared, a notice regarding special recruitment for a team for Deputy Leader Zhang Lie appeared on the digital noticeboard, causing a huge fuss in the examination hall.

"What's going on? Who's this?"

"Is this the same Zhang Lie who was the champion of the Void Cup? How did he become the deputy leader of the special forces in Qi?"

"Something must be wrong—I've never heard of the special forces having such a position!"

"Wait, look at the end of the message—"Team leaders of the special forces are likewise eligible to participate in the selection process.' Would those team leaders be willing to give up their high-ranking positions just to join Zhang Lie's team?"

"It's a farce, I'm sure of it! I bet they're only doing it because Zhang Lie hasn't made a name for himself in the second realm yet, so they're trying to attract more hunters to his team! In that case, I expect the weakest team in the special forces to be Deputy Leader Zhang's!"

"The weakest team? Are you crazy? Didn't you see Zhang Lie's performance during the Void Cup? He even withstood a blow from the white-winged emperor, and you still doubt his strength?"

"Oh, I watched that footage—but there was no way he would have been able to survive that blow if not for the timely arrival of Martial Sage Hao Tianqi!"

"Who's to say that he didn't have anything up his sleeve? Furthermore, what you're saying is only conjecture."

"Is no one else paying attention to the fact that he became a deputy leader of the special forces so quickly? Surely he can't have ascended for long—how could he already be a deputy leader?"

"Are you a fool? Don't you know just how much he's done for humanity by winning the Void Throne? Making him the deputy leader of the special forces is the least they could do—he's being treated like a god on Earth! Given his accolades with the Void Cup and with the theory of limit fragments, I wouldn't be surprised if he even took over Troop Leader Zhou Liao's position!"

Rapid debate and hushed conversations sprung up among the hunters gathered in the examination hall. In the end, a large majority of the hunters present applied to take part, attracted by the limited nature of the opportunity and Zhang Lie's fame.

Chapter 316: Investigating the Runic Tablets

Would Zhang Lie's special forces team really become the weakest team in the history of the Qi special forces, as one hunter had claimed? Of course not!

The strength of the members of Team Zenith, soon to ascend to the second realm, was comparable to that of the team leaders of the special forces. They all possessed basic and mutated limit fragments, peak gene fragments, and were in the process of accumulating resources for superior limit fragments. The combination of all these limit fragments would undoubtedly produce incredible strength in the second realm.

Of course, the recruits participating in the selection process wouldn't be aware of this at all. In fact, they wouldn't realize the extent to which they were mistaken until they stepped into the examination hall and found all nine team leaders of the special forces, including Troop Leader Zhou Liao and the once-doubtful Zhuo Yihong, gathered there.

The troop leader was presiding over the selection process; the other eight team leaders were... taking the place of recruits. Were they all trying to be selected as regular members in Zhang Lie's team? Why? Were they crazy?

With the eight team leaders of the special forces gathered here, how would they be able to succeed? Didn't those hunters outside say that Zhang Lie's team would be the weakest of all?

The surprise appearance of the eight team leaders caused at least half of the recruits to retreat: those without the courage and strength to stand up to the current team leaders of the special forces, and those who understood that they were unlikely to succeed and didn't want to waste their time.

Their departure wasn't particularly problematic or troubling; at least it would save Zhou Liao some time. The remaining recruits surely had some measure of confidence in their strength.

A week passed in the blink of an eye.

Zhang Lie sat cross-legged in the training chamber built into his cottage, genetic energy flaring around him. So immense was the aura that all the hunters in the barracks could feel it as clear as day, as though they had awoken some primordial beast.

Zhou Liao and the other team leaders hastily assembled.

"Troop Leader Zhou, is Deputy Leader Zhang about to leave secluded cultivation?" Zhuo Yihong asked, his face bright and radiant. With a combination of skill and good fortune, he had managed to seize one of the three open slots in Zhang Lie's team for himself during the selection process.

Zhuo Yihong was an interesting fellow indeed. It had taken him a mere hour to transform his disdain for Zhang Lie into rabid worship: half an hour to listen to what he had done since entering the second realm, and half an hour to confirm the stories he had heard.

Ever since then, he had become Zhang Lie's #2 fan within the barracks.

Zhang Lie's #1 fan was Xia Na, who, unlike Zhuo Yihong, also entertained the notion of becoming Zhang Lie's partner. After all, she was in the prime of adulthood, and Zhang Lie seemed like a perfect choice. She believed that she was keeping these thoughts very well hidden, but the sparkle in her eyes whenever Zhang Lie was brought up betrayed her.

Upon hearing Zhuo Yihong's question, she too turned to Zhou Liao.

"How would I know? With fluctuations of this magnitude, however, I think I'd agree with you. Zhuo Yihong, go call that lucky lad Qin Tian over! Once Deputy Leader Zhang makes an appearance, I'll be able to hand all three of you to him. You and Xia Na have both handled matters in your respective teams already, haven't you?"

"I'll go immediately! We took care of our teams the day we heard the news." Zhuo Yihong beamed, then ran off into the distance. His impatience was obvious; the jealousy of the arrayed team leaders around, even more so.

They regretted that they hadn't prepared sufficiently for the selection process, but it was all too late. The three hunters who would join Zhang Lie's team had been chosen, and the rest of them had squandered their opportunity.

Within his training chamber, Zhang Lie inspected his body. The genetic energy within frothed—a clear sign that Zhang Lie was finally able to control his newfound strength. He clenched his fist, quelling the fluctuations instantly. Zhang Lie smiled. As he repeatedly unclenched and clenched his fist, his genetic energy stormed and raged, then fell as quiet as the surface of a placid lake.

This was the objective of his seclusion, which he had achieved perfectly. Even so, Zhang Lie didn't intend to leave the training chamber just yet. Instead, he wanted to familiarize himself with the four tablets of [Ninecarp Transformation]'s fourth form, the dragonturtle.

Ever since he summoned all four tablets to the ground at the same time, Zhang Lie had had the sensation that he was missing something, that each tablet surely possessed a unique function beyond being able to augment the others.

For instance, the first tablet yielded the strength of gravity. In combination with the augmentation from the other three tablets, along with the power of [Eclipse], he had been able to subjugate Wang Yanyi without any direct attacks whatsoever.

As a result, he was even more curious as to just what mysteries lay hidden in the depths of the other three tablets.

Chapter 317: At Your Command

With a dull thump, he summoned the second of the four runic tablets from the dragonturtle's back. The tablets were all the same shape and size, though different runic inscriptions were carved on them, and the sensation he felt from summoning each tablet was different.

Compared to the first tablet's gravity, this tablet felt somehow... weightless. With a moment's thought, Zhang Lie suddenly found everything in the room, even himself, begin to float.

In that case, the second tablet's power was antithetical to the first: one strengthened gravity, and the other canceled it. As far as Zhang Lie could tell, if he grew skilled enough to combine or manipulate their effects at will, he would surely gain another powerful tool in his arsenal.

Instead of continuing his investigation with the third and fourth tablets, however, Zhang Lie decided to stop. He could feel the aura of the hunters gathering outside his training chamber, and it was clear that the fluctuations in his genetic energy had alerted them. They were likely waiting for him to come out of seclusion, so Zhang Lie didn't want to waste their time. He reclaimed the tablets, dressed himself, and stepped outside the chamber.

"Congratulations on your success, Deputy Leader Zhang! Given your aura, it must have been a successful session," Zhou Liao greeted him the moment he walked out, treating him even more formally than the governor himself.

The other team leaders and the lucky Qin Tian all echoed Zhou Liao's words, "Congratulations, Deputy Leader Zhang!"

Zhang Lie smiled politely. "We're all colleagues, aren't we? There's no need to be so formal."

Tension bled out of the gathered hunters' faces, and of Qin Tian in particular. After all, he had never met Zhang Lie before, so he couldn't help feeling anxious—especially after hearing so many tales of his successes over the past two days. He wouldn't have expected Zhang Lie to be so casual on their first encounter, without any of the arrogance and stuffiness natural to a hunter who had achieved so much.

He thanked his lucky stars again that he had chosen to participate in the selection process to join Zhang Lie's team.

"It's only natural, Deputy Leader Zhang—after all, everyone here is in awe of your skill," Zhou Liao replied. Who else would be able to subdue Wang Yanyi so easily? Even Governor Xiao would be hard-pressed to accomplish such a feat!

Glancing at the figures before him, Zhang Lie asked, "Are the results of the selection out?"

Given the hunters who were present, Zhang Lie had a pretty good guess as to who had been selected, but he still wanted some confirmation.

"Of course, Deputy Leader Zhang! Except for Xia Na, whom you personally spoke to and accepted, the other two spots in your team have gone to the third team leader, Zhuo Yihong, and the best candidate from the selection, Qin Tian." As Zhou Liao spoke, he motioned for the three hunters to step forward.

Zhang Lie had never met Zhuo Yihong or Qin Tian before. Zhuo Yihong was a mature hunter in his thirties, who seemed much like an uncle next door, whereas Qin Tian was somewhat younger, with a resolute expression on his face.

Zhang Lie's gaze swept over the three hunters. "Qin Tian's a somewhat familiar name. You're not related to the Qin clan in China's city of Liao, are you?"

Zhang Lie's question seemed to come out of nowhere, but everyone could hear the mild note of distaste in it. The Qin clan of Liao had likely been one of Zhang Lie's enemies during his initial period of growth. Perhaps they would no longer be able to threaten him, but he didn't want to help cultivate one of their promising talents, nonetheless.

"No, sir, I'm from Mars, and my family doesn't come from a major clan!"

The other team leaders sighed in disappointment as Zhang Lie nodded. "Good. There's no need to be so anxious—even if you were from the Qin clan, all I would have done was reject you."

Zhou Liao continued, "If there's no problem with the three candidates, Deputy Leader Zhang, then that's everything from me. I've informed Xia Na and Zhuo Yihong, the two previous team leaders, about what to expect with regards to your team's lodgings, and they should have everything prepared as well."

"Thank you for your help, Troop Leader Zhou. If there's anything you need my assistance with, please let me know, and I'll do my best."

Zhou Liao beamed upon hearing Zhang Lie's words. Zhang Lie's deferential attitude was something Zhou Liao could boast about for years; everyone present knew just how strong Zhang Lie was, after all.

"No, no, I could hardly command you, Deputy Leader Zhang! We'll work together!"

Chapter 318: Return to the Zenith Dojo

After greeting Zhang Lie, the other team leaders left. Soon, Xia Na, Zhuo Yihong, and Qin Tian were the only three hunters remaining.

"Alright, while they're all gone, let me go over my expectations briefly. There are only two important commandments in my team: first, don't provoke others, but don't back down if provoked;

second, honor our ideals and fulfill our objectives with overwhelming strength. Do you understand?"

The three new team members couldn't help but think back to how Zhang Lie had utterly destroyed Phoenix in the Void Cup, as well as how Zhang Lie had sallied alone into the throngs of the Kez to defeat a three-star black-tipped scarab in the fight that had catapulted him to fame.

These were good ideals to live by.

"Yes, Captain!" the three hunters replied as one, their tone resolute.

Their past backgrounds didn't matter; from today onwards, Xia Na, Zhuo Yihong, and Qin Tian would be nothing more—and nothing less—than Zhang Lie's team members.

"Alright, that's it. Since your lodgings have already been prepared for you, feel free to get settled in. For the moment, continue your personal training. I'll discuss how we'll split our resources once the rest of Team Zenith enters the second realm. If there's anything urgent, I'll contact you. Before the rest of Team Zenith joins us, I expect we won't get any missions. Cherish this period of peace and quiet—it won't last long!"

To be honest, Zhang Lie wasn't sure what plans Governor Xiao had for his team. Zhang Lie certainly wouldn't have organized a team on his own given that he already had Team Zenith, and he didn't know how to incorporate the three new members with the rest of Team Zenith.

Fortunately, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng would quickly ascend to the second realm, and he would be able to delegate this responsibility to them.

As for him, he had his own goals in mind. There were two pressing objectives for him at the moment. He had to quickly understand and master the use of the dragonturtle's four tablets, then start preparing to amass superior gene fragments for himself. The four tablets could be easily mastered with time and effort, he was certain; the superior gene fragments would be harder.

Compared to the lifeforms of the first realm, those of the second were far more intelligent, even more so than ordinary adults. Their intelligence meant that they would gather and roam in herds and packs, and even in alliances.

In the second realm, it was relatively easy to obtain basic and mutated gene fragments, but the difficulty of amassing superior gene fragments increased at least a hundredfold. After all, it was rare for superior-grade lifeforms to wander alone; all were members of some pack or alliance. As a result, every superior gene fragment a hunter could acquire was a precious commodity indeed.

Trying to hunt down a superior-grade lifeform meant dealing with the retribution from the pack it was in, so mankind had had no choice to work solely in teams and groups as well. It was simply too unrealistic to expect one person to handle a whole horde of lifeforms.

There could well be a rare few peak-grade lifeforms leading such a horde, and these corresponded to lord-class hunters in terms of strength.

Zhang Lie was a lord-class hunter himself, but facing two or more peak-grade lifeforms simultaneously would still be too much of a challenge for him to take on. Thus, Zhang Lie would

have to make significant preparations before he could feel comfortable about wandering out of the city on his own.

Fortunately, in his past life, Zhang Lie had become an excellent pillmaster, and dealing with a horde of superior-grade lifeforms was much easier with potions that perfectly countered their strengths and exposed their weaknesses.

As a result, Zhang Lie quickly traveled back to Earth, to the Zenith Dojo. In the dojo's basement was a top-secret laboratory expressly for his use. Much of the spiritual herbs that he had gathered within the first realm were stored here. His potbellied-toad pouch had been full to bursting, and he was anticipating the arrival of research groups from the alien races, so he had paid an exorbitant cost to transfer the herbs out of the dimensional world and into the real one.

Now that he wanted to brew a few potions, it would be most convenient to do so there.

Of course, he was also curious about how his sister was doing in the first realm. He was very protective of her, but he also knew that, if he were to indulge and coddle her too much, it would only stunt her future development.

When Zhang Lie appeared in the teleportation array situated in the center of the Zenith Dojo, it glowed with a pale golden light.

Zhang Hong, who had been in a meeting; Lin Xiu, who was lecturing a group of recruits; Zhang Hanxiang, who was currently taking a hot bath; and the members of Team Zenith, who had prepared everything and were waiting for Zhang Lie's command to ascend to the second realm, received news of Zhang Lie's return.

Almost as soon as Zhang Lie stepped off the teleportation array, a vivacious girl skipped forward to greet him.

"D-Dojo Leader, welcome back!" The girl's face was somewhat unfamiliar. She blushed red upon seeing Zhang Lie, clearly nervous but excited.

After all, at least within the Zenith Dojo, Zhang Lie was treated as an idol. Those disciples who entered the Zenith Dojo had done so both because they wanted to enjoy the best benefits of the Void Throne and, more importantly, because they venerated Zhang Lie.

They were all young hunters, hoping that one day, they too could become like Zhang Lie, a pillar of China, a beacon for humanity on Earth, in the dimensional world. This was the first time the girl was meeting her idol in person, and she was evidently and reasonably nervous. In fact, she felt as though her heart was about to jump out of her chest.

Chapter 319: The Unruly Zhang Hanxiang

Zhang Lie nodded at the young girl in greeting before his attention turned back to his transceiver, which had begun to beep. As expected, the first caller was Zhang Hong. The two of them exchanged a few quick words; what Zhang Hong had to report to him was exactly what Zhang Lie was already prepared to deal with.

First was Zhang Hanxiang. According to Zhang Hong, his sister had done admirably for herself within the first realm. Almost without relying on the members of Team Zenith, she, Jun Jiuxiao, and Ye Xianchen had finished capping out their mutated gene fragments, and they were more than halfway through with their superior gene fragments already.

However, Zhang Hanxiang had grown a little ill-tempered because of his prolonged absence. She had thought that she would finally be able to be by his side after becoming a genetic hunter, but now... One day, after finding out that Zhang Lie still hadn't returned from the second realm, she announced that she would remain on Earth and stop her excursions in the first realm of the dimensional world until Zhang Lie returned.

Within the Zhang family home, still preserved in the interior of the Zenith Dojo, was a crowded mess of ancient furniture and peeling wood. From Zhang Hanxiang's perspective, however, this was a far more lavish place than even the grand dojo that lay just outside its doors—because this was where she had developed countless memories with her brother, where she had stayed up the whole night waiting for him the day he entered the dimensional world for the first time.

Back then, she was her brother's world, and he was hers. Now, however, the times had changed, and her brother as well. The moment she received news of his return, Zhang Hanxiang wanted to rush out and welcome him home, but she forced herself against it.

She wanted to see if her brother would rush over to find her.

Zhang Lie hadn't known about what was going on with his sister, but after his brief communication with Zhang Hong, he realized that he would have to put her at the top of his agenda.

Just as Zhang Hanxiang finished her bath, Zhang Lie rushed into their old house.

"Hanxiang, are you inside? I'm back!" Zhang Lie shouted, only to see his sister running toward him, her lips pursed, barely suppressing a smile.

She was, at that moment, a paradox of emotion, unhappy that her brother had deserted her, but overjoyed that he had gone to find her first. This meant that she was still important to her brother, after all.

"Are you angry, Hanxiang?" Zhang Lie sat down by her side.

"Brother, it's been so long since I've seen you!" Zhang Hanxiang murmured.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Did you miss me? I heard you were doing very well for yourself in the first realm, and I thought you'd grown up! Perhaps Zhang Hong was mistaken..."

Zhang Hanxiang folded her arms and pouted at her brother, but he suddenly turned severe.

"Hanxiang, you must understand this: the road to cultivation is harsh, severe, and lonely. As we hunters acquire more and more power, we'll need to spend a commensurate amount of time developing, harnessing, practicing, and assimilating that power—months, even years. This is something you have to get used to.

"Even if we were in the same realm, there's no guarantee that I'll always be able to make time for you, so you need to learn to take care of yourself when I'm gone. Remember that the reason you enter the dimensional world is to develop and harness your own strength. Of course, I'll do my best to accompany you along your journey, but I can't be with you for good. You need to learn how to grow stronger, as do I. The dimensional world is dangerous, and sometimes, all you can count on is your own strength.

"Do you understand?"

Eventually, Zhang Hanxiang would have to learn how to live without him, and he had to impress upon her the importance of her independent growth. Zhang Hanxiang had to acclimate to this as soon as possible in case anything were to happen.

Zhang Lie was strong, and his strength would give him influence in any realm he reached. This strength alone was largely sufficient to protect Zhang Hanxiang, but it likewise posed a danger. Just as there were those who idolized Zhang Lie, there were those who plotted against him at any juncture.

Since Zhang Hanxiang wanted to become a genetic hunter in her own right, he couldn't coddle her and indulge in her every whim any longer. She had to learn to get used to loneliness, to derive strength from independence, to protect herself and her friends.

Zhang Hanxiang sat back, leaning against the weathered sofa, and slumped. She understood what her brother was saying, but it was simply so difficult! After entering the dimensional world, she had heard quite a lot of legends about her brother. Whenever she heard those tales, she was proud that her brother was so strong, but she hadn't carefully considered the source of his strength—not until the conversation he had had with her today.

His strength hadn't been a coincidence; it had been the result of long years of concentrated effort. If she were to continue her past behavior, she would be hard-pressed to excel in the first realm, let alone follow in her brother's footsteps.

She couldn't help but recall how Zhang Lie had entered the dangerous dimensional world in order to eke out a living for both of them, then how he had struggled through the depths of the Blacksteel settlement until finally he broke free, soared, and became the champion of the Void Cup all to get her the ability to stand once again.

All those opportunities for her, squandered in a fit of pique.

Zhang Hanxiang lowered her head. "I understand, Brother."

Chapter 320: Top Secret

The reason Zhang Lie was making such a big deal about this now was in order to highlight two important issues for his sister: first, that cultivation and the path of a hunter wasn't just a game, that she would have to put in hard work commensurate with the resources she had been given to succeed; and second, that the dimensional world was dangerous, and she needed some ability to protect herself.

"There's no need to apologize to me. Don't you think I understand how you feel? Even so, Hanxiang, I implore you to pay more attention to your cultivation. The members of Team Zenith will soon ascend to the second realm, and you, Jun Jiuxiao, and Ye Xianchen might have to fend for yourselves in the first realm.

"The influence of the dojo will continue to grow within the first realm, but if an emergency or accident happens, you'll need to be prepared to deal with it yourself. Make your way up to the second realm quickly, alright? This time, I promise I'll wait for you!"

In the end, he couldn't bear to be too harsh on her.

"Yes, Brother, I understand!" Zhang Hanxiang smiled, a blissful expression on her face.

"I'm going to be having a meeting with the members of Team Zenith about their ascension. There are a few things that I'd like to convey to you during this time as well, so you should join me."

"I understand, Brother!"

Zhang Hanxiang's tantrum had been within reason—while she was paralyzed, Zhang Lie naturally devoted more time and attention to her than now, and Zhang Lie's recent disappearance still weighed heavily on her.

The members of Team Zenith, like Zhang Lie, believed that she would soon grow out of this phase. Following Zhang Lie's command, they arrived outside the house within just a few moments.

"Captain!" As the door creaked open, the six members of Team Zenith greeted their captain and walked inside, remembering the first time they had met Zhang Lie.

Indeed, as Zhang Lie had claimed, they were very glad they had chosen to follow him. If they hadn't done so, they surely wouldn't have grown so strong.

Zhang Lie beckoned for them to sit around the table. "I'm ready to receive you in Qi. Are your preparations all finalized as well?"

Fang Yi nodded and spoke for the rest of the team. "Yes, Captain. We've collected all the spiritual herbs that you've asked for, and Hanxiang, Jiuxiao, and Xianchen are all capable of protecting themselves now."

Zhang Lie smiled. "Good. I trust your work, so what's left is for me to brew Potion #3 for each of you. Once you consume it and finish uncapping your superior gene fragments again, you'll be able to advance directly."

Fang Yi and the rest of the team nodded fervently, letting out excited smiles as they did so. Those who had never experienced the power of these limit fragments could hardly imagine the boost it gave to their abilities.

Just the basic and mutated limit fragments alone had given the members of Team Zenith an unimaginable boost, let alone the superior limit fragments they would soon obtain.

To be honest, even they had no idea just how strong they would become with this new potion. Although formally they were a team, none of them had ever managed to push Zhang Lie's limits, so from the members' perspective, Zhang Lie's source of genetic energy was all but boundless. Or, put differently, even their combined strength was unable to force him to his limits.

As far as they were aware, the reason for Zhang Lie's overwhelming strength was largely because they were missing his superior limit fragments, and it was only natural that they would jump at an opportunity to get what they had been dreaming of for so long.

"Thank you, Captain!"

"If you want to thank me, you'd better work harder!" The herbs had been extremely difficult to acquire even for their team, and Zhang Lie was the only hunter in the world who could make such a potion at the current stage.

"Brother, surely I haven't misheard you? You're talking about... Potion #3, which gives you access to superior limit fragments?" Zhang Hanxiang gasped in surprise. She had emphasized the words 'superior limit fragments'.

Zhang Lie nodded seriously. The reason he had asked the members of Team Zenith to come to his house was because he wanted to bring Zhang Hanxiang up to speed as well. Everything he had, so would his sister.

"Really?! Didn't the dojo announce that they had succeeded in the mutated limit fragment research just recently?"

"Hanxiang, remember that these discoveries will naturally make their way out into the public eye, and we of the Zenith Dojo aren't the only ones interested in these limit fragments."

She was shocked by the secret; as a schoolgirl who had only just made her way out into the world, her naivete hadn't left her entirely, and she believed the dojo's information almost without question, so this shock was a significant blow to her worldview.

Upon hearing her brother's words, however, she quickly agreed, "It does make sense, Brother."

Zhang Lie nodded. "Don't tell anyone for the moment, not even Jiuxiao or Xianchen. I'll let them know about the potions once the time is right. Do you understand?"