

U. Warlord 321

Chapter 321: Meeting with Zhang Hong

"Don't worry, Brother, I'll keep your secret!" Zhang Hanxiang nodded, happy that her brother had seen fit to trust her about such an important secret.

The members of Team Zenith knew their captain's personality well, and they certainly wouldn't divulge anything either.

Zhang Lie turned to them. "Hand me the materials—that'll be it for today. I'll let you all know when I have your potions ready."

Instead of heading straight to the lab, however, Zhang Lie then walked off in the direction of Zhang Hong's office, where Zhang Hong and Lin Xiu were already waiting for him.

"Sorry for the delay," Zhang Lie apologized, but Zhang Hong only smiled. "It's not a problem. We've been talking about some matters regarding the disciples."

"Good, good. How are the alien researchers doing?" Zhang Lie cut to the chase.

Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong glanced at each other, and Lin Xiu chuckled. "Lad, if you didn't bring them up, I would have suspected that you'd forgotten about them entirely. It's been a few months, and all you've done is give them the barest hint about what they should be doing. Even I think you've been too harsh! I know you've been busy, but it isn't appropriate to just leave them hanging either. How about you find some time to help them get started?"

Lin Xiu was hardly ever this verbose, and Zhang Lie was surprised that he was speaking up in defense of the alien researchers. Lin Xiu felt that this was only the right thing to do. During the past few months, the four alien researcher teams had gradually assimilated themselves with the Zenith Dojo, and they had petitioned Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong to help them out with regards to Zhang Lie.

They had been remarkably useful in helping out the Zenith Dojo, and they had even requested rare and precious resources from their home planets in order to do so, and Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong felt the need to compensate them for their trouble. Furthermore, they both understood Zhang Lie well—he would never renege on a promise he had made.

Zhang Lie would have to help them sooner or later, and they would try their best to ensure that it was sooner rather than later.

Zhang Lie smiled. "They must have been on their best behavior if even you were convinced to speak up for them, Lin Xiu. Very well, I'll show them a few tricks."

Zhang Lie deliberately took a big breath while they watched him in anticipation, then continued, "What do you think of my two apprentices, Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen?"

"Jiuxiao and Xianchen?" Zhang Hong frowned. Lin Xiu was likewise confused. Was there some sort of relationship between the limit fragment research and his two apprentices?

"What do you mean? How are they related?" Lin Xiu asked directly, only to be met with one of Zhang Lie's mysterious smiles. "Have a chat with the two of them, and you'll see. I think it should

make the four research teams' work a lot easier if you do—let them work on that for now, and if they run into an issue they can't resolve on their own, then I'll help them out once I'm out of the lab myself. I've already made preparations in the second realm, and I might be gone longer than I was this time around."

Zhang Lie's words shocked Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong. Apparently, Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen were instrumental to the alien research, but in a manner that wasn't yet apparent to Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong. Somehow, it seemed as though Zhang Lie had planned this all along— even before the start of the Void Cup itself. Lin Xiu found himself marveling at the extent of Zhang Lie's plans.

Even he couldn't block his curiosity any further. "Lad, tell me the truth—did you plan all this in advance?"

Zhang Lie laughed. "Not perfectly, but I was hoping for a little luck. You'll find out about everything once you ask the two of them what's going on. Right, tell them that I won't punish them for what they tried to hide from me. Please do keep an eye on them for me, too—I don't want my apprentices to be bullied by those fervent alien researchers."

Zhang Lie stood up and prepared to walk out of the room. "Right, that's that. I have to go brew some potions now, so I'll leave the two of you to take care of the dojo's affairs."

His tone was so indolent that the two of them gnashed their teeth and wanted to attack him, but there was little they could do. After all, he had bribed them with all sorts of expertise, potion knowledge, rare frameworks, techniques, and herbs...

Lin Xiu was already a master in his own right, and the treasures that Zhang Lie had access to had furthered his cultivation by a significant degree. Even Zhang Hong, who had just been a regular human, was now a proficient hunter in her own right.

Long ago, she had specifically booked time with Zhang Lie to begin her own training as a hunter, and she had continued that training with Lin Xiu despite how burdened she was with work.

"Ah, wait! You can't just leave everything to us—the first batch of disciples from the dojo are ready to enter the dimensional world! They're hoping you'll be present for the ceremony, and we were so overwhelmed with new recruits this year that we don't have space for all the promising candidates even with all the branches of the Zenith Dojo that currently exist. Do you think we should construct another set of branch locations?"

Chapter 322: False Identities

Zhang Hong called Zhang Lie back before he could escape and asked him two questions.

Zhang Lie thought for a moment, then replied, "I'll participate in the disciples' sending-off ceremony into the dimensional world, but it has to wait until I'm done with the lab. There's no need for us to build more branches of the Zenith Dojo. If there are too many applicants, then raise the bar—I want to value quality over quantity."

"I understand!" Zhang Hong nodded firmly, and Zhang Lie hurried off.

He headed toward the lab, whereas Zhang Hong and Lin Xiu made for the training grounds by the disciples' rooms in order to search for Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen and discover just how they were related to the limit fragment research.

There, they found quite a few disciples practicing their techniques in earnest, barely noticing that Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong had entered their midst.

On the arena in the middle of the training ground, two slender youths were clashing against one another, one male and one female, each about thirteen or fourteen years of age.

The male youth was dressed in white, his eyes fierce, a storm of genetic energy in his wake as he charged at his opponent with his fists. The female youth was dressed in black, her eyes sharp, her hands transformed into claws wreathed with black flame as she dodged with grace.

"One last blow—[Heaven-Splitting Fist]!"

"[Darkbane Claws]!"

Black- and white-colored genetic energy rippled out from the two youths as the spectating disciples watched on in shock and awe. The floorboards of the arena began to crack.

Even Zhang Hong and Lin Xiu were surprised by their display of strength.

To be honest, they didn't know too much about Zhang Lie's apprentices—the dojo had only been responsible for their preliminary, foundational education; Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith had then worked with the duo personally for framework and technique selection, then independent tutoring afterwards. They had created monsters.

It was then that the other disciples understood just what it meant to be one of the dojo leader's apprentices.

"Alright, Jiuxiao, Xianchen, it's time to stop! If you keep going, you'll wreck the entire arena!" Zhang Hong called out. Her voice brought them back to reality. They turned toward Zhang Hong, bowed, and leapt off the arena.

"Dojo Leader Zhang! Master Lin! What are the two of you doing here?"

It was true that Zhang Hong and Lin Xiu didn't play an important role in their cultivation and development as hunters, but they all got along quite well; in particular, a bubbly girl like Ye Xianchen was popular with just about everyone she met.

Only when she spoke did most of the disciples realize that Zhang Hong and Lin Xiu were in their midst.

"Dojo Leader Zhang!"

"Master Lin!"

Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong waved their hands and nodded at the excited disciples.

"Excellent work, everyone. Please, continue your training," Zhang Hong commented. She turned to Zhang Lie's two apprentices. "Jiuxiao, Xianchen, please come with me."

"Yes, Dojo Leader!"

Zhang Hong was the deputy dojo leader, beneath just Zhang Lie herself, and she had been accompanied by Lin Xiu. Just what would warrant both of them coming for her and Jiuxiao together?

The four of them sat down within an unoccupied meditation chamber. The moment they took their seats, Zhang Hong and Lin Xiu's faces turned dark, especially Lin Xiu's, and the atmosphere in the chamber grew tense.

"Explain yourselves. Why have you snuck into the dojo hiding your identities? What are your objectives?" Lin Xiu shouted, his aura stunning the two of them into silence.

Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen blanched, as though they were being subject to something horrifying. His face flushed, Jun Jiuxiao stuttered, "M-M-Master Lin, please hear us out, we never snuck into the dojo, and we never deliberately hid our identity! This is all a misunderstanding, so please listen to our explanation and don't chase us away!"

"Yes, Master Lin, Dojo Leader Zhang, Jiuxiao's right. We can't be considered human, but we promise that we didn't enter the Zenith Dojo with malicious intent.

Please don't expel us from the dojo," Ye Xianchen begged, following Jun Jiuxiao.

It was natural that the two apprentices would be worried; the dojo expressly barred disciples who intentionally hid their identity, and those who had joined for nefarious reasons. Those who were found to have violated this rule would have their genetic core destroyed, then be kicked out of the dojo.

Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong glanced at each other, and Lin Xiu continued, "A misunderstanding? Explain yourselves. What are your true identities and background? If you continue hiding anything from me..."

Lin Xiu was pretending to be angrier than he actually was in order to teach the two apprentices a lesson. Although Zhang Lie was willing to let their deception slide, they had still broken one of the fundamental rules of the dojo, and it would hardly be acceptable for them to receive no punishment for what they had done, nor for the other disciples to feel as though they could likewise violate that rule.

"Yes, Master Lin!" The two apprentices knew that the truth would come out sooner or later; after all, as they continued to grow, their racial characteristics would quickly become unable to hide.

They calmed down and began their narration. Jun Jiuxiao, still dressed in white, stood up. Genetic energy flared around him as a pair of angelic wings sprouted from his back.

Chapter 323: Princess of the Night Mystics

"I apologize, Master Lin, Dojo Leader Hong. I'm half-winged. Please believe me when I say that I didn't sneak into the dojo as a spy or anything similar. I simply arrived at Earth coincidentally while avoiding my pursuers, and I was fortunate enough to enter the dojo. While training in the dojo, I never bore any intention to harm the dojo, my masters, or any of my fellow students!"

He spread his wings wide, and his irises turned gold.

Ye Xianchen likewise strode forward. Runic inscriptions crept up her arms, and a sharp, black tail emerged from her lower back. "Master Lin, Dojo Leader Zhang, I'm half-night spirit. Escaping all

the way to Earth has been a harrowing journey, and we simply didn't dare to reveal ourselves for, for fear of further discrimination..."

Tears sparkled in Xianchen's eyes, and her voice fell with every word.

"Hold it, hold it right there! All I told you was to explain yourselves properly—I never said you'd be punished harshly!" Lin Xiu couldn't bear to play the bad guy any longer. He spoke to them in a far less demanding tone than before, explaining that they had little to fear.

After all, given that Zhang Lie himself had been willing to overlook the deception meant that there was surely no malicious intent behind it. It would suffice to give them a minor punishment, nothing more.

"Really? Thank you, Master Lin, thank you, Dojo Leader Zhang!" the two apprentices murmured in relief, but with a few notes of worry in their voice. After all, they didn't know how Zhang Lie would take their deception; they didn't realize that he had already found out.

Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong naturally realized what the two of them were thinking.

"There's no need to be so worried. Did you really think you could keep this hidden from the dojo leader? Come, tell us about the powers you've kept from us," Zhang Hong suggested. The two youths relaxed tremendously after hearing her words.

Right—how could the dojo leader not have seen through their deception? Perhaps he had already done so the moment they joined the dojo. Of course, that had to be the case! Otherwise, he wouldn't have summoned Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong to talk to them.

"Yes, Dojo Leader! I belong to an offshoot of the white-winged race, the hidden-winged. As an adult, I'll have the ability to shroud myself in invisibility by refracting the light around me. My father was a member of the hidden-winged, and my mother was a human. My clan disapproved of their union, and they were ultimately both killed by the clan," Jun Jiuxiao recounted, his somber tone and sharp, piercing eyes causing Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong to feel sympathetic toward him.

No wonder he had been so excited to see Zhang Lie kill Phoenix—no wonder he had trained so fervently, so recklessly, as though his very life depended on it!

Jun Jiuxiao's story was harrowing and all too believable. After all, before Martial Sage Hong Tianqi broke through, and before Zhang Lie developed limit fragments and became the champion of the Void Cup as a result, humans were widely recognized to be one of the weakest races in the Milky Way.

Even those members of the alien races who interacted with the humans would be laughed at by their compatriots, let alone those who would dare to start a family with them.

"Don't worry. Follow your master well, and one day, I'm sure the entirety of the hidden-winged will beg you for your mercy and forgiveness," Lin Xiu reassured him.

He had escaped from tragedy and discrimination of the worst kind; was it a surprise he didn't want to reveal his identity? Perhaps most curiously, he had managed to obtain basic limit fragments by breaking through following the human approach.

In other words, once the winged figured out what happened to him and why he was able to use the humans' approach to break through, they would quickly be able to amass limit fragments for their race. Unfortunately for the winged, however, they weren't in the first batch of races slated for research.

After Jun Jiuxiao told his story, everyone turned to Ye Xianchen.

"The night mystics are an offshoot of the nightdemons," she began.

"The night mystics!" Ye Xianchen's first sentence alone startled Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong. Both the nightdemons and night spirits had research delegations in the Zenith Dojo, and the night mystics clearly seemed to be a related race.

"Yes, the night mystics," Ye Xianchen continued. "Our eyes are our racial gift, granting us night vision superior to our vision in daylight. When shrouded in darkness, our strength can even be enhanced up to threefold. My father was once a high-ranking member of the clan. His marriage with my mother hadn't been a big problem—at least, not until I was born."

Ye Xianchen's eyes turned red, as though she were recalling some unhappy childhood memories.

Zhang Hong couldn't help exclaiming in shock, "Ah, it's you! You're the princess of the night mystics, the one whom the dojo leader spent so much time searching for?"

Zhang Hong stared at her with incredulity. The name 'night mystics' had rung a bell in her mind, but she didn't make the connection until Ye Xianchen continued to speak.

"The night mystics' princess...? The person we've been looking for for a few months was right by our side all along! Just how much luckier can Zhang Lie get?" Lin Xiu murmured.

Indeed, it was incredible luck that Zhang Lie had chosen her as one of his apprentices.

He continued, "Xianchen, we can't change what happened in the past, but believe me, as Zhang Lie's apprentice, you'll definitely be able to grow stronger with him than you would ever grow with the night mystics!"

Chapter 324: Assigned Tasks

Lin Xiu's words caused Xianchen to smile in delight. It was only natural that she had to grow up early because of what she had suffered, and she blamed the night mystics for what they had done to her family.

"I understand, Master Lin! I won't let you down, and I'll make good use of the resources that the dojo has provided me."

Lin Xiu waved a hand carelessly. "Don't worry, we don't have any question about your loyalty. If we did, the two of us wouldn't be the people approaching you today. You know of the four alien research teams in the area, don't you? They'll need a few research subjects, so we're hoping you and Jiuxiao will be willing to answer their questions, perform a series of tests, and submit some blood samples. The dojo leader's intention is for you to help out with their research in exchange for your having hidden your identities for so long."

The two youths finally relaxed after learning about Zhang Lie's attitude on the matter. Since he had promised that he would overlook the incident, that meant that there would be no further repercussions coming their way.

"Yes, Master Lin!" the two youths replied obediently, and Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong dismissed them.

By that time, Zhang Lie had entered his personal laboratory and begun preparations for concocting a whole slew of limit-breaking potions. This time around, Team Zenith had collected a large number of herbs, enough for a large supply of Potions #1 and #2, and even for over twenty bottles of the rarest Potion #3 as well.

Zhang Lie wasn't under particular time pressure at the moment, so he intended on crafting all these potions now. After all, the hunters of Team Zenith would require a batch of Potion #3 before their ascension, and then Zhang Hanxiang, Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, followed by the most promising of the second batch of disciples...

There would never be enough limit-breaking potions for everyone, and it was only sensible to start stockpiling now. In addition, it was long past time for him to show some gratitude to all those powerful hunters who had been supporting him and aiding his growth.

Concocting so many potions at once was an exercise in concentration, of a long period of boredom punctured by a brief few successes. By this point, Zhang Lie had become so familiar with the process of concocting Potions #1 and #2 that he could do it almost robotically, but he would have to pay special attention to Potion #3, which remained somewhat challenging.

Five days passed in the blink of an eye.

Zhang Lie barely left his fume hood, let alone sleep. Having broken past the constraints of a mortal lifeform, Zhang Lie was able to go without sleep for quite some time, at least enough to finish the last batch of potions. With the final bottle of Potion #3 finished, Zhang Lie let out a satisfied smile. He had finally consumed all the herbs that he had obtained from the members of Team Zenith.

He had made no mistakes, save with one bottle of Potion #3, the concoction process of which was far more demanding than anything else he had brewed to date.

After finishing with the potions, Zhang Lie left the lab. He was feeling excited about how much he had accomplished; despite having gone without sleep for five days, he still seemed to be quite energetic. The moment he was done with the potions, he immediately informed the members of Team Zenith to come pick them up.

Rather surprisingly, only three hunters came to find him—Sun Mengmeng, Zhou Ying, and Sun Xiaowu.

"Where are Fang Yi and the others?"

Sun Mengmeng smiled. "They're in the dimensional world with Hanxiang. She was too impatient to wait for you to be done with your brewing—she wanted to get stronger immediately. They left two days ago, and I just sent them a notification through my transceiver. I expect they'll be back shortly."

Zhang Lie sighed. "I hope my sister took my words to heart. You should have a guess as to why I'm calling all of you here now, don't you?"

The three members of Team Zenith who were present let out excited smiles. Of course! What other reason could Zhang Lie have to call them over if not for Potion #3? They were overjoyed to be able to obtain superior limit fragments imminently. As Zhang Lie's closest confidantes, no one knew better than they just how impactful these limit fragments were.

After all, besides Zhang Lie himself, they were the ones who had benefited the most from them.

"Yes—that's right. As you all seem to have guessed, I have Potion #3 ready for each of you, and you'll be able to get your own superior limit fragments soon. The potion is particularly potent, so I'll need to be present in case any side effects occur. Who wants to go first?"

This was something the gathered hunters were used to—before this, Zhang Lie had assisted them in absorbing the mutated limit fragments from Potion #2 as well. They could still remember the agonizing sensation of having so much genetic energy flow through their bodies that they felt as if they would burst at any moment.

The three of them glanced at each other. Sun Xiaowu and Zhou Ying stepped out of the room, leaving Sun Mengmeng alone with Zhang Lie. The three of them had been part of a small band of hunters before they met Zhang Lie, and Sun Mengmeng had been their leader; it was only natural that they would defer to her.

Perhaps because she was reminded of what had happened the last time they had done this as she imbibed Potion #2, Sun Mengmeng's face turned red.

Chapter 325: Superior Limit Fragments

Zhang Lie soothed her gently. "Don't worry, Sun Mengmeng. After consuming the potion, begin to meditate and guide the energy throughout your body. I'll handle the rest."

Sun Mengmeng did seem more relaxed, but her face turned even redder. Because of her fire-attuned framework, her genetic energy tended to be particularly explosive. When she consumed Potion #2 and her genetic energy had flared up, all her clothing had been incinerated and she had been naked in front of Zhang Lie. The residual embarrassment from that event continued to challenge her.

Nevertheless, when Zhang Lie handed her a vial of sapphire liquid, she reached out for it almost immediately—Potion #3! This was the potion that she had dreamt of for so long. She took a deep breath, steeled herself against the possibility that the exact same scenario as last time would happen again, and downed the potion in one gulp.

"Thank you, Captain!" As the potion entered her body, Sun Mengmeng sat down on the floor cross-legged. Her fire-attuned genetic energy, like an erupting volcano, began to spew out of her body. Her skin began to steam, and she felt as though she were burning up in a pyre of flame.

A pair of large hands pressed down on her shoulders, sending jets of cooling genetic energy into her body, providing her with such relief that she barely avoided moaning. If her body were an active volcano, then these two palms were like an arctic geyser, able to counteract any heat that her body was able to produce.

No accident occurred; the entire process went surprisingly smoothly, so much so that Sun Mengmeng herself could barely believe it. She didn't even experience any discomfort at all—in fact, it felt as though she had had a refreshing cold shower on a hot, sticky day. She felt soothed and

rejuvenated all over, and the feeling was so amazing that she wished she could go through it all over again.

Unfortunately, the energy from the potion wasn't boundless. As it was fully absorbed by her body, the two palms left her shoulders. Zhang Lie's assistance had been perfect. As he released her, he said gently, "Alright, try to sense how your body is feeling."

Potion #3 would significantly increase the strength of a hunter's body as a side effect—what determined how many gene fragments hunters could absorb were the strength of their bodies and their status as a lifeform. The second factor was immaterial to Sun Mengmeng and the others, who were still mortal lifeforms of the first realm.

The first factor, the strength of their bodies, referred not to their muscular strength, but rather their genetic structure. Potion #3 worked by expanding the strength of their bodies to increase the number of gene fragments they would be able to absorb. Because Potion #3 dealt with superior limit fragments, the increase in strength would naturally also be scaled up.

At that moment, Sun Mengmeng felt as though her base strength had increased tenfold. This sort of dramatic increase disoriented her; she felt as though she were in a dream. After all, each superior limit fragment was more impactful than even a corresponding peak gene fragment, and Sun Mengmeng's body had just been primed to accept fifty such fragments.

No wonder Zhang Lie had taken down his opponents in the Void Cup so easily—he had had such a tremendous boost! Surely he had obtained superior limit fragments by that point.

Sun Mengmeng gave Zhang Lie a deep bow. "Captain, thank you!"

Zhang Lie only smiled. "There's no need to be so formal with me. Send the next member in, will you?"

Team Zenith's loyalty and hard work had won Zhang Lie's absolute trust, and he intended to sponsor and cultivate their development as much as he could.

Sun Mengmeng nodded, but as she walked out of the room, she couldn't help but feel a pang of loss, one that even her joy at growing stronger couldn't overcome. She had been harboring feelings for Zhang Lie for quite a while, though she only gradually grew to recognize exactly what she was doing.

After the incident with Potion #2, she found herself less and less able to hide these feelings, but from her recent encounter with him, she could clearly sense that he treated her just as he would any other member of Team Zenith. This was normal, of course, but she couldn't help feeling a sharp stab of abject refusal.

It was true that Zhang Lie was a young man in his twenties, prone to hormonal urges—but he was also a reincarnator. Of the regrets in his past life, a particularly significant one was a romantic relationship that had gone awry. It wasn't that Zhang Lie looked down on Sun Mengmeng, but he felt as though he had to process his feelings over that relationship before starting a new one, so he could only pretend to turn a blind eye to Sun Mengmeng's feelings.

After Sun Mengmeng left the chamber, she called for Zhou Ying to enter.

"Captain, I'm here. What would you like me to do?" Zhou Ying spoke up. Her voice was mellifluous and rarely heard; she tended to be quiet, but her scant remarks were always insightful.

Zhou Ying looked as though she was in a particularly good mood, and Zhang Lie was rather surprised by how lively she had become. He still thought of her as a quiet, bookish young woman, but it was evident that she had grown since then.

Much of her reticent nature stemmed from a lack of self-confidence, but ever since joining Team Zenith, she had slowly grown more comfortable with who she was. Although she was still rather quiet, she had certainly developed by leaps and bounds.

Chapter 326: Ascension Strategy

Zhang Lie was glad to see Zhou Ying blossoming and developing as a hunter. He handed her a vial of Potion #3. "Calm down. Meditate and circulate your genetic energy throughout your body, and leave the rest to me."

"Yes, Captain!" Zhou Ying swallowed the contents of the vial in one gulp. With Zhang Lie's expert assistance, she naturally managed to absorb the potion's medicinal energy and raised her superior gene fragment capacity.

As she sensed the overwhelming growth in her strength, Zhou Ying bowed down deeply toward Zhang Lie. "Captain, I, Zhou Ying, swear—"

"Ah, there's no need for that. Just keep working hard and don't let me down, alright?" Zhang Lie broke Zhou Ying off before she could declare her loyalty once again. He didn't think there was anything to worry about—after all, the members of Team Zenith had all tethered their fates to the Zenith Dojo; they would grow and prosper together or not at all.

Zhou Ying gave him a firm nod, then stepped outside the chamber.

With Zhang Lie's help, Sun Xiaowu also quickly increased his superior gene fragment capacity, followed by Fang Yi, Yang Ze, and Li Feng, who had returned after receiving Sun Mengmeng's emergency notification.

All six members of Team Zenith broke through in succession, and Zhang Lie subsequently convened a meeting with regards to their ascension to the second realm. He cut to the chase.

"There are two important points I want to make you all aware of: the condensation of your genetic armor during the transferral procedure, as well as the location in the second realm to which you are sent. I've already prepared appropriate materials for genetic armor for each of you. What you have to be prepared to do, however, is to struggle."

The members of Team Zenith cocked their heads.

Zhang Lie clarified, "While activating your framework and circulating your genetic energy throughout your body to forge your genetic armor, you need to resist the refinement energy provided by the will of the world."

Fang Yi, flummoxed by Zhang Lie's logic, couldn't help questioning, "Resist? Captain, shouldn't we try to accept and incorporate the refinement energy into our bodies instead? Why would we resist it?"

"The longer you resist, the more benefits you'll ultimately get from the process," Zhang Lie explained, his tone firm.

The gathered hunters couldn't help but think back to what had happened in the dimensional world immediately before his disappearance and immediately after his reappearance. Combined with what he had just said, they were able to identify the source of his confidence—he had to have done just that himself!

"Next, I need all of you to be transferred to Qi when you arrive at the second realm, which is where I'm located. If you still want to follow me, you have to make sure to be sent to Qi."

By this point, even Zhang Lie was frowning slightly, and the members of Team Zenith were even more confused. As far as they knew, they would be sent to one of the four human cities in the second realm randomly after their ascension. This location was decided by the will of the world, and was supposed to be uncontrollable.

Yang Ze voiced that thought, and Zhang Lie smiled in response. "Theoretically, it can't be controlled, but during my ascension, I noticed a few rules in play. Follow my method and see if it works—if it doesn't, then immediately return to Earth after ascending, and we'll think of a way for us all to meet up."

"What's this method, Captain? Quick, tell us!" Fang Yi rubbed his hands. If they could really control their ascension location...

"The crux of the solution is simple: it's again a matter of resistance. What you need to do after the transferral process is almost complete is to flare your genetic energy and express your will as you resist the will of the world.

"As far as I can tell, whether or not this procedure will be effective depends on how strong you become after the transferral process. If necessary, you can even all work together to resist the will of the world, forcing it to succumb to your combined wills."

The hunters gaped at Zhang Lie. Who would have expected that the final boss they would be facing for ascension would be the will of the world itself?

"Captain, are you certain that this will work? The will of the world is like a god!" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed.

"Like a god? No, you're not quite right—in the first realm of the dimensional world, the will of the world is a god!" Fang Yi corrected him.

Yang Ze sucked in breath through his teeth. "Master, do you mean that we're supposed to challenge the god of this world?"

The members of Team Zenith all turned to Zhang Lie.

"So what if it's a god? Is that enough to make you all so fearful?" Zhang Lie replied casually, as if the task he had set for them wasn't a difficult one at all.

The hunters didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. With Zhang Lie's strength, it might not have been a challenge—and indeed, he had managed to overcome the will of the world before, but that didn't mean they could replicate his successes.

The will of the world governed the entirety of the first realm! Would it be so easy to go against it?

Glancing at their worried expressions, Zhang Lie suddenly glared at them in anger. "Are you all so worried about something as minor as the will of the world? In that case, what's the point of spending so much time on all of you? Let's disband the team, then!"

Zhang Lie suddenly stood up, surprising everyone. After all, they had almost never seen him mad since they had begun following him. How could the members of Team Zenith hesitate now?

"Don't, don't! Don't get angry at us, Captain! We'll do as you say, even if it costs us our lives!"

"Right, there's nothing that we can't do with your help, Captain!"

Chapter 327: A New Settlement

It wasn't as though the members of Team Zenith had been truly scared of facing off against the will of the world; rather, they were simply shocked by the daring idea that Zhang Lie had proposed.

Zhang Lie believed that they would be able to handle it after acquiring their superior limit fragments, and the hunters believed in Zhang Lie. After all, they had followed him for quite some time, and there was no reason for him to guide them down an improper path.

His ultimate objective was to try to gather everyone from Team Zenith in Qi, as well as to test whether this hypothesis would actually be a fruitful method. He smiled. He wasn't actually angry at them; him threatening to disband the team was simply the most efficient way to get the hunters over their mental hurdle.

What remained were the specifics. Zhang Lie patiently explained and set up all the likely problems that the hunters might face during their ascension. After a long discussion, everyone left satisfied with a specific idea of what they had to accomplish in the short term.

As long as they followed what they discussed today to the letter, there wouldn't be a problem with teleporting to Qi.

After having dealt with the most pressing issues at hand, Zhang Lie was finally free once more. Instead of heading over to Zhang Hong for a status update, he went to find his sister first. Zhang Hanxiang had returned with Fang Yi and the others, and if Zhang Lie didn't take the time to go see her, she would likely feel a little upset.

Furthermore, with the members of Team Zenith about to ascend, the Zenith Dojo's presence in the first realm would be significantly reduced. There were still quite a lot of hunters affiliated with the Zenith Dojo in the first realm, of course, but they certainly weren't as well known as the members of Team Zenith themselves.

Zhang Lie was a little worried for his sister's safety, and he wanted to impart her with a few more words of advice. The two of them sat opposite each other in their rundown house.

After Zhang Lie's last session with Zhang Hanxiang, she seemed to have grown much more obedient, and she appeared surprised to see Zhang Lie enter the house. After all, she knew just how much responsibility her brother had to carry on his back.

Nevertheless, beneath her shock was unbridled joy—she was clearly happy to see her brother once more. The two of them had a pleasant chat, and Zhang Lie was much more comfortable about leaving her, Jiuxiao, and Xianchen in the first realm alone.

Afterwards, Zhang Lie contacted Zhang Hong to schedule a meeting with her and Lin Xiu.

"Are the members of Team Zenith ready to ascend?" Lin Xiu asked the moment they all sat down. As one of the strongest hunters in the dojo, he had been quite interested to observe the development of the hunters of Team Zenith, and he viewed all of them rather highly.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Almost. All the conditions are ready, so what's left is to see how they perform under pressure. How about the research teams? Have they had more success after Jiuxiao and Xianchen joined as test subjects?"

"Don't mention it—they've done all sorts of testing to no avail! I think you'll have to handle it personally, because these supposed scientists don't have any idea what they're doing!"

In the week that Zhang Lie had spent cloistered in his laboratory, Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen had had to give out samples of their blood and even bone marrow, but despite all that, the scientists had failed to make any research progress since then, and their demands had only grown more and more ridiculous. Their inadequacy naturally angered Lin Xiu.

Zhang Lie laughed. "If these researchers were chosen to lead such an important experiment, I'm sure they're skilled in their own way. I suspect they just haven't found the right approach for the study."

"What do you mean, they haven't found the right approach? These are perfect test subjects! If not for the fact that the two youths are trying to compensate for their deception, they wouldn't have given in to all these incessant demands!" Lin Xiu was so angry with the research team that his initial goodwill was nowhere to be seen.

"Yes, Zhang Lie, I'm somewhat worried myself. Please go have a look personally so that the two youths don't have to suffer so much," Zhang Hong added.

"I'll certainly go check out their progress later," Zhang Lie replied. He suspected that Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong were worrying too much about nothing. Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen were Zhang Lie's apprentices, so no matter what, the research teams wouldn't dare to make requests that would be too unreasonable.

"However, I'm not too concerned about the research. Instead, the reason I've called both of you over is to discuss our next steps."

Lin Xiu exclaimed in shock, "What? What are you planning on doing now?"

To Lin Xiu, Zhang Lie was much like an eccentric genius, who came up with things that seemed to be outside the realm of normalcy. Even he was a little curious just what Zhang Lie would do next.

"The members of Team Zenith are about to ascend to the second realm, and the Zenith Dojo's influence in the first realm of the dimensional world will reach a nadir in their absence. Hanxiang, Jiuxiao, Xianchen, and the other disciples will need quite some time to develop as seasoned hunters

in their own right, so we have to temporarily supplement quality with quantity. The first batch of disciples is just about ready to enter the first realm, so we need to resolve this issue soon.

"My intention is to request that a settlement be constructed specifically for the hunters and disciples of the Zenith Dojo. Given my fame, my development of limit fragments, and the significant impact of the Zenith Dojo worldwide, it shouldn't be a problem for us to acquire the permission to do such a thing.

"As for the construction, we have ample funds to sponsor such a feat. What do you both think?"

Zhang Lie's proposal stunned them both. They had both considered the issue of their disciples entering the first realm, but neither was so visionary or daring to propose such a plan.

The construction of a new settlement would require approval from the highest authorities of the world federation, and they were shocked that Zhang Lie was willing to go this far. However, given Zhang Lie's own influence in the dimensional world, he very well might have the ability to establish a settlement in the first realm.

After all, he had a personal connection with Martial Sage Hong Tianqi, so if anyone could obtain settlement rights for their dojo, it would be him.

"That's an ambitious idea, but I'm in full agreement!" Lin Xiu stated. If this plan could succeed, it would change the course of history.

"I agree," Zhang Hong replied, smiling. She was optimistic about the possibility of the plan working.

"Very well, then, it's settled! Master Lin, can I leave drafting the plan to you? As a member of the world federation, I imagine you have some idea of what needs to be done. Let me know when you need me to step forward!"

"Yes, Dojo Leader! Before then, however, I hope you'll mention this plan to Martial Sage Hong beforehand."

"Of course I will—and I'll bring him a small token of appreciation as well."

"Ah, a small token? What is it?" Lin Xiu's eyes gleamed. What did Zhang Lie think would be so valuable that even Martial Sage Hong would covet it?

Zhang Hong seemed similarly curious.

Zhang Lie retrieved two vials from his potbellied-toad pouch. "What else? I only have one thing the martial sage might be interested in."

Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong's eyes widened at the sapphire-blue liquid contained within.

"Are these... vials of Potion #3?!" Lin Xiu was flabbergasted. Both Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong had already consumed Potions #1 and #2, and they remembered very well the sensation of downing those two potions.

The liquid in Zhang Lie's hand, however, was a color they had never seen before, though it gave off a similar sensation as the two potions they had consumed. The natural conclusion was that this was the next potion in the series.

"C-Can I see that?" Lin Xiu's face flushed red as he glanced at the sapphire-blue vials, desire apparent in his eyes.

Zhang Lie smiled. "What's there to look at? These two vials are for the two of you."

He tossed each of them one vial.

"Ah, be careful!"

"Right, what if we didn't catch them in time?!"

Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong clumsily fumbled for the vials. Since they had already experienced the potency of Potions #1 and #2, they naturally knew just how precious these vials were.

Chapter 328: Reclaiming the Apprentices

Zhang Hong and Lin Xiu were both very touched by Zhang Lie's gesture in handing them each a vial of Potion #3. As high-ranking staff of the Zenith Dojo, they knew better than anyone else just how precious these vials were.

"Lad, I have to say, you're—"

"No, no, none of that! You've given the Zenith Dojo your all, and you've both worked yourself to the bone while I was gone. It's only right for me to pay you back somehow," Zhang Lie added.

Lin Xiu and Zhang Hong were both of humble birth, and they had experienced their fair share of discrimination before growing into their power. Only after entering the Zenith Dojo did they truly discover their own value.

As they clutched the vials in their hands, they swore to themselves that they would forever remain loyal to the dojo.

"Master Lin, I trust you can handle the absorption process yourself? Please help Zhang Hong when you've finished. We'll continue talking later. Do you think this is an appropriate gift for the martial sage?"

Lin Xiu turned to him and replied seriously, "Of course, of course it is! I'm certain the martial sage will be overjoyed with this present."

Zhang Lie nodded. "From his perspective, I imagine he could easily get his hands on any cultivation resource he would want—with the exception of this." He smiled. "Can I leave sending out these gifts to you, Master Lin? Not just to the martial sage himself, but also the officials and important figures of note from the world federation, as well as the Chinese military and government, who have helped us out. That said, I can't afford to hand them all a vial of Potion #3, so please be prudent."

Lin Xiu laughed. "Su Feng and Yan Long have been wanting to get their hands on these potions for a while—I'm glad to see that they'll finally get their wish! Don't worry, I can handle all this easily."

"In that case, the matter's settled." Zhang Lie nodded, then turned to Zhang Hong. "Zhang Hong, can I leave the construction of the settlement to you—everything from the materials, the workers, the security? And if we're going to build a settlement, then we'll have to delay the disciples from entering the first realm for a little while longer."

Zhang Hong nodded firmly. "Don't worry, I can handle it!"

"You've really been an amazing help, Zhang Hong. I must say, I can't wait to see what our settlement will look like once it's done!"

"Dojo Leader, you're making me nervous—what if it's not up to par?"

"Ha! If there's anyone who can handle it, I'm sure it's you."

As the meeting concluded, Zhang Lie headed straight toward the four alien research teams.

Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen were his apprentices, after all, and he certainly had to investigate how they were being treated by the researchers. The research facility was under Team Zenith's name, but the research staff was largely composed of the scientists of the nightdemons, aquatic, starbeasts, and night spirits. This facility was constructed specifically for alien research, after all.

The lead scientists in charge of the project were overjoyed to see Zhang Lie paying them a visit. This was only the second time they had ever met this legendary human.

"How's the progress on the limit fragment research?" Zhang Lie asked, getting straight to business. "Have studying my two disciples helped you all?"

The four lead scientists glanced at each other, then explained that they had tried to perform tests that were as minimally invasive as possible and which wouldn't hurt Zhang Lie's two precious apprentices.

Jiuxiao and Xianchen themselves were quickly summoned to the meeting.

"Master!" The moment they saw him, they gave him a deep bow. They were still quite sorry about having hidden their identities from Zhang Lie, and they were worried about what he would say.

"I heard the two of you have suffered quite a bit during these experiments. Is that true?" Zhang Lie asked, not mentioning their deception at all.

"Ah, no, Master, we've been doing quite well here!"

Zhang Lie smiled. "There's no need to behave so carefully around me. If I really blamed you for the deception, I would hardly have kept you both around. I just want you to be useful research subjects, nothing more—this isn't intended as a punishment for either of you. I think you've both spent enough time here already, so return to the dojo with me in a bit."

Zhang Lie ignored the four lead researchers, but they couldn't ignore him.

The lead researcher for the nightdemons, Ye Hualin, began, "Dojo Leader, I can understand how much you care for your apprentices, but as for our research—"

"Enough. This shouldn't have been too complicated, especially with my two apprentices around. Show me your preliminary results—I'm quite curious just what you've done."

"Of course, Dojo Leader, we'll do so immediately!" Ye Hualin beamed.

The nightdemons had impressed upon her the importance of acquiring limit fragments for their race without destroying the relationship between them and Zhang Lie. However, this was the first time

that Zhang Lie had shown up in the facility in the months since they had arrived, and they had to get whatever pointers they could from him while he was around.

Chapter 329: Gathering

The research reports were quickly delivered to Zhang Lie. He scrolled through their findings and quickly discovered the problem—as he had suspected, they had gone in the wrong direction.

What the scientists were focused on was trying to analyze the differences between their races and the human race, rather than why the procedure developed for humans wouldn't likewise work for their race.

While the former question might ultimately provide an answer to the latter, that analysis would be significantly more time-consuming, and potentially with many more red herrings besides.

"What you've done so far doesn't get at the fundamental issue in play. Use the markers that you've identified to examine just what happened to the genes of my two apprentices when they underwent the foundational breakthrough. That should lead you to the crux of the issue," Zhang Lie suggested.

"The mutability of the resulting genes... I understand, I understand! Thank you so much, Dojo Leader!" Ye Hualin murmured to himself, then exclaimed in shock.

Indeed, figuring out the difference at this juncture would be a direct first step in modifying the foundational breakthrough for the alien races. Their original research direction had been too general to lead to success within a short timeframe, but Zhang Lie's proposal seemed far less daunting.

Ye Hualin was certain that he had the data to proceed as Zhang Lie suggested, and his two apprentices wouldn't be necessary any longer. He happily bade them farewell.

Zhang Lie walked off with the two youths trailing behind them. They lowered their heads, still somewhat worried that their deception would make Zhang Lie think poorly of them.

Eventually, Zhang Lie turned back around. "Alright, that's enough of that! Let me repeat myself: I understand why you felt like your deception was necessary, and I won't treat you differently because of it, but you should remember that, above all else, you're disciples of the Zenith Dojo, as well as my apprentices! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master, I understand!"

"Yes, Master!" the two youths shouted.

Following that, Zhang Lie beckoned them forward into the dojo with a smile.

With his apprentices retrieved, he had finished all the tasks he was hoping to achieve on Earth, and all that remained would be to wait for the members of Team Zenith to ascend.

In the first realm of the dimensional world, within the Valley of the Wind, a burst of arrows struck down a gigantic ox.

"Wonderful, Sis! That's the last beast we need to max out our superior limit fragments—I can't believe it's been so hard to find superior-grade lifeforms lately!" Sun Xiaowu called out.

Sun Mengmeng dematerialized her bow, then sighed. "Right—no wonder the captain mentioned that the appearance of the disaster-grade lifeform would cause irreparable destruction in the first

realm. The number of superior-grade lifeforms in the vicinity seems to have dropped sharply. I wonder if Fang Yi and Yang Ze have noticed a similar decrease?"

Sun Xiaowu nodded. "Who knows? They might have gotten luckier than we did—they might already be back at the Stargleam settlement!"

"In that case, what are we doing here? Pack up—we'd better head back now!"

The members of Team Zenith had a suite at the Stargleam Inn in the Stargleam settlement.

Fang Yi, Li Feng, Yang Ze, and Zhou Ying were already present, and they were eating to the accompaniment of pleasant chiming notifications about gaining more superior limit fragments. If not for the fact that they were waiting for Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu's return, they would already have finished the feast, but Zhang Lie had recommended that they ascend together so as to be able to resist the will of the world.

"What's going on? Where's Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu? Could something have gone wrong?"

"Surely there's nothing that can trouble them with their level of strength? Maybe they're just having a hard time finding prey, like we did," Fang Yi wondered.

Almost immediately afterward, the lock to the room clicked, and the Sun siblings walked into the suite.

Glancing at the feast arrayed before them, Sun Mengmeng sighed. "You all finished your hunt so quickly! Were you complaining about me and Sun Xiaowu being too slow?"

The other four hunters nodded.

"Honestly, it felt as though all the superior-grade lifeforms had gone extinct where we went," Sun Xiaowu murmured.

The others had experienced something similar, but far less extreme.

"It's not a problem. Do you need any help preparing the carcasses you brought back? There's a difficult task ahead of us all, after all," Fang Yi replied. He seemed simultaneously excited and nervous about the challenge, something he wouldn't even have dreamt of doing without Zhang Lie's advice.

Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu shook their heads as they entered the kitchen. By Fang Yi's side, Li Feng asked, "Fang Yi, how can you be so excited to face the will of the world? To be honest, I'm really quite nervous about whether or not we'll succeed without our captain's assistance."

Fang Yi smiled. "We have to grow stronger to keep up with our captain, don't we? We can't rely on him for everything; we have to become strong in our own right so that we're qualified to follow in his footsteps."

Chapter 330: The Refinement Ceremony

Li Feng grimaced in response. "You're right, Fang Yi—we can't back down now. I know that logically, but I'm still not used to not having the captain around."

"Indeed, but that's something we'll have to get used to too. The second realm is far larger than the first, and I expect we'll have to go separate ways for our own objectives frequently," Fang Yi concluded, and the others nodded in assent.

While they chatted, Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu finished preparing the superior-grade carcasses they had brought back with them and joined in the feast.

In just half an hour, they had gotten to a total of 145 superior gene fragments.

They felt the genetic energy in their bodies begin to swell, as well as a notification from the will of the world urging them to prepare for ascension.

[Attention! Attention! Your genetic energy is nearing the threshold of this realm. Please prepare for imminent transferral to the second realm.]

[Attention! Attention! Your genetic energy is nearing the threshold of this realm. Please prepare for imminent transferral to the second realm.]

[Attention! Attention!...]

The hunters devoured the food on the table even more rapidly, knowing that they wouldn't be able to remain in the first realm for much longer.

Sun Mengmeng: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Black Sun (pinnacle)

Techniques: Flameburst Step (pinnacle), Lunarflame Shot (pinnacle), Baptism of Hellfire (pinnacle), Firefeather Wings (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10

Soulshards: Embersoul Archer (superior), Firebird (superior), Ardorcrown Monkey (superior), Deepflame Beetle (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Li Feng: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Arclight Dragon's Imprint (pinnacle)

Techniques: Dragon's Triumph (pinnacle), Light's Bulwark (pinnacle), Daybreak (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10

Soulshards: Lightborne Beetle (superior), Radiant Salamander (superior), Owl of Wisdom (superior), Prismscale Wyrms (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombaen Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Fang Yi: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Rondo of Wind and Storm (advanced)

Techniques: Heaven's Judgment (pinnacle), Wind's Spirit (pinnacle), Floating Clouds (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10

Soulshards: Shadowcrest Serpent (superior), Stormward Albatross (superior), Runetiger (superior), Thunderflash Mantis (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Zhou Ying: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Avatar of the Fae (advanced)

Techniques: Storm of Leaves (pinnacle), Willow's Caress (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10

Soulshards: Devil-Face Spider (superior), Forest Wolfman (superior), Butterfly of Decay (superior), Treeborn Leopard (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Sun Xiaowu: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Adamantine Aegis (advanced)

Techniques: Golden Divide (pinnacle), Goldenscale Palm (pinnacle), Blinding Flash (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10

Soulshards: Gold-Limned Tiger (superior), Rampaging Rhinoceros (superior), Goldenhorn Beetle (superior), Iron Hog (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

Yang Ze: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ripples of Shattered Glass (pinnacle)

Techniques: The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), Mirrored Refraction (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10

Soulshards: Tigershark (superior), Snapjaw Crocodile (superior), Deepsea Crab (superior), Windborne Eagle (superior), Blood Ant (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (mutated), Potbellied Toad (mutated)

As they looked over their status windows, they found themselves transported into an extradimensional space, each of them in a separate instance of it. The hunters of Team Zenith felt an extremely potent energy seeping into their bodies and combining with their own genetic energy.

[Attention! The refinement process is beginning. Please cooperate!]

[Attention! The refinement process...]

[Attention!...]

The hunters felt as though they were in furnaces, that their bodies were right about to melt. Fortunately, Zhang Lie had warned them about what was going to happen, and the hunters were clearheaded enough to follow his command.

Each hunter began to flare their genetic energy in order to resist the refinement energy, causing the will of the world to send more warnings to them even as it increased the volume of energy directed their way.

As the frightening potency of the energy ravaged their bodies, the hunters of Team Zenith gritted their teeth and forced themselves to stand strong.

Their own genetic energy came in waves, sapping away the will of the world's energy. At the same time, they retrieved the parts of the shell of the disaster-grade lifeform which Zhang Lie had partitioned to them and began the process of forging their genetic armor, in an attempt to delay the ascension ceremony even further.

As time passed and the refinement energy accumulated in their bodies, even the prepared hunters of Team Zenith were unable to resist its strength. They were forced to conclude the ceremony, but the time it had taken them to do so was easily ten times that of other hunters.

In other words, they were able to absorb far more of that refinement energy than usual.

Covered in crystalline genetic armor, the hunters of Team Zenith found themselves transformed by the ceremony.

Fang Yi's genetic armor, in accordance with his dual-attunement framework, took on a translucent sheen of green and blue. From close up, one could almost hear the roaring of wind, the crackling of thunder.

Sun Mengmeng's armor glowed internally with red flame. She looked like a radiant, exquisite rose, burning with embers of a neverending flame.

Yang Ze's armor was crystal-clear, entirely colorless, free of any impurities or imperfections whatsoever.

Li Feng's armor felt like a paladin's raiment, one which gave off a sense of holiness and sanctity.

Sun Xiaowu's armor was covered in mysterious, golden runic inscriptions. His honed body, coupled with the golden armor and his sharp, steely genetic energy made him seem like a bastion that could never be destroyed.

Finally, Zhou Ying's armor took the form of a dress, gentle and flowing, one in which she could move entirely at ease. She looked like a goddess of nature, the energies of vitality, regrowth, and deep lore flowing through her.

[Your genetic energy has surpassed the threshold of the first realm. Please ascend to the second realm immediately!]

[Your genetic energy has surpassed...]

[Your genetic energy...]

Teleportation arrays formed around the six members of Team Zenith, and, according to plan, they each flared their genetic energy, tearing apart the half-formed teleportation array. They resisted the will of the world together and transmitted it their own will.

"Teleport us to Qi!"

The will of the world hesitated for a moment, shocked by the strength of the six hunters' response, then counterattacked with full force.

The hunters' extradimensional space began to warp, and they felt the pressure mounting on their bodies. Working together, however, the hunters managed to overcome the pressure long enough that the extradimensional space was what broke first, splintering like the glass of a broken window.

The members of Team Zenith found themselves back in the Stargleam settlement. Amidst a cacophony of notifications, they found tremendous energy gathering above them, and the walls of the suite in which they were located began to crack.

Recalling what had happened to Zhang Lie during his ascension ceremony, Fang Yi cried out, "We have to leave—follow me and head somewhere deserted!"

He smashed apart the wall in his hurry to leave, followed by the rest of the members of Team Zenith.