

## U. Warlord 331

### Chapter 331: The Skies of Qi

A huge vortex formed over the Stargleam settlement despite Fang Yi and the others' best efforts to leave. A frightening rainbow-colored energy was gathering by the skies, so potent that it made every hunter in the settlement twitch. Fortunately, instead of striking the settlement itself, it rushed in the southwestern direction through a forested area, following Fang Yi and the others.

News of the strange phenomenon instantly traveled across China, the world, even the Milky Way at large. After seeing what had happened to the Blacksteel settlement for themselves, the hunters of the Stargleam settlement evacuated instantly.

Meanwhile, the instigators of this phenomenon were struggling against the will of the world's intended subjugation. Holes appeared in the sky, and the lifeforce of all the greenery and beasts in the area was quickly being sucked away.

The six members of Team Zenith quickly got into formation. As they linked arms, a black half-moon rose into the air. The black moon gave off dazzling rays of darkness, devouring everything in sight, including the rainbow-colored genetic energy formed from the will of the world.

At the same time, the six hunters again willed that they be transported to Qi in the second realm.

Rather than acquiesce, however, the will of the world only kept increasing the force being applied on the hunters.

While the will of the world was strong, the hunters of Team Zenith weren't weak, and the will of the world had just received two major setbacks: the incursion of the disaster-grade lifeform, along with Zhang Lie's ascension. The amount of energy that the will of the world was able to spend on the hunters was limited, so the hunters of Team Zenith were able to handle what limited energy the will of the world sent their way.

Over the next two hours, the six members of Team Zenith managed to defend against ten waves of attacks from the will of the world, turning the forest where they were situated into a barren wasteland.

After the tenth wave, the will of the world finally seemed to give up, and the notifications that the members of Team Zenith received grew visibly different.

[Your genetic energy has surpassed the threshold of the first realm. You will be transported to Qi in the second realm.]

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[Your genetic energy...]

A rainbow-colored teleportation array was inscribing itself by their feet.

"Our captain was right—our plan really did succeed. Everyone, we've successfully overcome the will of the world!"

"Honestly, I still can't believe it—to think we were able to grow so strong as to be able to counteract the will of the world itself!"

"Can you imagine how strong our captain must be, to have gone against the will of the world alone? In the end, the will of the world hadn't been able to do anything against him—he moved on so as to prevent the first realm from being destroyed!"

The teleportation array, which had just been completed, suddenly flashed. Their vision turned black, and they suddenly found themselves in mid-air, about a thousand meters above the city of Qi.

Was the will of the world trying to send them to their deaths?

They doubted it—the members of Team Zenith all possessed some form of aerial maneuverability or another, and any decent first-realm hunter would be able to survive such a fall.

In fact, the will of the world had simply constructed the teleportation array in a hurry, and the coordinates of the teleportation weren't as precise as they usually were.

Wind and storm circulated around Fang Yi's body. He quickly regained control of himself, then morphed into a bolt of lightning as he descended to the ground. Beside him, a pair of fiery wings sprouted from Sun Mengmeng's back, and she too dove toward the ground.

Li Feng blinked from spot to spot like a ray of light, following Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng. Meanwhile, Yang Ze floated to the ground on a bed of clouds, and Sun Xiaowu hunkered down into the shape of a cannonball as he allowed gravity to propel him downwards. Much like Sun Mengmeng, Zhou Ying sprouted a pair of leafy wings from her back.

The six hunters descended toward Qi.

Almost immediately as they appeared, the guards of Qi noticed them. They each possessed immense genetic energy, none of which was familiar to the guards. The fact that they had somehow managed to enter Qi airspace and were now descending to ground level caused the guards to sound a raid alert immediately.

The city of Qi frothed.

The last time this alert had sounded was when the sura invaded the human cities—the reason the guards had thought the hunters of Team Zenith to be such a strong enemy was because of the remnant traces of the will of the world's energy that still surrounded their bodies. After all, that energy was easily purer than anything the monarchs of the sura could produce.

The strongest hunters of Qi swarmed out of homes and buildings.

"Invaders, desist at once!"

In just ten seconds, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others found themselves surrounded by bands of Qi elites.

Invaders?! What was going on? They had just ascended to the second realm!

Fang Yi stepped forward. "Excuse me, I think there's been a misunderstanding. We're humans, not invaders."

"Oh? In that case, who's your superior? Why aren't there records of your genetic energy in Qi? You aren't recognized by the artificial intelligence of Qi!"

Fang Yi continued introducing himself. "I'm Fang Yi of Team Zenith, and behind me are my teammates Sun Mengmeng, Sun Xiaowu, Yang Ze, Li Feng, and Zhou Ying."

"Team Zenith? The same Team Zenith as from the Void Cup? Did you all just ascend?"

Fang Yi nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"Do you really think that I'm a fool? How can newcomers to the second realm possess this level of genetic energy? Guards, seize these disguised invaders!"

Chapter 332: A Resolved Misunderstanding

"Capture them alive!" The captain of the guards transformed into a fiery lion as he rushed out at the six members of Team Zenith, and his men followed suit. The lion raised his head and roared, causing waves of genetic energy to spread out from him.

"Set up a formation, quick!" Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others quickly got into position to defend against the guards' onslaught.

As a dark moon rose into the air, petals of moonlight flowered around the six hunters, establishing a well-defined boundary. The lion rushed forward, but the moment his attack touched the black light, it vanished like a popped bubble. If the captain of the guards hadn't been fast enough to react, he might have been devoured whole by the formation as well.

A tsunami of genetic energy from the Qi guards swamped the moonlight flower, which suddenly began to revolve, then explode, forming a black hole in midair. The six members of Team Zenith continued standing upright, unaffected by the burst of attacks from the Qi guards.

On the other hand, the moonlight flower's explosion felled the first row of guards, stripping them of their genetic energy as the force of the explosion pushed them aside—and this even after the members of Team Zenith had deliberately reduced the potency of their formation so as not to kill anyone.

After all, this was merely a misunderstanding.

The remaining forces present were shocked by the sight. Could these hunters really be the members of Team Zenith? Zhang Lie had managed to beat every member of the special forces without any gene fragments from the second realm. Wasn't it plausible that his teammates would be similarly strong?

As for the members of Team Zenith, while their formation had sufficed to block one wave of attacks, the genetic energy it had required to do so was immense, and they wouldn't be able to keep the formation running for long.

Before the guards could strike again, a voice rang out from the middle of the crowd,

"Halt! They're not our enemies!"

The Qi guards turned to the voice, and their captain shouted, "Xiao Feng, what's going on? On what grounds do you claim that these aren't enemies?"

Xiao Feng, one of the governor's men, only smiled. "Because they held back, of course. If they really were sura in disguise, wouldn't they have dropped their illusions after the first wave of attacks? I'm more inclined to believe that they aren't lying!"

Xiao Feng spoke what many in the crowd had been thinking since the result of the confrontation, but none of them could be entirely certain.

"In that case, do you claim that the members of Team Zenith are this strong immediately upon ascending to the second realm? Xiao Feng, are you crazy?"

Xiao Feng began to laugh. "Haven't you heard the news?"

"You mean—they're really hunters from Team Zenith?"

"Who else would be able to cultivate such a team of hunters?"

The captain of the guards sniffed, then motioned for his men to depart, causing the members of Team Zenith to sigh in relief. The captain of the guards, along with Xiao Feng and the second captain of the Tianji Council, Feng Lin, walked toward Fang Yi and the others, then hung his head and said, "I apologize, I didn't expect all of you would just fall out of the skies. I acted too rashly."

"I'm the captain of the guards, Ning Yu."

"And I'm Xiao Feng, serving at the governor's manor."

"I'm Feng Ling, from the Tianji Council!" The three of them reported their names and identities in a friendly manner. The sudden shift from enmity to amity left the hunters of Team Zenith somewhat overwhelmed. In fact, they were quite impressed by how Ning Yu was willing to treat them pleasantly despite how they had defeated him and his guards in just one blow.

Sun Mengmeng smiled. "It's not a problem. I'm Sun Mengmeng from Team Zenith, and these are my teammates Fang Yi, Li Feng, Zhou Ying, Sun Xiaowu, and Yang Ze."

"We'll happily accept all of you in Qi, of course, but there's something I'd like to ask about, if you don't mind." Xiao Feng's inquisitive expression caused the members of Team Zenith to become somewhat wary.

Sun Mengmeng replied calmly, "I can't promise I'll be able to answer you, but we'll at least hear you out."

"How did you all manage to appear above Qi together? If I recall correctly, you should have been transferred to a random location in Qi upon first arriving in the second realm, and the teleportation array in Qi for such newcomers surely isn't located in the sky—it's in the Tianfeng Valley!

How did you skip over that valley and appear above Qi, then? This is an important question for securing the defenses around Qi, so please answer me truthfully," Xiao Feng pressed, startling the other two hunters by his side.

Indeed, Xiao Feng was right! That was an important point that neither of them had thought to consider. The fact that they had managed to appear directly above the skies of Qi meant that there was a hole in Qi's defenses!

"I apologize, but we're unable to answer that question—we're flummoxed about the entire affair as well," Sun Mengmeng replied diplomatically.

The three hunters frowned. For some reason, though Sun Mengmeng exhibited no sign of duplicity, they didn't think she was telling the truth. However, under such circumstances, it didn't seem like a good idea to press her further, because as they were speaking, Zhang Lie's three new team members, Xia Na, Zhuo Yihong, and Qin Tian, had arrived.

"Ah, I apologize, Mr. Fang, Ms. Sun—we were slightly delayed! Please, let us handle the rest." The three new hunters respectfully greeted the members of Team Zenith, then turned to interrogate the three others that were already present.

"Ning Yu, Xiao Feng, Feng Ling, what's going on?"

Xia Na and Zhuo Yihong, who used to be team leaders of the special forces, were well-respected and well-regarded among the authorities of Qi.

Xiao Feng replied, "It was nothing more than a misunderstanding, Team Leader Zhuo, Team Leader Xia! We've just about resolved it by now."

The three of them were smiling, but internally rather shocked. Why were Zhuo Yihong and Xia Na sucking up to the members of Team Zenith? Just how amazing did Zhang Lie have to be for both Xia Na and Zhuo Yihong to behave in this manner?

Zhuo Yihong retorted, "Don't call us team leaders anymore—we're just regular team members now! Furthermore, how could a simple misunderstanding cause you to sound the invaders' alert? And what was with that massive fluctuation of genetic energy just now? You weren't ganging up on the hunters of Team Zenith, were you?"

Ganging up?! Who was ganging up on whom?! Ning Yu and his guards had charged forward at the six members, only to be defeated in one blow!

He would have liked to bully the members of Team Zenith, but that would require a level of strength that he didn't have, and now he was even being interrogated about it!

"It really was a misunderstanding," Xiao Feng reiterated. "The members of Team Zenith appeared in so unusual a fashion that we thought they were invaders, but we've already resolved the issue."

"Please forgive us for what we did—your arrival in Qi was just too unusual for us to ignore."

"We apologize," Feng Ling and Ning Yu added once again.

Zhuo Yihong turned back toward Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng, as if asking them whether they were satisfied.

"It was nothing more than a misunderstanding—after all, we did arrive in Qi in a particularly unexpected fashion. I'm sorry to have caused such a big commotion." Fang Yi apologized to the three officials as well, ending the altercation decisively.

The city guards quickly departed, while Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng and the others followed Zhuo Yihong, Xia Na, and Qin Tian toward the underground barracks of the special forces.

"Mr. Fang, Ms. Sun, please let me apologize once again for what happened during your arrival," Xia Na repeated.

"Right, who would have expected those guards to have massed up against you so quickly?" Zhuo Yihong muttered. Qin Tian didn't speak, but he also seemed quite angry.

The disturbance that Zhang Lie had caused when going up against Tianji Council had had significant repercussions, and the three of them thought that this was some sort of oblique payback, but Fang Yi and the others thought that this was rather commonplace instead.

"No, it's likely not that. We didn't expect to arrive in such a location, let alone them. I can understand why they wouldn't believe that we were members of Team Zenith, and it's only natural that they would want to be vigilant given that something like this has happened in the past.

"Furthermore, that guard captain Ning Yu never tried to take our lives; he was only trying to capture us alive. If someone really were trying to scheme against our captain, I don't think they would give such an order or act so blatantly. After all, we descended from the skies of Qi, and there would surely be countless witnesses for the entire fight between us and the city guards.

"Given how strong our captain is, and the strength he's already revealed, I don't believe anyone would go against him for the moment. It's likely just a misunderstanding, so don't feel bad."

#### Chapter 333: Welcoming Banquet

Fang Yi's words, logical and reasonable, did seem more plausible than Zhuo Yihong and Xia Na's baseless hypothesis. The crowd quickly arrived at the special forces' underground barracks, where Zhuo Yihong and Xia Na led them to Zhang Lie's small cottage.

By then, Zhang Lie had been waiting in the cottage for quite some time. He had been planning to welcome his teammates himself, but considering the fiasco he had caused recently, he ultimately chose to leave Zhuo Yihong and Xia Na responsible for welcoming them instead.

He beckoned them in; everyone sat surrounding a small table within his cottage.

As Zhang Lie glanced at the six members of Team Zenith, he couldn't help but laugh. "I'm glad the process I proposed really worked. How did it go?"

Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng glanced at Zhuo Yihong and Xia Na, then murmured, "Captain, the process was actually very successful, and I think..."

Zhuo Yihong and Xia Na understood what was going on. Looking around, they quickly got up and turned to leave, but Zhang Lie stopped them. "Don't worry, they're not outsiders. You can tell us all."

Xia Na, Qin Tian, and Zhuo Yihong all turned to Zhang Lie with a look of gratitude. It was obvious that Fang Yi was about to discuss how the members of Team Zenith had all managed to gather at Qi after ascending to the second realm, and this would surely be top secret information. It was natural that they would have to be sent away in light of this information, especially since they hadn't been in Zhang Lie's team for long, but Zhang Lie actually called them back.

He chose to believe in them, and he really was treating them like part of his group.

With Zhang Lie's approval, Fang Yi continued, "Everything went according to plan, up until the transferral to the second realm: we arrived in the second realm directly above Qi."

Zhang Lie cocked his head. "The skies above Qi? You didn't pass through the Tianfeng Valley?"

"No, we didn't. The moment we opened our eyes, we were a thousand meters up in the sky, with Qi directly below us," Fang Yi replied.

"Hmm. How did you manage to suborn the will of the world?"

"As you suggested, Captain, we resisted the will of the world until it used up so much of its energy that it had to accede to our will, forming a teleportation array that brought us to Qi."

Zhuo Yihong, Xia Na, and Qin Tian were all stupefied by what Fang Yi had mentioned. They had all undergone the ascension process from the first to the second realm, but did Fang Yi say that he and the other members of Team Zenith had opposed the will of the world—and that they had somehow forced it to consume so much energy that it had had to accede to their demands?

The will of the world was the god of the first realm! What Fang Yi was saying was that they had essentially challenged a god and even succeeded! No wonder Zhang Lie didn't care about assembling a troop from the special forces—Team Zenith was all he would need!

Fortunately, Zhang Lie had eventually relented, and now they were part of his team too.

Zhang Lie laughed. "It teleported you away out of exasperation? That's a little different from what happened to me. I suspect that's the source of the issue—perhaps intentionally or otherwise, it failed to lock on to the correct coordinates for Qi."

Sun Mengmeng nodded in assent. "I think so too. The will of the world seemed surprisingly weak to me, and I suspect that it had been weakened because of the incursion of the disaster-grade lifeform and from your battle with it."

Zhang Lie nodded as well. "In that case, we've basically figured out the strategy to remove the randomness from ascension," he concluded, causing everyone in Team Zenith to smile. They had participated in developing this technique themselves, and they knew its value.

Zhuo Yihong, Xia Na, and Qin Tian were dumbfounded. Even what little they had heard had overwhelmed their understanding of the dimensional world. The hunters of Team Zenith treated the will of the world, a godlike being, as nothing more than just another lifeform! How could they? It was unimaginable!

"Well, alright. All of you must be quite tired from overwhelming the will of the world, so take a break for today. Zhuo Yihong, Xia Na, Qin Tian, can you show them around the barracks? Then go out hunting with them for basic and mutated gene fragments tomorrow. I assume you understand everything you heard is top-secret, so without my approval, you can't mention it to anyone, not even your family or friends. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Captain!" the three hunters replied firmly.

They had countless questions for Zhang Lie and the rest of his team, but they chose not to bring them up for the moment. Instead, they exited Zhang Lie's cottage with the members of Team Zenith.

There would be many more days ahead of them, and the fact that Zhang Lie had allowed them to stay for this discussion made his attitude clear. As long as they were loyal enough, this wouldn't be the last time that they would be able to participate in such discussions.

To be frank, after finding out about what Zhang Lie and his team had done, they felt like they were living in an entirely different world. If they too could become a member of Team Zenith, then what the members of Team Zenith experienced now could be what they would experience in the future.

News of the arrival of Team Zenith quickly spread around the upper echelons of Qi. That night, the troop leader of the special forces, Zhou Liao, organized a celebration to welcome the members of Team Zenith.

In the barracks' canteen, all the special forces troops, save the second team, who had gone out on a mission, were gathered for a feast. Team Zenith's table was at the very center. No one dared to show Zhang Lie or his team any disrespect; after all, Zhang Lie had subdued the entire Tianji Council by himself, even the council head Wang Yanyi.

The members of Team Zenith, fresh newcomers to the second realm, managed to defeat Ning Yu and his guards while suffering no injuries at all. It seemed that they were each about as strong, or even stronger than, the troop leader Zhou Liao himself.

The special forces troops couldn't dare imagine such a feat, so it was obvious that they would treat the members of Team Zenith well.

"Deputy Leader Zhang, congratulations on reuniting with your team once more! And members of Team Zenith, welcome to Qi and the second realm! From today onwards, I'm sure you'll be the strongest team in the special forces!" Zhou Liao smiled excitedly at them, wholly unafraid that Zhang Lie would claim his spot as troop leader.

He knew very well that, given Zhang Lie's skills and resources, he would easily be able to take over his position if he really wanted to, but Zhang Lie was far more ambitious than that. He wouldn't have to worry about Zhang Lie usurping his position at all.

"Isn't that so? Deputy Leader Zhang crushed Wang Yanyi on his first day here, and the members of Team Zenith did the same to the Qi guards!"

"Right, right! A toast to the members of Team Zenith!"

The members of Team Zenith accepted the toasts that came their way, smiling as they heard their praises being sung.

"Ha! Aren't you afraid they'll get conceited from all that praise?" A voice came from the outskirts of the canteen.

Everyone turned to find the governor of Qi, Xiao Zhengyang, and the head of the Tianji Council, Wang Yanyi, standing there. The two of them had appeared out of nowhere; Wang Yanyi seemed to have been the one who had spoken. His face seemed a little sullen, given that he had been relegated to the background in the story of Zhang Lie's claim to fame.

Chapter 334: Traveling Alone

"Ah, it's Council Head Wang! I'm honored to have my little gathering attract your attention—and you as well, Governor Xiao!" Zhang Lie shouted, calling out to the two men.

"Council Head!"

"We greet the governor of Qi!"

No other dared do the same; they bowed toward them deferentially.

Xiao Zhengyang began, half-joking and half-serious, "It's not a formal occasion, so there's no need for all the pleasantries. Aren't you going to welcome us, Deputy Leader Zhang? Why, it's almost as if you don't want us here!"

"Of course I do! Please, come, have a seat!"

Xiao Zhengyang had treated Zhang Lie well, and Zhang Lie would treat him the same way.

Yang Ze and Li Feng prepared to stand up to give their seats to the governor and council head, but Xiao Zhengyang stopped them. "There's no need—just put down two more stools and two more sets of utensils!"

The banquet table sat ten: Zhang Lie, the members of Team Zenith, along with the newcomers Zhuo Yiong, Xia Na, and Qin Tian. Troop Leader Zhou Liao had joined them, and with both the governor and the council head, there would be thirteen guests present at that table.

A spectator might have imagined that the special forces were so poor that even this welcoming party had to be held under cramped conditions, but in truth, everyone present at the table was an influential figure in Qi.

As the extra stools and utensils were laid out for them, Xiao Zhengyang and Wang Yanyi sat down. The atmosphere around the banquet table seemed to change. Xiao Zhengyang felt kindly toward Zhang Lie, and that kindness was reciprocated; the problem was Wang Yanyi.

He and Zhang Lie were, frankly speaking, enemies. However, what Wang Yanyi said next was somewhat surprising. "Deputy Leader Zhang, please allow me to apologize for our altercation outside the walls of Qi. I came over here today to tender that apology, as well as to meet the heroes of Team Zenith. I've dealt with Wang Po, and he won't appear in your sight ever again. Thank you for sparing him his life, Deputy Leader Zhang."

As expected of a career politician, Wang Yanyi was wily and possessed a glib tongue. He had initially imagined that Zhang Lie, strong though he was, would be a solitary hunter without any backing, but matters changed as soon as he learned of Team Zenith's arrival. None of the members of Team Zenith would be his match individually, but if they were to work together...

Zhang Lie's rise wasn't something he, nor anyone else in Qi, could stop. Wang Yanyi knew that he would need to placate this man if he wanted to keep his position in Qi.

Zhang Lie was taken aback by Wang Yanyi's words, but he recovered swiftly with just a moment's hesitation. "We'll let matters be. As long as you don't provoke me, I won't provoke you."

Zhang Lie toasted him with a cup of wine, which Wang Yanyi reciprocated. "I admire your magnanimosity, Deputy Leader Zhang!" Wang Yanyi downed his cup of wine in a single gulp, and Zhang Lie followed suit.

The other hunters at the table watched this scene. The deputy leader of the special forces troops, and the head of the Tianji Council... the latter's position seemed far more important than the former, but

in reality, Wang Yanyi's aura seemed to be dominated by Zhang Lie's. Even the governor, Xiao Zhengyang, seemed to be dwarfed in comparison.

Despite the presence of the governor, the head of the Tianji Council, and the troop leader of the special forces, it was the deputy troop leader Zhang Lie who felt like the most important hunter at that table.

Wang Yanyi proposed another toast. "Let me dedicate this toast to welcoming the hunters of Team Zenith! It relieves me greatly to have such strong hunters joining the defense of our city, so allow me to toast you all!"

Wang Yanyi's words were as polished as expected. The members of Team Zenith all raised their cups of wine.

Governor Xiao commented, "Ah, he's left nothing for me to say! Regardless, welcome to Qi."

Xiao Zhengyang raised his cup of wine in a toast, followed by Zhou Liao. "Welcome to Qi, and welcome to the special forces!"

"Thank you for coming, everyone! It's an honor to have you all here." Fang Yi spoke up for the members of Team Zenith. The two strongest and most authoritative figures of Qi had personally attended their welcoming party in a clear demonstration of respect.

Thirteen cups of wine clinked against each other in the center of the table, and the guests downed their cups at once. Upon doing so, Wang Yanyi made a little more casual conversation, then hurriedly left, leaving only friends and acquaintances behind at the table.

"Governor Xiao, what's going on? Why did Wang Yanyi come?" Zhang Lie asked, after the council head was out of earshot.

Xiao Zhengyang laughed. "He was scared of you and your team, of course! I'd do the same if not for the fact that we both know Yan Long. I'd have been too frightened of offending you given your team! Come now, tell me—do you care about being the governor of this city at all? If so, I'll convene a meeting of the elders tomorrow and hand the reins over to you," Xiao Zhengyang joked half-seriously, as if trying to probe Zhang Lie's attitude.

"Oh, no, no! I'm not interested in such a restraining position at all. In fact, once the members of Team Zenith settle down here, I intend on exploring the second realm alone," Zhang Lie told him in confidence.

His goal in the second realm was to finish maxing out his gene capacities as quickly as possible. Being a governor sounded interesting, but it would be far too much work. Zhang Lie intended to enter the third realm as quickly as possible, and this position which might have tempted the others was almost meaningless to him.

Zhou Liao knew that Zhang Lie had set his sights toward the future, but he wouldn't have expected that Zhang Lie would turn down such a position so easily.

Governor Xiao had offered him the seat of the governor! There were millions of hunters in Qi, and he would be able to control and manipulate them all just like that! If Zhou Liao had been made the same offer, he was certain he wouldn't be able to refuse—but unfortunately, he wasn't Zhang Lie, and Zhang Lie wasn't him.

Xiao Zhengyang seemed to have predicted Zhang Lie's response. Smirking, he clapped him on the back and said, "I knew you wouldn't want to shoulder my burdens! Well, I can't foist my responsibilities onto you, but let me at least give you some advice: don't rush to head out of the city on your own. The second realm is far more dangerous than the first, and it's best to be cautious. Why not hunt down a few superior-grade lifeforms with your team first?"

"It's alright. After all, I entered the dimensional world in order to train myself, and I expect I'll be safe with my given level of strength. The members of Team Zenith will need to learn how to grow strong in my absence as well. They've outgrown the first realm, and the second realm is where they belong at the moment.

Xiao Zhengyang nodded. "In that case, safe travels. I'll keep an eye out on the members of Team Zenith for you—at the very least, I can prevent them from receiving unequal treatment within the city grounds."

Zhang Lie smiled. "You're saying all this as though you think I'll never return! There's no need to take special care of them. Let them learn to handle things on their own."

Zhang Lie felt that the hunters of Team Zenith didn't need any special care whatsoever; they could easily fend for themselves. The unofficial motto of Team Zenith was: don't cause trouble, but don't be a punching bag, either.

Meanwhile, the other hunters at the table whispered incessantly to each other, trying not to disturb Zhang Lie and Xiao Zhengyang's conversation.

The banquet lasted all the way until midnight before the troops and guests dispersed unwillingly. By that time, the members of Team Zenith had gotten to know the other troops in the special forces very well. Governor Xiao had consumed so much alcohol that his eyes were droopy and his words slurred, but even so, he was still holding a conversation with Zhang Lie.

As hunters, if they didn't want to get drunk, they could easily purge the alcohol from their bodies by circulating genetic energy. The reason they had chosen not to do so was to preserve the convivial atmosphere that came from getting drunk; it would be pointless to remain perfectly sober by cleansing themselves with genetic energy. Of course, the moment the hunters departed, they would use that very handy trick to sober up and avoid a hangover the next day.

With Xiao Zhengyang and the special forces troops gone, only Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith remained in the canteen. It was clear that Zhang Lie had some news for them. "I wasn't joking at the banquet—I'll be heading off on my own tomorrow morning."

The hunters of Team Zenith weren't surprised—except when he was facing enemies, Zhang Lie was a man of his word. Of course, that didn't mean they didn't have opinions of their own. There had been too many people just then for them to voice their concerns, but now they were free to do so.

Sun Mengmeng began, "Captain, why don't you at least bring a few of us with you, just in case you get into trouble? We'll be more help than not, I'm sure."

The others nodded.

Zhang Lie laughed. "Sun Mengmeng, I'm not some pampered young master who needs to be taken care of, and the second realm is far more dangerous than you think. With your current strength, you won't be able to help me out at all.

"I have my own reasons for leaving all of you behind. After collecting regular and mutated gene fragments with the special forces troops tomorrow, acclimate to your newfound strength as quickly as possible. Subsequently, start collecting certain herbs in Qi secretly. I'll hand you all a list of important herbs soon. Keep an eye on Zhuo Yihong, Xia Na, and Qin Tian for now. If they seem trustworthy and reliable to you, you're free to share up to Potion #2 with them, but not Potion #3.

"Finally, get used to how the special forces operate. As I've said before, the reason you're all here is to train and widen your perspective—you're all strong enough to be working independently otherwise. I'll be back before you know it. Do you all understand?"

"Yes, Captain!"

"In that case, let's end the meeting here. There's no need to send me off tomorrow—I want to keep a low profile."

Zhang Lie vanished from sight in the blink of an eye.

The next morning, almost at dawn, the hunters of Team Zenith arrived at Zhang Lie's cottage. Despite Zhang Lie telling them not to send him off, they still instinctively did so—only to find Zhou Liao, the other team leaders, and even the governor Xiao Zhengyang waiting for them.

Unfortunately for them all, Zhang Lie had departed overnight, predicting exactly such a scenario. By then, he was already in the depths of the second realm.

#### Chapter 335: The Black Eagle

Because he had left the city of Qi in the middle of the night, Zhang Lie's initial progress was very limited. Only at dawn did he make it past the outer boundary of the nearby forest and into its inner region.

He was sauntering in a relaxed fashion; there was no urgent goal that he had in mind for this excursion, unlike in the past.

However, he would have to start paying more attention. The outer boundary of the forest consisted only of regular and mutated-grade lifeforms, and Zhang Lie skirted by them with ease. In the inner perimeter were superior-grade lifeforms, and Zhang Lie would have to prepare to hunt them.

At the very least, he certainly wanted to max out his superior gene fragments. In the dimensional world, might was right, and the superior-grade lifeforms of the second realm would be stronger than even the peak-grade moonlight wyrm that he had faced in the first realm.

He would even have to use the advanced form of stealth from Venombane to avoid detection, and he certainly couldn't afford to be as careless as he had been in the outer boundary of the forest. Maintaining this level of stealth would also consume quite a lot of genetic energy from his end.

The forest was foggy and filled with lush greenery, the foliage so thick that sunlight barely penetrated the canopy. Zhang Lie strode through the forest without disturbing the leaves by his feet, not having noticed a single superior-grade lifeform. He didn't relax, but he wasn't overly anxious,

either. According to the map Zhou Liao had given him, the inner perimeter of the forest was extremely large, and it would be a hundred kilometers more before he reached its core.

Zhang Lie stopped by a bubbling stream, noticing three black eagles, each about half a human tall. Two of them had their heads lowered as they drank from the stream, while the third was glancing alertly at its surroundings.

They were apex predators able to fly at ten times the speed of sound. If they were airborne, Zhang Lie wouldn't have dared to set his sights on them, but it was another matter entirely if they were on the ground. After all, it would take them some time to fly into the air. By then, Zhang Lie would easily be able to take them down.

The reason he hadn't yet struck was because he was observing his surroundings to see if there were other superior-grade lifeforms nearby. He didn't want all his hard work to have gone to naught if there were others waiting to claim his prize from him.

Fortunately, he and the eagles were alone. He struck.

A runic tablet fell from the skies. The eagle responsible for surveying the surroundings immediately squawked, then pinpointed Zhang Lie's location. By the time the eagles reacted, they found themselves forced to the ground by gravity.

The three eagles tried to leap into the air to counter the force, but they ended up falling into the stream instead. They began to squawk loudly as they crossed their wings and sent blades of wind flying in Zhang Lie's direction.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Dragon's Wrath]!" By the time the eagles attacked, he had already sent a blood dragon flying in their direction, an attack so strong that it easily obliterated the eagles'.

As Zhang Lie's attack rushed toward them, they flapped their wings in earnest in an attempt to flee, but caught within the localized gravitational field, they weren't able to make it out in time before Zhang Lie's attack struck them.

Working together, the three eagles tried to resist Zhang Lie's attack, but to no avail. The eagle at the very front, struck by the full force of the attack, fell to the ground like a rock. The other two eagles weren't too affected, and even made use of the force of the attack to escape the gravitational field.

The struck eagle recovered from the attack quickly, but it had missed the best time to escape. Zhang Lie was right below it. Almost as the eagle fell, one of Zhang Lie's soulshards gleamed, and a ball of silver liquid shot up toward the eagle.

The next moment, like a mosquito stuck to a wad of bubble gum, the eagle and silver ball crashed down by the side of the stream. No matter how it struggled, it couldn't free itself from the silver liquid, which seemed to latch on to the eagle more and more tightly.

As it fell to the ground, a black boot stepped on its body, draining it of its genetic energy and obliterating all resistance. The next moment, a small white snake flashed before its eyes, and then it knew nothing more—Whitey was a summoned beast who consumed other lifeforms' souls as food.

Zhang Lie stored the eagle's carcass in his potbellied-toad pouch, ending the battle bloodlessly.

He didn't chase after the other two eagles that had already taken to the air, which would be meaningless—it would be difficult to catch them if they were focused on running away, and he would already obtain more than enough gene fragments from consuming the eagle's carcass.

However, his planning this time around didn't account for the fact that the eagles might not actually want to run away...

Two sharp cries pierced the skies, and the eagles who had escaped out of harm's way shot back toward Zhang Lie like two loosed arrows.

The three eagles shared a close bond; upon realizing that their comrade had been trapped, the two remaining eagles rushed back. Their bodies burned with black flame, and their incredible speed made them seem like two ballistic missiles.

### Chapter 336: In Dire Straits

The eagles' target, Zhang Lie, didn't seem at all surprised by their attack. Perhaps the two eagles could have caused him a headache in an aerial battle, but since he was on the ground, he had nothing to fear. After all, he was far stronger than either one, or even both combined.

Zhang Lie stomped on the ground, and three runic tablets fell from the skies. A blood moon ascended, and the figure of a dragon turtle seemed to appear behind Zhang Lie. Gravity multiplied in the vicinity of Zhang Lie, causing the eagles to squawk in sudden disorientation.

Their ballistic trajectory turned parabolic as they were dragged down by the force of the runic tablets.

Zhang Lie's runic tablets could fully restrain even Wang Yanyi; it was overkill for the two superior-grade lifeforms. They met the same dire fate as their companion—the last thing they saw was a little white snake flicking its tongue at them.

Just as Zhang Lie was about to store the eagles' carcasses, he felt a sudden motion to his right behind him, along with the aura of no less than a hundred superior-grade lifeforms. The commotion he had caused had clearly summoned what seemed to be an entire superior-grade horde.

Zhang Lie raised his eyebrows, stowed away his spoils, then went back into stealth.

As he did so, a flock of giant bats, over a hundred strong, darkened the skies as they landed in front of the stream. Upon seeing the bats, Zhang Lie lost all interest in hunting them down. He dashed off into the distance.

Not all lifeforms in the second realm could be consumed easily, and the bats were one such example. They were extremely toxic, with genes largely incompatible with humans, and would cause crazed madness if forcibly assimilated.

Of course, from the bats' perspective, this was an excellent survival mechanism to prevent their numbers from being whittled down by overzealous hunters.

Zhang Lie was headed toward the Yeluo Valley, located in the western side of the inner perimeter of the forest. It was a gigantic valley. A clan native to this valley had the ability to make potent pills that were able to counteract high-ranking fighters of the sura, but they were as yet unaware of this ability.

Zhang Lie, whose eventual target was the asura, could hardly miss an opportunity to get these pills for himself. Along the way, he would hunt down any suitable prey he encountered as well.

Given his top speed, Zhang Lie anticipated that he would be able to make it to the valley within three days, but by the end of those three days he found that he hadn't even gotten halfway there. There were simply too many superior-grade hordes roaming the region, and Zhang Lie had to consume a significant amount of genetic energy to maintain his advanced form of stealth.

He had spent over half of the last three days skulking around in order to restore his energy. Of course, even that amount of progress was shocking. Even a whole special forces team would have been hard-pressed to remain in the forest for over three days. Most of their hunting consisted of identifying a target via preliminary scouting, blitzing that target down, and then running off. The superior-grade hordes that roamed the inner boundary of the forest were particularly dangerous, and could easily kill even a fully equipped team of hunters.

Despite how careful Zhang Lie was, he had still ended up fighting three superior-grade hordes, once because he found them a suitable target, but twice because his stealth had been broken and he had no choice but to fight. Fortunately, he was strong enough that the fights weren't a challenge.

However, Zhang Lie was dissatisfied with his rate of progress, and he decided that he would acquire some superior gene fragments first. Doing so would require him to consume the flesh of these lifeforms that he had hunted down, so he would need to find a secluded location in which he could start a fire.

This wasn't an easy task in the middle of the gigantic forest that bordered Qi, and Zhang Lie had spent a day and a half searching before he saw a small mountain of rock nearby, devoid of any greenery in the area or any traces of superior-grade lifeforms. Most importantly, it was close to a source of water.

Zhang Lie walked up to the side of the mountain and used his corrosive genetic energy to excavate a cave. Furthermore, he laid out a special formation by its entrance to make the cave hard to detect.

With a canteen of water, Zhang Lie began to prepare the carcasses of the prey he had hunted. He roasted them on four giant spits, seasoning them with a satchel of spices he had prepared beforehand.

The cave quickly filled with the enticing aroma of meat, but under Zhang Lie's circumstances, this wasn't good news. The moment he could detect the smell, he increased the density of water vapor in the air, trying to dampen the aroma and prevent it from leaking outside the cave.

It took a few hours for the lifeforms to be ready for consumption. Just as he was about to dig in with gusto, he could sense the auras of a human hunter and over a dozen lifeforms entering his range of perception.

He frowned, then headed out of the cave to see what was going on.

The struggling, bedraggled hunter noticed his presence almost immediately as he headed out of the cave, and she darted toward him. Over a dozen rhinoceros dogs were chasing her.

These rhinodogs were a combination of rhinoceroses and dogs, the size of giant boulders with a constitution and stamina to match. They possessed great physical resistance and a frightening bite.

As superior-grade lifeforms, they controlled earth-attuned genetic energy, and were able to use those techniques to capture or trap their prey. The combination of all these characteristics made them particularly difficult to hunt.

Most importantly, they roamed the forest in large packs consisting of hundreds or even thousands of lifeforms. The dozen or so that were following the female hunter seemed to be a scouting party of sorts.

If he were to participate in this battle, he would have to end it quickly. He was rather interested in the female hunter—as far as he knew, no one would dare to venture so deeply into the forest alone. She wasn't weak, but clearly wasn't strong enough to be able to survive in the forest alone.

Had she lost her teammates? If that were the case, she should have headed toward the outskirts of the forest rather than its interior, surely?

Hong Xi sighed. Underneath her outwardly bloodied and disheveled appearance was a young woman, soon to be entering her twenties. She came from Mars; her speech had a tinge of a Martian accent.

She was the last hope of the Hong clan. There was naturally a reason she risked her life to venture so deep into the forest around Qi. Before she could reach her destination, however, she had been found by a pack of rhinodogs, and had to flee for her life shortly afterwards.

When she saw the hunter coming out of his cave, her eyes widened, and she ran in his direction. "Please, save me!"

If there was anyone who could save her, it would be him. He seemed calm despite seeing the pack of rhinodogs chasing after her, and he clearly had some skill if he managed to survive in the forest alone for so long.

She grabbed onto the man's right arm, but he shrugged her off almost immediately.

She pleaded with the man for her life.

"Why should I save you? What can you give me?" Although he had already decided to help her out, Zhang Lie didn't intend to do so for nothing.

"I'll give up anything I own, anything!" Hong Xi begged urgently.

"Very well. Hide in the cave behind me. Don't step out, no matter what you hear."

Zhang Lie dashed forward into the pack of rhinodogs. The reason he had chosen to save her was because he felt a familiar source of genetic energy emanating from her.

Chapter 337: Descendant of the Hong

Against the ferocious pack of superior-grade rhinodogs heading his way, Zhang Lie only smirked.

[Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!

As the image of a dragonturtle appeared behind him, four runic tablets smashed into the ground, followed swiftly by the rhinodogs themselves. Zhang Lie struck forward with his right fist, causing a torrent of black dragons to emerge from his palm.

The pack of rhinodogs was ravaged in an instant.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade rhinodog. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade rhinodog, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

Hong Xi gaped at the man from where she hid in the cave. Had he killed the whole pack, just like that? It took her a few moments to realize why the man before her seemed so familiar. "You—aren't you Zhang Lie? Champion of the Void Cup, Zhang Lie?!"

Zhang Lie turned around with a smile. "You recognize me?"

"Recognize? Is there a human that doesn't? You're the champion of the Void Cup, and I'm one of your top fans! I can't believe I'm meeting you in person here!" Hong Xi's eyes seemed to have transformed into a pair of twinkling stars.

Before she could continue talking, Zhang Lie stopped her.

"We can't talk now—it's going to be dangerous to stay here much longer." He salvaged the carcasses of the rhinodogs, packed up his food, then beckoned for Hong Xi to follow him. They ran off to a mountain a few dozen kilometers away, where Zhang Lie repeated his cave-making technique and started another fire.

He retrieved the four roasted carcasses and began to consume them with gusto while Hong Xi prepared the carcasses of the rhinodogs for consumption. This was a necessary skill for all genetic hunters, so even a young woman like her was adept at it.

Glancing at the bedraggled young woman who seemed oddly familiar, Zhang Lie asked,

"Can you explain your situation? How did a young woman like you come to be in such dire circumstances?"

Hong Xi hesitated. "That, I, well, actually—"

"Enough. Don't bother if you don't want to tell me—I only saved you because you seemed familiar somehow. If you won't tell me anything, I'll just send you to the outer boundary of the forest tomorrow, where you can make your way back to Qi easily."

Hong Xi's eyes dimmed for a moment before she made up her mind and asked, "Zhang Lie, do you know of the Eclipse Sage?"

Separated from her team, she hardly had the ability to survive, let alone search for hidden treasure. Yes, hidden treasure—that was why she had appeared in the forest.

Unfortunately, her team had underestimated how dangerous the forest would be. Some of the hunters had died in an altercation, and she had been separated from the others. If she hadn't found Zhang Lie, she would have perished.

She knew of Zhang Lie's strength, and she believed that he would be her only hope at getting to the treasure. Thus, she couldn't let Zhang Lie ditch her now.

Zhang Lie scrutinized her. "Are you a descendant of the Eclipse Sage?"

"Ah, yes—but how did you know?!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "Do you come from the city of Tianhong on Mars?"

He remembered the Eclipse Sage's last words very clearly. His first task for Zhang Lie was to destroy the Musi clan on Tarkus, and his second was to assist the remaining members of the Hong clan in Tianhong.

He had had Yang Ze investigate the situation, but he had been unable to find any trace of a Hong clan in Tianhong. Many years prior, they had vanished without a trace due to the actions of the Musi clan.

Zhang Lie sent a few men to investigate the situation, but he had been too busy with everything else to follow up on this responsibility. He did, however, identify some useful information about the Musi clan on Tarkus. This clan ruled over Tarkus as a hegemon, and its clan head was a famous hunter of the third realm.

Zhang Lie didn't feel that he was strong enough to take on the Musi clan as he was now, but he couldn't help being reminded of this affair after meeting a descendant of the Hong. It looked as though it might be time to make plans to attack the Musi, after all.

Hong Xi shook her head. "It's been a long time since my family lived in Tianhong. After being targeted by our enemies, we had no choice but to hide our identities and head to the planet Tira instead."

Zhang Lie's face turned severe. "By your enemies, I assume you're referring to the Musi clan? How's your clan been doing since then?"

Perhaps because she had identified some unusual emotion in Zhang Lie's tone, Hong Xi took a deep breath and began to tell him everything. "My clan is in dire straits. Of the main family, only my brother and I remain. The Musi clan have been searching for us in order to claim the inheritance of the Eclipse Sage. All we know, all that has been passed down from the elders of the clan, is that the sage left a treasury behind in the second realm."

"And you intend on finding this treasury in order to resolve your clan's problems?"

Hong Xi nodded firmly. "Yes. We need to secure this inheritance, or I believe our clan will fall. Zhang Lie, you're the champion of the Void Cup. If you're willing to help me find the treasury, I'll give you everything inside but one item!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "The manual for [Eclipse]?"

Hong Xi clenched her teeth and looked away. As though she had just made a very big decision, she continued, "I'm willing to share [Eclipse] with you."

The Musi clan was tightening its grip, and if the Hong clan couldn't obtain the Eclipse Sage's inheritance in time, both she and her brother would perish.

"But do you think that obtaining [Eclipse] will be sufficient? Do you think that it'll allow you to escape the clutches of the Musi? What if I intercede with the Musi on your behalf? I think they'll be willing to negotiate with me after my performance in the Void Cup," Zhang Lie probed.

Hong Xi shook her head adamantly. "No, the Musi clan would never agree. As long as even a single member of the Hong lives on, the Musi will never let us go."

"Good!" Zhang Lie nodded, satisfied. "In that case, I'll help you out."

"Really?" Hong Xi was hoping that that would be his response, but she still couldn't quite believe it.

"Of course—I would hardly stoop to lying to a young woman. However, I do have a condition."

"What condition? As long as I can satisfy it, I'll accept it!"

"Even if you'll have to give up your life?"

"Yes, but in that case, you have to promise to hand [Eclipse] to my brother. What's the condition? I'm ready to hear it!"

"I'll let you know once we get to the treasury."

Hong Xi drew close to Zhang Lie. "In that case, let's set off immediately!"

### Chapter 338: Hong Xi's Objective

It was somewhat annoying to travel through the forest at night, but hardly impossible. Following Hong Xi's directions, the two of them managed to find the treasury at noon the second day.

At the bottom of a clear pond, hidden in a stone cave almost submerged by silt, weathered golden doors appeared before the two hunters. Engraved on the doors was a half-moon blazing with dark fire.

Hong Xi took out a dagger, sliced her palm, then pressed it against the half-moon. The doors blazed golden. The treasury slowly opened up, allowing the two of them access to its interior. There wasn't much space inside. A plinth stood in the middle of the room, supporting a battered old chest.

Hong Xi's eyes widened as she glanced at the chest, her lips bursting into a smile—but as she reached toward it, the cave began to shake.

"What's with all this fuss?" Zhang Lie wondered.

Hong Xi frowned. "I think something's wrong."

Zhang Lie whirled around, sensing an overwhelming fluctuation of genetic energy from behind, abrupt but dense, so dense that even Zhang Lie was forced to pay attention to the attack.

He materialized Venombane with a flick of his wrist, then cut forward.

"[Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!" A cloud of dust filled the air, but the rumbling and quaking continued. Zhang Lie was forced to take a few stumbling steps back. Venombane quivered in his hand.

Zhang Lie at the gigantic maw before him, his eyes as cold as flint. The maw was so large that a small bus could fit comfortably within. It was surrounded by sharp, serrated teeth. Green saliva pooled on the ground, letting out sizzling sounds as it touched the rock.

He was facing a gigantic sandworm—from the looks of it, a peak-grade sandworm that had lived out its life underground in darkness. Its skin was unusually resilient and tough; even Zhang Lie's [First Form: Parting the River] had barely done anything to it.

"A-A peak-grade lifeform!" Upon sensing the genetic energy exuding from the peak-grade sandworm, Hong Xi's legs turned to jelly as she fell to the ground.

Zhang Lie's face turned cold. The sandworm was strong even for a peak-grade creature, especially in an environment that was far more suited to it than to Zhang Lie. If he could avoid having to attack it, he would.

"Why is there a peak-grade lifeform around?!" Hong Xi cried out.

From the sandworm's aura alone, Zhang Lie suspected that it was at least ten times the strength of the moonlight wyrm that he had faced in the first realm.

The sandworm hissed—its sneak attack had failed, and it had even received a few injuries as a result.

Unexpectedly, however, it gave up on attacking Zhang Lie and turned to Hong Xi instead.

[Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]! The image of a dragonturtle appeared before Zhang Lie as four runic tablets crashed into the rock floor, surrounding the sandworm from all four cardinal directions.

Under the enhanced force of gravity, even the peak-grade sandworm was forced deep into the lakebed. Even so, the sandworm continued to writhe and thrash around, as though it were trying to get into the cave.

"No—it's not interested in you, but rather the treasure behind you!" Zhang Lie came to a realization. There was something in the treasury potent enough to attract even the peak-grade sandworm. He stomped on the ground again, maximizing the force of gravity surrounding the sandworm and completely enraging it.

The sandworm howled as it thrashed forward, but Zhang Lie avoided the attack with [Mirrored Refraction].

"Shut the doors and protect yourself—I'll have a little fun with this sandworm!"

The sandworm had grown visibly slower owing to the four runic tablets pinning him down, and Zhang Lie was easily able to evade its blows. He counterattacked, circulating [Ninecarp Transformation] to its fullest as a dark dragon wrapped around his arm.

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]! A huge explosion echoed about the space, followed by an unusual cracking sound: one of the sandworm's gigantic teeth had been cracked in half by the attack.

"You really are a durable bastard, aren't you? Well, take this! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Zhang Lie punched forward with his left arm, sending a torrent of dragons flooding toward the sandworm's open maw.

The dragons crashed into the sandworm's maw, and it howled. The noise from the altercation could be heard throughout the lake. After stunning the sandworm with his two attacks, Zhang Lie immediately followed up with Venombane. He activated his blood ant soulshard, then struck with [The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath].

A dragon of blood shot into the sandworm's maw and pierced it from the inside out, dyeing the water around them in ink-green blood. Any other peak-grade lifeform would have died of such a wound, but the sandworm's strength was exactly in its fortitude and vitality.

Zhang Lie had dealt it a heavy blow, but not a lethal one—indeed, it wasn't even life-threatening. However, the blow was strong enough that the sandworm knew that it couldn't overwhelm its opponent. It tried to flee, turning around and attempting to burrow into the lakebed.

"I won't let you go!" Zhang Lie shouted.

A black carp manifested around him as he too darted into the water, chasing after the sandworm. He grabbed its tail, then pulled it back as he pummeled it with his fists. The sandworm howled, and its giant maw turned back to attack Zhang Lie even as he grabbed onto its tail.

The strength of the attack was so great that it warped the space all around them, shocking even Zhang Lie himself. He immediately turned to defense, activating his white-grub soulshard and trapping the sandworm's maw in a net of thick silver hemp.

Unable to bite, the sandworm could only attempt to defeat Zhang Lie with brute force, slamming into him with its body like a hammer.

Zhang Lie activated both his forest wolfman and blood ant soulshards in tandem, then attacked again with [The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]. He charged forward with the bloody dragon, using it as cover to launch the second form of his [Ninesoul Dragonblade].

A violet arc traced out the motion of the dragon's body.

[Second Form: Piercing the Soul]! The sword's slash cut through the sandworm's maw and sliced all the way through its back.

[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]! With another attack, the sandworm's battered body was neatly carved into a dozen pieces.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade sandworm. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade sandworm, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie took in a deep breath, stored the carcass of the peak-grade sandworm, then rushed back to the treasury.

"Open up, Hong Xi!"

Hong Xi peered out at him through a slit in the door and immediately opened it. "What's going on, Zhang Lie? Are you injured? The treasury was shaking so badly that I thought I was about to be buried alive!"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "The peak-grade sandworm was tough, but that's about it."

"That's about it?! Wait, Zhang Lie, did you—did you kill that peak-grade sandworm all by yourself?!"

Hong Xi stared at him in disbelief, then understanding, then regret. That was a peak-grade lifeform! If she had known that Zhang Lie was able to kill it on his own, she would have thrown a dart or something its way—it would have given her access to ten peak gene fragments! How could she have forgotten?!

Zhang Lie knew what she was thinking, but he was inwardly glad that she hadn't stepped forward. If she had done so, it would have made matters much harder to control. He smiled. "Don't worry.

Peak-grade lifeforms aren't as difficult to kill as you think, especially considering the treasures that the Eclipse Sage has left for you."

"Ah, I wouldn't know—I was waiting for you to return before opening it. Here!"

The young woman's innocence surprised Zhang Lie a little. "In that case, why don't you open it now?"

Hong Xi nodded, slicing her palm again and resting it on the battered chest. The lock clicked open, and Hong Xi found three treasures within. A black tablet immediately caught her attention—that was likely [Eclipse], which she had been searching for for so long.

She pointed at the plinth on which the chest had been located. "Zhang Lie, there's an optical reader there!"

As she slotted the tablet into the reader, a youthful Eclipse Sage appeared, explaining the basic principles behind [Eclipse].

Zhang Lie was naturally disappointed. On the other hand, Hong Xi fell to the ground, weeping tears of joy at the sight. "I've finally, finally retrieved it—my hard work hasn't been for naught, there's finally hope for my clan!"

#### Chapter 339: Another Apprentice

Seeing how impassioned Hong Xi was, Zhang Lie could hardly bring himself to tell her that that tablet contained even less information than what he had managed to find on Earth. That would be far too cruel.

He turned toward the other two objects in the chest, the first of which was a yellow-brown fruit. Zhang Lie's eyes widened. "No wonder the peak-grade sandworm was attracted to the treasury—it's a shayang fruit!"

As Zhang Lie picked it up, sand gathered around the fruit and formed a miniature sandstorm. The shayang fruit had a chance of raising one's talent for cultivation, but compared to gambling on that probability, Zhang Lie had a better use for it. He believed it would be a necessary ingredient for making Potion #4, which would grant him peak-grade limit fragments.

The final object in the chest was a red glove, one of rather high quality, but not something that interested me.

He kept the shayang fruit. "I'll be taking this. You can have the glove that remains in the chest."

Hong Xi exclaimed, "Please, Zhang Lie, take what you want! I only managed to make my way here because of you. Otherwise, I'd already have died to the rhinodogs."

Zhang Lie smiled but shook his head. Before he could leave, Hong Xi clambered up to him, her face still slightly red. "Zhang Lie, wait! I still haven't shared [Eclipse] with you. In addition, I'm hoping you'll allow me to join the Zenith Dojo—would you please allow me to do so?"

"That's not a problem. I'm even willing to take you as my apprentice, if that's something you're interested in."

Hong Xi's eyes gleamed. She knelt on the ground, dirty though it was, and thumped her forehead against it three times. Subsequently, with both hands, she offered up the tablet containing [Eclipse]. "Master, please accept this gift from your apprentice."

If finding [Eclipse] were able to revitalize the Hong clan ten times faster, then taking Zhang Lie as her master would revitalize it at least a hundred times faster. As one of Zhang Lie's superfans, she knew better than anyone else just how strong Zhang Lie truly was.

Zhang Lie himself was willing to take her as his apprentice because of her relationship to the Eclipse Sage, whom he considered one of his mentors.

"Very well. From now on, you'll be my third apprentice."

"Yes, Master! I, Hong Xi, gratefully pay my respects!"

Instead of accepting the proffered tablet, however, Zhang Lie placed two fingers on Hong Xi's forehead. He activated his peak-grade moonlight wrym soulshard, and, using Whitey as conduit, left her with the entirety of [Eclipse].

"This is..."

Zhang Lie's [Eclipse] was even more clarified and complete than the footage that she had acquired.

"Master, this—"

"By a stroke of good luck, I obtained the Eclipse Sage's inheritance back on Earth. I'm glad I've been able to hand it down to one of his descendants as well."

Hong Xi clutched her mouth in shock. "Master, you're my ancestor's apprentice?"

Zhang Lie laughed. "You can put it that way. Otherwise, would I have taken you as an apprentice myself so easily?"

Hong Xi made an "Ahh" sound in realization. No wonder Zhang Lie had been willing to help her out so readily!

"Master, nevertheless, thank you for taking me on. I might not be your most talented apprentice, but I swear I'll be the most hardworking!"

Hong Xi's determination made Zhang Lie smile. "Very well, my most hardworking apprentice, can you tell me about your gene fragments?"

"Because I learned of the Eclipse Sage's treasury in the second realm, I entered the second realm before capping my gene fragments in the first. Currently, I have a hundred basic and mutated gene fragments, along with fifty superior gene fragments.

Zhang Lie widened his eyes. After all, the fifty superior gene fragments she was mentioning had come from hunting superior-grade lifeforms with Zhang Lie as they made their way toward their destination. In other words, she had dared to brave the depths of the Qi forest only having maxed her basic and superior gene fragments.

She was so daring that Zhang Lie was at a loss for words. It was lucky that she had met him; otherwise, she would surely be dead by now.

"Your foundation is rather weak, but it can be improved with time. [Eclipse] has no attunement and can be compatible with any technique, so that's a good start. What sort of techniques do you want to learn?"

Hong Xi replied seriously, "I'd like to learn a fist technique, just like my ancestor."

She wasn't being entirely truthful—the main reason she had chosen a fist technique was because she had been enthralled by Zhang Lie's use of [Hundred Dragons Soaring] in her defense.

"The only fist technique I can teach you is [Fists of the Silent Sea]. This was originally a water-attuned technique, but I can convert it into a null-attuned technique for you—though its strength will depend on what you make of it."

"I understand, Master! Please, will you impart that technique to me?"

Zhang Lie nodded. Using Whitey as a conduit, he sent her a mental transmission of the technique, then demonstrated it in front of her.

"As for your footwork and body techniques, I suspect the ones that came alongside [Eclipse] will be most suitable for you—[Moon Seeker] and [The Elusive Moon]. Finally, you'll need a weapon technique of some sort. I transferred you a rather comprehensive set along with [Eclipse], so choose the one you like best. I'll also help you find a few suitable soulshards, and you should be prepared to hunt superior-grade lifeforms at that point."

"Master, thank you!"

"You're now one of my apprentices, after all. There's no need to be so polite."

"Yes, Master!"

Three days flew by in the blink of an eye. Within that time, Hong Xi's strength grew by leaps and bounds. Once Zhang Lie deemed that Hong Xi had learned enough to fight on her own, the two of them left the drab treasury and headed back toward the Yeluo Valley.

Zhang Lie decided to head there first, then to accompany his new disciple home and to bring the entire Hong clan to Ning. After all, he had promised the Eclipse Sage that he would take care of the Hong clan.

Because he was trying to help Hong Xi hunt for soulshards as well, he abstained from tealthing the two of them. They walked through the forest with their heads held high, naturally attracting the attention of all sorts of predators.

With a piercing screech, a bird surrounded by green winds flew by them. The screech was so shrill that Hong Xi had to cover her ears. The bird flapped its wings, summoning a gale out of thin air.

Zhang Lie pointed at the sky. "What do you think of this bird?"

"Ah, what do you mean, Master?"

Instead of responding, Zhang Lie watched as the bird swooped down toward Hong Xi.

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]! Before she could scream, Zhang Lie punched at the bird, obscuring its sight with a flight of over a hundred black dragons, howling in unison far louder than the bird could screech.

The bird suddenly squawked, noticing that its prey seemed to be stronger than it had expected. Before it could flee, however, the black dragons had already taken to the sky. They surrounded the bird and burst apart, drowning out the sunlight in a wave of dark energy.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade fleet-winged windbird and obtained its soulshard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade fleet-winged windbird, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie smiled and held out a green soulshard in front of her. "You're rather lucky! Here, a gift from me to you."

Hong Xi gaped at the sight. Her eyes were bulging at the carcass of the windbird. What had just happened? That was a superior-grade lifeform from the second realm!

Zhang Lie had taken it down in just one blow—in a mere ten seconds!

Hong Xi knew that her master was strong, but not how strong.

"What, don't you want this?"

"Master, that's a superior-grade soulshard!"

"Naturally. I would be embarrassed if my apprentices were to use anything less. It looks like a rare weapon-type soulshard. Why don't you absorb it into your soulspace and try it out?"

Chapter 340: Toward the Yeluo Valley

As Hong Xi absorbed the soulshard, a ball of light appeared on her palm, and a green-feathered fan materialized.

She twisted the fan open, seeing the figure of a fleet-winged windbird on its surface, with picturesque scenery in the background. As she waved the fan, a cool gust of wind began to blow. The stronger she waved it, the stronger the wind became. A miniaturized tornado took form, disintegrating a boulder into pieces and uprooting nearby shrubs and trees.

"A wind-attuned fan—not bad! Your genetic armor doesn't seem compatible with you at all. You'll need another set of armor, as well as a suitable weapon. If I recall correctly, superior-grade lunar butterflies can drop a rapier that might be well-suited to [Eclipse] and to your skills, but they're a little annoying to hunt at the moment since they always appear in swarms. Once I finish maxing out my superior gene fragments, I'll get you one."

Hong Xi smiled with gratitude. "Thank you, Master! In that case, where are we heading now?"

"To the Yeluo Valley. The Yeluo clan lives there, and there's something I'd like to acquire from them."

Hong Xi seemed rather surprised. "You mean that there are other intelligent races here in the second realm besides the sura?"

"Of course! The second realm boasts more species of lifeforms than exist in the Milky Way. Did you ascend without even knowing this much?"

He handed her a vial of Potion #1. "Here, drink this. Given your improved strength, you should be able to digest it easily."

Hong Xi swallowed it in one gulp, then suddenly felt as though her stomach was burning up. The hot and spicy feeling made her open her mouth and pant, "Water, water—water!"

Zhang Lie handed her a bottle of water, the entirety of which she consumed before her thirst was satiated.

As she circulated genetic energy through her body, she suddenly discovered that she seemed to have grown quite a bit stronger, and the strange announcement in her head which she had never heard before sent her into a bout of momentary confusion. "Master, c-could this be—"

Zhang Lie laughed. "It is. Get used to your newfound strength, and then I'll hand you Potion #2 once we're done with the Yeluo Valley."

Hong Xi was lost in thought as she sensed the changes throughout her body. "Master, are these the rumored limit-breaking potions that you're known for?"

After Zhang Lie's surprise victory at the Void Cup, his theory of limit fragments had spread like wildfire across the galaxy. However, hardly anyone was able to acquire vials of such precious potions for themselves.

She hadn't expected Zhang Lie to be so generous given how new an apprentice she was.

"It's just a vial of Potion #1, nothing more!"

"Wait a minute, Master, you mentioned Potion #2 just now—could you have already developed it?!"

"Shh!" Zhang Lie shushed her. "This isn't a secret to those who know me, but you shouldn't mention it in front of anyone else."

Hong Xi obediently nodded. Because Hong Xi didn't have a stealth-type soulshard of her own, and because it would consume too much energy for Zhang Lie to stealth her as well, they had no choice but to walk through the forest boldly.

As they hunted down any lifeforms daring enough to cross their path, Zhang Lie found that he had already accumulated over a hundred superior gene fragments. Most superior-grade hordes wouldn't be able to cause him any trouble, so he didn't have to be as careful as he had been.

"Hong Xi, what do you think of that herd of bihorns over there?"

Hong Xi glanced at Zhang Lie doubtfully. "Master, that's a huge horde of bihorns! Surely you aren't thinking of—"

"Wait here. Let's see if we can get something for you!" Zhang Lie stealthed, dashed over, and slaughtered over a dozen superior-grade bihorns with one activation of [The Boundless Blade].

Hong Xi gaped at the sight. By the time she returned to her senses, Zhang Lie was already by her side, checking the spoils he had obtained. "Not here, nor there, nor there—not even a single soulshard!" he cursed.

Mere moments later, he rested his eyes on a pack of dragonscaled lions. "Hong Xi, what do you think of those lions?"

Before she could reply, he had already darted off. For the rest of their journey, he attacked any group of lifeforms that he came across and thought was interesting, and Hong Xi's surprise and shock was quickly replaced by imperturbable calm. The superior-grade lifeforms that she was paralyzed by and had hidden from were all turning into walking sacks of treasure.

Ten days later, she even began to attack these superior-grade lifeforms on her own. Given her incomplete foundation from the first realm, Zhang Lie was rather surprised by her strength in the second.

"Master, why don't you take a break? Let me show off my new skills!"

She had grown tremendously as a hunter since becoming Zhang Lie's apprentice.

Hong Xi: a mutated-grade lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. 10; Eclipse (advanced)

Techniques: Fists of the Silent Sea (intermediate), Moon Seeker (intermediate), The Elusive Moon (intermediate), Syzygy Blade (intermediate)

Genes: Basic, 100; Mutated, 100; Superior, 100; Peak, 0; Disaster, 0

Soulshards: Fleet-Winged Windbird (superior), Iris Peacock (superior), Mindborne Leopard (superior), Spirit Fox (superior), Lunar Pig (superior)

She had acquired all her superior gene fragments and soulshards from hunting with Zhang Lie, though she was unable to face the lifeforms head-on; she had had to launch sneak attacks on them.

Her superior-grade iris peacock soulshard allowed her to generate a bright five-colored light, which had the unusual effect of separating an enemy from their weapons or soulshards. It could also be used to cause temporary blindness.

Her superior-grade mindborne leopard soulshard was able to create a number of illusions, and her spirit fox soulshard took on the form of a long, blazing robe, which would counterattack all foes that struck her. Finally, her superior-grade lunar pig soulshard produced a large quantity of lunar arrows which she could shoot at her opponents.

Zhang Lie was shocked to learn of the overwhelming affinity that Hong Xi seemed to have with [Eclipse]. In just ten days or so, she had already reached advanced proficiency, a feat even he hadn't been able to duplicate.

However, Hong Xi had done so with ease. Part of the reason was because the framework she had used to date was a predecessor of [Eclipse], and she was naturally primed for it. After watching her for a few days, Zhang Lie came to another conclusion: she could well be more attuned and more compatible with [Eclipse] than even the Eclipse Sage himself.

Her [Eclipse] domain grew stronger by the day, and with its help, she soon became able to take down hordes of superior-grade lifeforms as well.

The two hunters took about a month's time to reach the Yeluo Valley. It was filled with a large number of bug-type lifeforms and unusual plants. Even at Zhang Lie's level of strength, he couldn't be careless given the unusual abilities that some bug-type lifeforms possessed.

This was his first time in the Yeluo Valley proper. Although he hadn't met many of the Yeluo in his past life, he knew quite a bit about what he would have to be wary of within the valley.

Almost immediately as they entered, Zhang Lie reminded Hong Xi, "Follow me tightly. We're basically there, and the members of the Yeluo clan might be even more dangerous than the lifeforms we're apt to encounter."

"Understood, Master!" Hong Xi fell in line behind him.

When they stepped into the valley proper, what first caught their attention was the lush greenery all around, the bright blue skies, the grass sparkling with dew, the fresh scent of floral fragrance—and the danger that lurked beneath.

The Yeluo clan was situated in the deepest part of the Yeluo Valley. They lived off the land, a world apart from any other hunter. The clan was about three thousand members strong.

As Zhang Lie and Hong Xi made their way deep into the valley, they suddenly heard an ongoing fight in the distance. Members of the Yeluo clan were exterminating a swarm of poisonous superior-grade bug-type lifeforms.

This was the first time Hong Xi and Zhang Lie had met the Yeluo. Hong Xi didn't seem to think much of it, but Zhang Lie was thrilled. He had finally found the Yeluo! In his past life, they had been massacred to the last after an unexpected altercation with an enemy clan. By the time a human discovered that their potions were particularly effective against the sura, it was already too late—the Yeluo had been wiped off the face of the earth.

Their hair was dark green, with the color and texture of seaweed. Their skin was lustrous and the color of bronze; their bodies large and hardy, the adults almost uniformly over two meters tall. They looked more like bronzed statues rather than actual lifeforms. Most of them wore hunting masks covering the upper half of their faces, with sharp teeth jutting out of their uncovered mouths.