

U. Warlord 41

Chapter 41: Li Hong's Involvement

It turned out that Zhang Lie's intuition was right: Fang Yi's patrol immediately identified quite a few lone wolves in the area.

Lone wolves were hunters who were confident enough in their abilities to hunt solo. Of course, no matter how confident they were, those who would hunt in an area like this were usually only at near-maximum capacity for mutated gene fragments, and they wouldn't even dare to lay their eyes on superior-grade lifeforms.

If not for Zhang Lie, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng certainly wouldn't have, either.

He was relatively experienced in dealing with such affairs, and managed to fend them off with a few inspired lies. When these lone wolves saw Fang Yi's large team 'fleeing for their lives', they didn't dare draw any closer.

By the hole, Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng were harassing the dreadtoad, trying to squeeze it dry of genetic energy. Zhang Lie was playing the role of the tactician, whereas Sun Mengmeng was the attacker. From time to time, she would shoot a [Ninecloud Arrow] at the toad, causing it to shriek and croak.

Upon hearing these cries, the teams of hunters who had been lured to the scene by the disturbance were largely dissuaded from heading any closer and fled instead.

However, there were still a few hunters who kept approaching. For instance, the second-fiddle team fielded by the Li clan, on hearing the dreadtoad's cries, picked up their pace and rushed toward the fight instead.

Fang Yi's patrol naturally encountered them within the dense forest. He was quite familiar with Li Hong's team, a ten-member team consisting of hunters who were near the mutated gene capacity. They had a reputation for being tyrannical, and would frequently snatch the kills of other teams of hunters.

Fang Yi hadn't expected that they would encounter them at such a critical juncture; his team was lacking in terms of strength and numbers, and wouldn't stand a chance in a direct confrontation.

Thus, Fang Yi made use of a tried-and-tested technique: pretending to be fleeing in haste after encountering a life-threatening situation.

"Stop right there!" As expected, after glancing at them derisively, Li Hong commanded them to stop.

Fang Yi's team immediately stopped. He stepped forward and asked, "Is something wrong, Captain Li?"

Li Hong smiled. "You recognize me?"

"Of course! Surely there's no one from the Blacksteel settlement who hasn't heard of your team. Is there anything I can do for you?" Fang Yi might not have been a very strong hunter, but his social skills were unparalleled.

Li Hong preened at the flattery. "Good, good! Let me ask: why is your team running away?"

Fang Yi made a horrified expression. "Captain Li, don't you know? Just ahead, there was a dreadtoad that just fought off a thunderfur polecat. It seemed to be enraged after the fight, and it's killing off one of the hunting teams in the area now! According to the hunters I passed along the way, almost their entire team is dead or crippled now, and the scene of the fight's a mess of bloody gore!"

Fang Yi was trying to scare Li Hong off, but Li Hong clearly had much more inflated an opinion of his own abilities than Fang Yi had expected. Upon hearing Fang Yi's description, he seemed to grow even more interested. "Did you see that dreadtoad?"

Fang Yi shook his head. "Of course not! If I did, I wouldn't be alive right now. One croak from it would be all it took to kill me! Captain Li, that lifeform's really quite frightening—you aren't thinking of hunting it down, are you? Don't, it's simply too dangerous!"

Sensing Li Hong's interest, Fang Yi tried to dissuade him from the idea, but Li Hong wasn't to be swayed so easily. He immediately gave Fang Yi a condescending look. "If you want to run, run! Your team isn't like mine, after all."

Fang Yi barely masked the derision from his face. However, he was smart enough not to get into a direct confrontation. As Li Hong suggested, he hurried off with his team.

The moment they were out of sight, Fang Yi immediately had Sun Xiaowu report what had happened to Sun Mengmeng via conch shell, while he would rush back to her, taking a detour around Li Hong's team, to provide reinforcements.

At the edge of the trap, after attacking the dreadtoad inside dozens of times without sensing a response, Zhang Lie was about to head into the hole and take the dreadtoad's life when a conch shell by Sun Mengmeng's waist began to vibrate.

Sun Xiaowu's hesitant voice explained to Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng what was going on.

Sun Mengmeng's face filled with shock. "Captain, what will we do? Li Hong's coming!"

Zhang Lie frowned, then relaxed. "Let him come. If he wants to die, so be it! Tell Sun Xiaowu and the others to try to stall them or hold them back. We'll hurry and kill the dreadtoad before Li Hong gets here, and head back to help them immediately afterwards. Launch another attack into the hole. I'm getting ready to jump in."

Sun Mengmeng looked at Zhang Lie in disbelief. "Captain, what do you mean? Are you going to go against the Li clan? The Li clan's one of the six most influential clans in the settlement! If we get on their bad side..."

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. "In that case, what do you propose? Handing them this dreadtoad just like that? If you think it's dangerous, you can have your team retreat, and you can also retreat.

In that case, nothing that happens here will be of any concern to you."

Sun Mengmeng stilled at the ultimatum. Honestly, her behavior wasn't unexpected. Zhang Lie might have seemed like a top hunter, but he was just one person, whereas the Li clan was a massive player in the Blacksteel settlement that no ordinary hunter would be able to go against.

If they were to start a conflict with members of the Li clan now, they would likely face a thorny road ahead in the Blacksteel settlement. However, they also didn't want to give up this rare opportunity to obtain superior gene fragments. If they didn't seize this opportunity now, who knew when they would ever be able to obtain superior gene fragments?

After all, under usual circumstances, they wouldn't even be able to face a superior-grade lifeform in a direct confrontation before maxing out their mutated gene capacity.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I have to think about my entire team's future." Sun Mengmeng regretted her decision almost instantly, but she had to do what was right. A rash decision on her part could irrevocably affect her team members' lives.

In the end, she chose to give up on the opportunity.

Zhang Lie smiled. "If you don't take this opportunity now, when will you ever take such an opportunity? If you choose to retreat, to cower, to back down just because it's a risk, you'll never become a top-tier hunter. Your two teams stand a fighting chance against Li Hong's team, and I'll be around to handle him myself. I'm asking you once more: are you certain you want to back down?"

Sun Mengmeng seemed even more conflicted. After a moment of desperate wrangling with herself, she called out seriously, "Captain! Let me ask you a question myself. If we offend the Li clan going forward, will you continue working with us?"

Zhang Lie began to laugh. "This is my prey, and I won't let anyone steal it from me! I won't give it up even to Li Jin, let alone Li Hong! Furthermore, who's to say that Li Hong will make it back to the Blacksteel settlement to report this feud to the clan?"

"You—you can't be thinking of killing..." Sun Mengmeng gaped in shock. After an agonizing few seconds of thought, she finally made up her mind. "I'll trust you this once! Xiaowu, Fang Yi, try to delay Li Hong's team. We're almost done here!"

Chapter 42: Let Matters Rest

After confirming that the dreadtoad had been completely paralyzed, Zhang Lie leapt into the hole after activating his stealth, then killed the dreadtoad with a clean strike through its head.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade dreadtoad, but did not obtain a soulshard. By consuming the flesh of the dreadtoad, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

As the will of the world spoke into their minds, every member of the team that had participated in the kill sighed in relief.

Sun Mengmeng asked expectantly from the top of the hole, "How did it go, Captain? Did it produce a soulshard?"

Superior-grade soulshards were a particularly rare and precious commodity within the dimensional world, especially those that were particularly useful. Even though Zhang Lie had stated clearly that none of them would get the soulshard if one were to condense, Sun Mengmeng was still very excited at the possibility of one.

Zhang Lie shook his head in annoyance. "No, it didn't!"

Zhang Lie wasn't acting this time. In an attempt to condense a dreadtoad soulshard, he had secretly smashed up two regular-grade potbellied-toad soulshards, and even then nothing had emerged.

Sun Mengmeng's face fell. "That's a shame. But soulshards were always rare to begin with, so there's nothing we can do about it. Won't you hurry out of the hole? Xiaowu and the others can't hold them off much longer!"

By the time Zhang Lie leapt out of the hole, there were already quite a few people behind Sun Mengmeng.

As he glanced toward Zhang Lie, Li Hong, with five of his subordinates gathered around him, smiled superciliously at him. "What good timing! You, in the silver armor! Hand over the spoils, and I won't kill you!"

When Fang Yi's team came by again to hold him back, Li Hong began to suspect that something was amiss. He split his team up into two, then rushed toward where he had last heard the dreadtoad's cries.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Captain Li, the dreadtoad's dead, and it didn't condense a soulshard. Even if you were to obtain its flesh, you won't be able to get any superior gene fragments from it, would you? How about doing me a favor and leaving, so none of us have to go through any trouble?"

Zhang Lie glanced at Sun Mengmeng, motioning for her to get ready for battle.

"A favor? Who do you think you are, to deserve a favor from m—"

"Attack!" Of course, Zhang Lie didn't expect an arrogant, condescending hunter like Li Hong to let things lie. The only reason he had said what he did was to give Sun Mengmeng some time to prepare.

The moment Li Hong responded, Zhang Lie brusquely broke him off. Genetic energy exploded from his body as he activated [Rippling Walk], tracing out a dragon's form as he dashed forward. In his hand, Venombane glowed violet, like the tooth of that dragon.

His blade headed straight for Li Hong's throat.

Li Hong certainly hadn't anticipated that the other party would attack him immediately, even when he was surrounded by his team. These were the blackwater sands, right by the Blacksteel settlement and under its control! What hunter would dare to strike at him here?!

Before he could react, Zhang Lie's blow was right in front of his face. His speed made Li Hong realize that his opponent had no fewer superior gene fragments than he did, and likely even had more. Reacting almost by instinct, he raised his spear to block the blow.

However, the moment he did so, Zhang Lie changed his stab into a slice, tracing out a violet arc against his right arm. Venombane was a weapon that had come from a superior-grade soulshard, and was even rarer than a weapon forged from materials that came from a superior-grade lifeform. How could Li Hong's armor block a blow from this sword?

Their initial confrontation left Li Hong injured with a shallow cut. Luckily, he had about a dozen superior gene fragments, and was able to react almost as the shortsword split his skin a[art. He leapt away, preventing Zhang Lie from taking advantage of his momentary opening.

"Kill them!" Li Hong shouted, his eyes red with bloodthirst, pale-blue genetic energy emanating from his body.

The moment Li Hong's team prepared to fight, a firebird swooped down toward them, an attack from Sun Mengmeng. The explosion from the firebird was blocked by a rainbow of genetic energy: Li Hong's team was strong even by the standards of the blackwater sands, and it was able to handle even this sudden attack.

As smoke and dust billowed through the air, Zhang Lie vanished from sight. Amidst the dust, a violet light sparkled. At the back of Li Hong's team, a young hunter who was about to throw a spear had his neck pierced clean through. Even to his death, he had no idea from which direction the shortsword had appeared.

"Be careful! That fellow has some unusually advanced stealth technique! Zhang Chao, toss flash powder into the air!" The team had certainly noticed their long-ranged attacker dying, and Li Hong forced himself to ignore the corrosive poison in his wound as he commanded the rest of his team.

Li Hong hadn't expected that his opponent's blade would have been smeared with poison. He retreated and drank two whole bottles of antidote, to no avail.

He had initially thought that his opponent's blade had only left a scratch on his arm, but it was far worse than that. The poison on the blade was so strong that he had to devote most of his genetic energy to prevent it from spreading throughout his body.

A cloud of white powder was tossed into the air, but Zhang Lie had come prepared for that. Water saturated the air around him, turning it to fog, as he dashed out of the powder's range.

At the same time, the other half of Li Hong's team, which had been stalled by Fang Yi and the others, finally arrived at the scene. Of course, as they rejoined Li Hong, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, and the others headed to Zhang Lie's side.

The two sides faced off again, their weapons raised, but Li Hong appeared to be far more serious than before. Given Zhang Lie's attitude and strength, he knew that he wasn't going to benefit from today's confrontation.

The most pressing issue was that silver-armored hunter's strength, his unpredictable movement speed, undetectable stealth, and frightening poison. Perhaps he would be able to defend against him if he hadn't been wounded, but now that he had been poisoned, he could well suffer grievous injuries if the fight were to continue.

He shot a piercing glance toward Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng, then turned toward Zhang Lie. "I was too rash. Will you accept my apology and let matters rest?"

Li Hong, admitting defeat? Fang Yi could barely hide his look of shock and amazement. Li Hong had always been an arrogant asshole to everyone around, so when had he become so... nice?

Could he have misheard? He glanced at the stupefied faces all around him. No, that couldn't be the case.

Sun Mengmeng was the only one who understood what was going on. After all, she had been scrutinizing Zhang Lie very closely during the fight.

It was from then on that she decided to become one of his followers.

Chapter 43: Li Hong Succumbs

The gathered hunters all turned to Zhang Lie, because what he said next would determine the outcome of this confrontation. From Li Hong's subordinates' standpoint, they were certainly hoping that Zhang Lie would accept Li Hong's offer, because their teammate's death had been so sudden and unexpected.

If Zhang Lie were to attack any of them, they would likely perish in the same manner. Who knew whom Zhang Lie would target next? They only had one life, after all, and if they could avoid dying just by losing some face, well, that didn't seem like too bad an offer.

Li Hong only picked on those teams that were weaker than his, anyway. They could just retaliate against this team of hunters when they had an even larger force with them.

Of course, just because they thought this way didn't mean that Zhang Lie and the others would agree. They had all been hunters for quite some time now, and Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng in particular knew full well that if they were to let matters lie now, they would surely suffer intense retaliation from Li Hong and the Li clan in the future.

Zhang Lie would likely be fine because he was strong, but what about the rest of them?

Given the tense atmosphere, however, neither of them dared to step forward and ask Zhang Lie to continue the fight. They didn't realize how strong Zhang Lie's poison was, or how weak Li Hong had become.

"Captain!" the two of them shouted out, hopeful that he wouldn't succumb to the pressure and would instead deal with this problem once and for all.

Zhang Lie glanced back at Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng, both clearly wanting to say more but barely restraining themselves, and gave them a knowing glance.

"Heh, you want a ceasefire? Don't you think you should act more politely, then? Or are you unaware of the fact that your remaining life can be measured in seconds?"

Li Hong was clearly unable to accept Zhang Lie's response. "What? What do you mean, measured in seconds? I'm a hunter from the Li clan, and if you dare—"

"If I were scared of your clan, I wouldn't have poisoned you, don't you think? If you're smart, you'd hand over all your soulshards now, and I might spare you on account of Li Jin."

Li Hong was quite used to getting whatever he wanted whenever he revealed his identity, but he hadn't expected that the other party would break him off and even bring up his brother. The other hunter's tone of speech made it seem as though even Li Hong's brother would have to defer to him.

"You know my brother? Who exactly are you?!" Li Hong could hardly have imagined that the result of a thin scratch on his arm could be so serious. Based on the hunter's words, his life would rapidly drain away if he didn't do anything about it.

"Aren't you talkative? Either hand over your soulshards or rot away into nothingness, the choice is yours." Zhang Lie was tired of talking to him.

The poison in his arm seemed to be turning more and more corrosive: despite concentrating all his genetic energy to block it, not only was his genetic energy draining faster, the poison was also starting to spread. Given the situation, Li Hong knew that he wasn't going to get away unscathed.

A long period of terrorizing the weaker hunters in the region had left him unprepared to deal with a real threat. How naive he was to think that he could call for a ceasefire when his life was already in the other hunter's hands!

Li Hong glanced at his subordinates, not wanting to lose face in front of them. "Are you certain you want to make enemies of the Li clan? If I were to lose an arm, are you certain you'd be able to handle the Li clan's wrath?"

Li Hong chose to struggle to the very end, and his subordinates, upon hearing his words, quickly began to charge up genetic energy. Of course, as they did so, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng did the same on the other side.

"Kill them all!" Zhang Lie commanded, darting forward to strike the first blow.

Li Hong saw a violet arc flash by his eyes, and an unexpectedly familiar arm flying into the air.

"Ah—Ahhh!" That was his right arm! Li Hong screamed as blood poured out of his stump, stumbling to the ground in a fit of weakness. He had lost all ability to fight.

If Li Hong had decisively cut off his arm the moment he was inflicted with the poison, he might have been able to defend himself for a while longer, but by this point, the poison had already begun to spread through his bloodstream. It wouldn't corrode his body just yet, but his body would soon be paralyzed. The blood from his stump was a ghastly purple, indicating that the poison had spread even further.

Zhang Lie ignored him entirely.

He activated [Rippling Walk]. With his left palm, he stacked the effects of [Three-Wave Crescendo] and [Fists of the Silent Sea]; with his right hand, he charged up [The Boundless Blade]. He struck the remainder of Li Hong's team with the unassailable might of the ocean.

Four hunters fell in the blink of an eye.

The other hunters on Zhang Lie's side also began to fight. Fang Yi was a water-attuned hunter, and his eyes were gleaming as he saw Zhang Lie in action. Clearly, he hadn't expected that water-attuned techniques could be so devastating.

As he struck at his own opponent, Fang Yi swore to himself that he'd latch onto Zhang Lie. With his team's current resources, meeting Zhang Lie was undoubtedly a rare opportunity. He would be a fool not to take advantage.

To his left, Sun Mengmeng's [Flamewing Shot] swallowed up a hunter opposite her.

Their leaders' performance boosted the other hunters' morale, and Sun Xiaowu and the others each found a target for themselves.

In what seemed like an instant, Li Hong's team of ten hunters was reduced to three, and Li Hong himself slumped feebly to the ground.

"Spare me! I surrender!"

"That's right, we'll hand over all our soulshards!"

Before he could say anything, his last two subordinates were lying prostrate on the ground, begging for mercy. They removed all the soulshards they had in their soulspace and offered it to Zhang Lie with cupped hands.

Zhang Lie motioned for his group of hunters to cease attacking.

The soulshards that Li Hong's subordinates were offering up were relatively ordinary, and Zhang Lie had no interest in any of them. But even though he didn't want any, the rest of his group certainly did. Dozens of soulshards, all theirs in one fell swoop!

Li Hong knew now that he had no choice but to surrender. He had completely and utterly lost! "Alright, I admit defeat! I'll hand over my soulshards!"

Dozens of glowing, colorful soulshards were heaped into a pile in front of the gathered hunters' eyes, blinding Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng with their brilliance. Given their relative poverty, they hadn't ever dreamt that one hunter could possess so many soulshards.

Chapter 44: Splitting the Loot

Most importantly, of these dozens of soulshards, none were of inferior quality. In fact, all of them were mutated-grade soulshards. Among these, Zhang Lie even found the soulshard of a mutated-grade blood ant.

"Thanks for the loot. Hope you enjoy the Underworld!" With a thrust of Zhang Lie's sword, Li Hong's head sank to the ground in disbelief. He hadn't expected that, even after he handed over his soulshards, Zhang Lie would still kill him.

However, a dead man's thoughts were of no consequence.

Upon seeing Li Hong's death, his two subordinates, who had prostrated themselves on the ground, immediately got up and tried to flee. Unfortunately for them, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had snuck up behind them even before Zhang Lie killed Li Hong. If even Li Hong had died, then surely they wouldn't be allowed to live.

Thus ended this one-sided slaughter.

In the end, all the hunters in Li Hong's team perished, whereas a few of Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's teammates were injured. Luckily, the injuries were minor and could be readily treated.

In truth, except for the wildcard called Zhang Lie, the two teams' strength was comparable. In fact, Li Hong's side had more hunters. The reason they had suffered such overwhelming defeat was because Li Hong had been overconfident, and because Zhang Lie was simply that strong after surpassing the usual gene capacity multiple times.

He scooped up all the soulshards and smiled. "Haha, this was a good haul! Clean up the scene, and then we'll divide up the loot back in the settlement."

Everyone started moving. Conveniently, they had a large hole already dug up for the ten corpses of Li Hong's team, and all they had to do was throw them inside and bury them.

Back in the Blacksteel settlement, in a VIP suite in the Blackgold Inn, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Li Feng, Sun Xiaowu, and Zhou Ying all looked at the unmasked Zhang Lie with varying levels of incredulity.

Who would have expected that the mysterious hunter behind the silver armor would be the hunter who had been at the bottom of the gene leaderboard for so many months, Zhang Lie?

They had even heard other hunters discussing rumors about him, but now...

The hunter who had shocked them all with his prowess, and the hunter in front of them now... reconciling the two hunters in their mind was a difficult affair.

After all, it was Zhang Lie who had killed Li Hong in a one-sided fight.

Had this world gone crazy? How could Zhang Lie be so strong?

Then, they began to think about another affair in which Zhang Lie had been implicated, that one fateful night in the venombane glade. The Qin, Wang, and Zhou families had all suffered great losses in the aftermath, especially the Wang and Qin families, who had lost almost half their wealth just from that one incident alone.

The gathered hunters shivered upon feeling Zhang Lie's glance on them.

"What, do I look that frightening?" Zhang Lie smiled amiably, but none of them were at all relieved. This innocent-looking hunter was a living devil!

"Captain, now that you've revealed your identity to us, aren't you afraid that we'll spread—"

"Spread what? That I'm actually a very strong hunter, that I was the mastermind behind the scheme that brought the Wang and Qin families low? Or that you helped me kill Li Hong and his team? Do you think anyone would believe what you said, given my reputation in the Blacksteel settlement?"

Fang Yi gaped at Zhang Lie speechlessly. Zhang Lie was right: even if he were to tell others the truth, it seemed so outlandish that no one would believe him. After all, he had witnessed the entire fight for himself, and still he had trouble believing what he had seen.

"No one would believe what you said—honestly, even if I were the one who said it, no one would believe it either. Furthermore, the fact that I'm willing to reveal my identity to all of you means that I'm prepared for whatever happens next.

"After all, those two clans do know about me, and yet I'm still here, hale and hearty! Alright, all that was in the past, and it's unrelated to any of you. Don't try to stick your nose in. Now, shall we split up the soulshards?"

Zhang Lie was quite interested in Fang Yi, so even though Fang Yi's question was rather inane, he still patiently explained himself.

Then, he patted his potbellied-toad pouch and dumped a few dozen soulshards on the table. The gathered hunters glanced at each other in surprise. They knew quite well just how little they'd contributed to the fight, and they clearly hadn't expected that Zhang Lie would still be willing to split the spoils with them.

"Captain, thank you for your sincerity, but we can't take any of this from you. Honestly, if not for you, we wouldn't have managed to hunt anything at all today! Just a bit of the dreadtoad flesh is more than sufficient."

Zhang Lie raised an eyebrow. "Being too polite isn't a good thing, you know." He picked out the mutated-grade blood-ant soulshard from the pile, then announced, "For everyone's performance today, you'll each get two soulshads. Take your pick!"

The hunters glanced at each other, waiting for someone to take the first move.

It took only ten seconds before a hunter stood up.

"In that case, I'll go first!" Sun Mengmeng was the first to choose, and she picked out two rather compatible mutated-grade fire-attuned soulshards for herself.

With a broad smile on her face, she turned to Zhang Lie. "Zhang Lie, thank you for treating us with respect. I, Sun Mengmeng, will repay you with my loyalty. If you'll have me, from today onwards, I intend to be your follower, your most reliable subordinate."

She had made this decision quite some time ago, and Zhang Lie's actions now reaffirmed her choice.

Soon, the other hunters all picked out their soulshards and expressed their intention to follow Zhang Lie. However, the last hunter left, Fang Yi, seemed to be hesitant.

Chapter 45: A Fledgling Team

There appeared to be something on Fang Yi's mind keeping him from declaring his intent to follow Zhang Lie even when the other hunters had done so.

Zhang Lie hadn't anticipated such a situation. He had been as sincere as he could, and it had won him the hearts of all gathered here, all but Fang Yi.

Fang Yi himself was reflecting over the events of the day. From his perspective, he kept feeling as though Zhang Lie was far too friendly than he had any right to be.

His and Sun Mengmeng's teams' strength was incomparable to Zhang Lie, but Zhang Lie had not only allowed them to participate in hunting a superior-grade lifeform, but also incited them to kill Li Hong's team with him.

Not only that, he had been willing to share some of his spoils with them. Perhaps it could have been explained if they had long since known each other, but they hadn't been anything but strangers before this fateful day!

"Captain, please don't blame me for being cautious, but I don't understand why you're doing all this. Isn't it the first time we've met each other?"

Zhang Lie finally understood what was going through his mind. After all, who else had any idea how much Zhang Lie owed to Fang Yi? If he were in Fang Yi's position, he would likely have thought the same way.

Zhang Lie turned to him and spoke seriously, "Don't worry about it. I do have a few reasons for favoring you, but everyone else was simply at the right place at the right time. I've been thinking of building up a team, and I need two helpers to do so. Since I encountered your two groups out in the sands, I decided to test you to see if you would be a suitable fit.

"I don't intend on forcing you to do anything at all. If you don't want to work with me, you're welcome to leave after we divide up the spoils. There aren't any eyewitnesses to the Li team's murder, and unless you incriminate yourself, you should be safe from any retaliation."

Whether or not Fang Yi stayed would be up to himself. If he were to leave, the only one who would lose out was him: Zhang Lie didn't much mind either way.

"You don't have to say anything else, Captain! I'm willing to follow you!" Fang Yi's eventual choice didn't disappoint Zhang Lie. And since he had made up his mind, he quickly pocketed two soulshards from the pile left on the table.

"Alright. Since all of you here have decided to work with me, let me make myself clear: as long as you're all loyal to me, I'll share whatever I have with you. Believe me: you'll all be grateful for the choice you made today!"

This was Zhang Lie's anticipated outcome, and he was naturally welcoming of the new additions to his team.

After Fang Yi finished selecting his soulshards, Zhang Lie kept the remainder, then took out the dreadtoad carcass from within his pouch.

"Are there any good cooks among you? Can you prepare this for consumption?"

Sun Mengmeng and Zhou Ying stepped forward. Cooking was a strength of theirs, and they were eager to demonstrate their abilities in front of their new captain.

As they dragged the carcass toward the kitchen, Zhang Lie reminded them from behind, "Be careful with its vocal pouches and tongue—those will fetch quite a few points!"

"Got it, Captain!"

Everyone was eagerly anticipating the superior gene fragments they would soon obtain.

"Captain, let me help too!" Sun Xiaowu was so impatient that he couldn't help running into the kitchen to help his sister.

Only Fang Yi, Li Feng, and Yang Ze were left in the room.

Zhang Lie knew quite a bit of Fang Yi, of course. He turned to Li Feng and Yang Ze, trying to learn more about them.

Yang Ze was from the Yang clan, whose stronghold was in the city of Sacred Fire on Mars. Though the Yang clan was reasonably prosperous, as a bastard, he was more or less unaffiliated with them.

The Yang clan had no power in the Blacksteel settlement, and it was almost as though Yang Ze had been sent into exile. According to him, it was unlikely that the clan would care at all even if he were to perish here.

Luckily, his mother had brought him up well, though he seemed to express a tendency toward depression and self-loathing.

Zhang Lie made a note of this, giving him a few words of encouragement and promising to help him develop into a hunter his clan would focus its attention on.

Last was Li Feng from Sichuan, who was far more ordinary. He came from an average family, was hardworking and honest, and had entered the dimensional world at eighteen in accordance with the draft.

After a quick conversation, Yang Ze turned toward the television, whereas Li Feng went around inspecting the suite.

Even the cheapest room in the Blackgold Inn cost at least a thousand points per day—ten thousand dollars in real life!—and he had never entered such a luxurious place either on Earth or the dimensional world.

With everyone else distracted, only Zhang Lie and Fang Yi were left on the couch.

"Captain, can I ask you something?" Fang Yi turned to him curiously.

Zhang Lie nodded as he ordered a few side dishes to be sent to the suite.

"As far as I know, Li Hong has around twenty superior gene fragments, and you seem to have a comparable amount. And with regard to martial skill, while your techniques are impressive, your framework doesn't seem particularly high-quality. Why was the fight so one-sided?"

This was a question that he'd wondered since he witnessed the fight. From his perspective, Zhang Lie was Li Hong's equal in terms of both genes and techniques. However, Fang Yi had the impression that Zhang Lie hadn't even used his full strength in the lopsided fight against Li Hong.

He had dominated in terms of strength, speed, and energy. With one simple, shallow cut, he had grasped Li Hong's life in his hands.

Zhang Lie smiled. "I'm older than he is, of course. Older and more experienced, so naturally I would have the advantage. As to your question about how I'm so much stronger than Li Hong even though we have comparable stats... all I'll say about that for now is that I have limit fragments. I'll tell all of you about limit fragments eventually, so don't guess or ask me about them now. What happens beyond that will depend on each of your choices."

Zhang Lie's words made Fang Yi even more curious, but he obediently pressed his lips together and said nothing else.

Regular genes, mutated genes, superior genes, and then supposedly pinnacle genes, but what were these limit gene fragments that Zhang Lie had mentioned?

He was able to repress his curiosity, but Yang Ze, still fiddling with the television by his side, immediately scooted over when he heard the discussion.

"Captain, I heard your words too! What are these limit fragments? Are they beyond pinnacle grade?"

Chapter 46: Forming the Team

Naturally, Zhang Lie wasn't about to answer this question, at least not before he had finished planning out his team. At this point, telling them about the possibility of a framework breakthrough wasn't necessarily a good thing.

Before Yang Ze could respond, Sun Mengmeng, Sun Xiaowu, and Zhou Ying had finished their preparations and were calling everyone over to eat.

The hunters' eagerness meant that the table was set up in no time.

The dreadtoad carcass had been so large that, even after discarding the parts that couldn't be or were too valuable to be consumed, there were enough dishes to fill the entire table. Sun Mengmeng and Zhou Ying seemed to be well-versed in a dazzling variety of cooking techniques. They had made a dozen dishes from the toad meat, each a delicacy.

However, Zhang Lie still wasn't satisfied, and had supplemented this banquet with a few additional dishes from the inn itself. According to him, toad meat alone would be too monotonous. He had also ordered two flasks of wine.

The trademark liquor of the Blackgold Inn was Inferno, so named for its potency. Even a hunter who boasted superior gene fragments could only consume a flask or two at most. Two flasks would be more than sufficient for the six hunters gathered here.

Fang Yi set a cup of wine by everyone's plate in a fluid, practiced motion.

"Captain, no matter your reason, I, Fang Yi, will be forever grateful that you've given me such an opportunity! You've sped up our growth by at least a few months, and I dedicate this toast to you!" He drained the cup in one fell swoop.

"Captain, we dedicate this toast to you!" With Fang Yi taking the lead, the rest of the gathered hunters quickly followed suit.

"Alright, we're all comrades now, aren't we? There's no need for such pleasantries. I'll accept your toast!" Zhang Lie downed his cup of wine as well. "Now let's dig into this superior-grade feast!"

Zhang Lie motioned for everyone to get started.

All the hunters dug in with gusto, all pleasantries forgotten. As Zhang Lie said, what lay in front of them was a feast of superior gene fragments, and they would be foolish to miss out now.

"Slow down, Xiaowu!"

"Hey, Yang Ze, what're you doing? That's my piece of meat!"

"What? It's clearly mine!"

Cheerful bickering filled the room.

Yang Ze and Sun Xiaowu had fought over a small piece of toad meat so furiously that their faces had gone red, causing Zhang Lie to smile at their antics. They were originally from two different teams, and it seemed as though they were already starting to learn to get along.

Of course, he was busily eating himself: he only had nineteen superior gene fragments at this point, after all.

After their first cup of wine, none of the hunters refilled their cup. They were all focused on eating the food laid out in front of them. As they ate, the will of the world announced in their mind:

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade dreadtoad, you received one superior gene fragment.
Current total: 20]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade dreadtoad, you received one superior gene fragment.
Current total: 21]

[...total: 25]

The six hunters had devoured the food in front of them within a quarter of an hour, not sparing even the dregs.

Zhang Lie had obtained a total of six superior gene fragments. The other hunters had gotten more or less the same number. The unluckiest received only five, whereas Sun Mengmeng received seven, essentially the upper limit when the meat was divided among so many people.

It was likely that her body naturally possessed a stronger affinity to the dreadtoad than the rest of theirs.

When they finished the meal and noticed the changes to their constitution, they were all throwing admiring glances at Zhang Lie. After all, if not for him, none of them would have been able to get any superior gene fragments so early on.

Hunting for gene fragments sounded like a grand affair, but even the slightest mistake, indecision, or inattention could lead to death. Under usual circumstances, hunters much preferred to hunt safer, low-grade lifeforms. Strength wouldn't matter to them if they were dead, after all.

The hunters began toasting Zhang Lie again as the mood in the suite rose to a crescendo.

"Captain, doesn't our team need a name? How about my old team's name, Typhoon?" Fang Yi, tipsy and slightly drunk, made a suggestion.

Before Zhang Lie could respond, however, Sun Mengmeng flapped her hands at him. "Nonsense! It's a new team, so we need a new name! Captain, come up with one!"

The other hunters clearly agreed with Sun Mengmeng.

Zhang Lie had actually been considering this question. "What do you think about calling our team Zenith?"

"Zenith?"

"Team Zenith!"

"Captain, tell us the truth! Does this have anything to do with the limit fragments you were talking about earlier?"

"Limit fragments? Are you drunk, Yang Ze? I've never heard of such a thing!"

Except for him and Fang Yi, no one else knew anything about these mysterious limit fragments. However, Yang Ze didn't back down. He stared at Zhang Lie, waiting patiently for a response. Fang Yi did the same.

Upon noticing how serious he and Yang Ze were, Zhang Lie nodded. "That's right. The reason I've chosen the name Zenith naturally has something to do with these so-called limit fragments. Furthermore, as long as you're all willing, you'll be able to get your own limit fragments soon!"

Fang Yi and Yang Ze both brightened at the news, whereas the other hunters just looked at Zhang Lie in stupefaction.

"Captain, what limit fragments? I haven't heard anything about them!" Sun Mengmeng cried out.

Zhang Lie smiled mysteriously. "This is still top secret for now, and all I can tell you is that these limit fragments will elevate you above all other hunters."

Even Fang Yi and Yang Ze hadn't expected that these limit fragments would be such a big deal.

Although they had only known Zhang Lie for a short period of time, he had never claimed something he couldn't accomplish. To be elevated above all other hunters... was such a thing even possible?

They initially expected that this "limit fragment" business was just a little trick that their captain knew about, but it seemed as though this was top-secret information! Furthermore, Zhang Lie didn't seem unwilling to tell them about it—it just wasn't the right time yet.

Zhang Lie smiled as he saw everyone's curiosity piqued. "Would you all like to know how to obtain these limit fragments?"

The hunters all nodded their heads fervently, like little chicks pecking at grain.

Chapter 47: First Mission

Upon seeing the hunters' eager faces, Zhang Lie smiled. "Simple: just stay in my team for two months and let me observe your loyalty and latent talent. If I find you suitable, you'll meet me in the city of Ning and formally join Team Zenith. Then, I'll teach you how to exceed your own limits and obtain limit fragments."

The hunters gaped at him in disbelief. They had expected that they would need to undergo all sorts of trials and tribulations to obtain such a secret, but was Zhang Lie going to give it away so easily?

"Captain, are you sure you're not just drunk?" This time, even Sun Mengmeng didn't dare believe that Zhang Lie was serious. After all, considering the magnitude of the secret, Zhang Lie's selection process was almost like a joke.

"I haven't been with you guys for a long time, but when have I ever lied to you?" Zhang Lie grinned, no sign of drunkenness apparent on his face.

"You mean it?"

"Of course I mean it!"

Zhang Lie hadn't given them any reason to doubt him, and the hunters forced themselves to accept this reality.

"Captain, we've all heard you make this promise, so you'd better not renege on it in the future!" Fang Yi exclaimed.

The gathered hunters all made up their minds to give a good showing in the hunts to come, so as to gain Zhang Lie's favor.

Zhang Lie raised a cup in toast. "In that case, I'll wish you all luck in passing my inspection."

"Of course!"

Clink! They each downed another cup of fiery liquor.

Because the toad meat was all finished, the hunters could now consume the rest of the feast in moderation, chatting and laughing as they did so. During the feast, Zhang Lie had learned a little about all six of them.

Sun Mengmeng, from a middle-class family in the capital; cute and passionate, but surprisingly logical in decision-making.

Sun Xiaowu, from the capital; Sun Mengmeng's cousin; resilient and diligent, with a keen eye; a fanatic for genetic techniques.

Zhou Ying, from a middle-class family in the south; attentive but taciturn, with a fair appearance.

Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Li Feng, Sun Xiaowu, and Zhou Ying had all left a rather good impression on Zhang Lie after the feast. Once all the food was consumed, Zhang Lie gave them their first mission.

"Since you're all eager to get to work, I have a task for each of you. The Void Cup's about to begin, and there's a very important prize for me this time around. As a result, I intend on personally participating in the Void Cup. In the next three months, I'll have to try to fill up my superior gene fragments to capacity. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

The hunters nodded earnestly.

"The Void Cup! It's something hunters like us can only dream about, but if it's you, Captain, I'm sure you'll do well. Don't worry. Within these two months, we'll try to scout as many superior-grade lifeforms as we can. Focus on cultivating and mastering your genetic techniques, and leave the rest to us." Fang Yi spoke for the rest of the team.

Sun Mengmeng and the others indicated that they would do their best to support Zhang Lie

Zhang Lie smiled. "What do you mean, something you can only dream about? I'm not the only one who will enter. I need quite a lot of resources, so all of you have to enter as well, and you have to aim as high up in the ranking as you can."

...they would be participating as well?

In the past, even the weakest competitor who had participated in the Void Cup had at least eighty superior gene fragments, and they had mastered at least three high-grade techniques.

And Zhang Lie was even expecting them to place high in the ranking too! What could they accomplish? They weren't even at the mutated gene capacity yet!

Perhaps it would be somewhat easier to deal with mutated-grade lifeforms now that they had a few superior gene fragments and useful mutated-grade soulshards, but they still needed some time, didn't they? And what about their genetic techniques? Of them all, only Yang Ze even had a pinnacle-grade technique.

Wouldn't they just get weeded out in the first round of the competition?

"Captain—"

"Don't worry. I don't intend for any of you to be sandbags, and I promise I'll train each of you well before the competition. Furthermore, even if you do end up as sandbags, surely you see that entering the Void Cup at all would be a great boon to your future.

"After all, while you'll be in direct combat against other hunters, your lives will certainly be protected during the competition. Is this a safeguard that you'd have out in the wilderness of the dimensional world?" Zhang Lie broke Sun Mengmeng off, anticipating her comment.

Sun Mengmeng thought for a moment, then nodded firmly. "Yes, Captain!"

The other hunters glanced at Zhang Lie, looking forward to training under him. Ever since their first meeting, Zhang Lie had given off the impression of being a truly strong and mysterious hunter, one that they would give anything to learn from.

"I've recorded here some known locations for a few superior-grade lifeforms, as well as a few remarks on their behavior and habits. Over the next few weeks, scout them out and figure out a plan for hunting them down. We'll begin in six weeks."

Zhang Lie retrieved a booklet from the potbellied-toad pouch and laid it on the table.

Fang Yi picked it up and flipped through it, only to find specifics for forty to fifty superior-grade lifeforms listed in agonizing detail. Most of them were creatures that Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng hadn't ever heard of, let alone seen.

Zhang Lie seemed even more mysterious than ever.

He left them no further explanation. After handing them the booklet, Team Zenith's first feast came to an end. Subsequently, Zhang Lie handed Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng fifty thousand points for their scouting, got their contact information, and dismissed them.

They hadn't had much to drink, and although a few of the hunters were tipsy, none were drunk.

Zhang Lie prized a clear head over anything else, and while he'd tasted all sorts of excellent wine in his past life and present, it had never been to the point of drunkenness. After all, it seemed far more comfortable to drink in moderation than in excess.

Once the other hunters had left, he headed out of his suite, dressed entirely in black again, and began to wander around the Blacksteel settlement. By this point, news of Li Hong and his team's disappearance had likely spread to the Li clan, and they were surely going to make a move.

Zhang Lie had just ambled over to the settlement gates when he saw Li Jin rush out of the settlement with a large number of hunters. At the same time, the usual crowd gathered by the gates started to gossip.

Chapter 48: A Mischievous Girl

"What's going on with the Li clan?"

"You haven't heard the gossip yet?!"

"Gossip? What gossip?"

"You really don't know? Someone killed Li Hong!"

"What Li Hong? The one who's in the blackwater sands all day?"

"Yes, him! Apparently, his entire team was wiped out by some rival team of hunters!"

"Really? That's excellent news! Who did it?"

"If I knew, would I still be here?"

"Haha, what a godsend!"

"Isn't that so? How many teams did Li Hong bully into submission in that area, hundreds? He deserved to die!"

"This has to be the best piece of news I've heard all day!"

"It looks like we won't have to be as wary of heading to the blackwater sands now, do we?"

"Aren't you all naive? Yes, Li Hong's gone, but soon you'll see a Zhang Hong, or Wang Hong, or Liu Hong pop up! Now that the area's not under Li Hong's control, some other tyrant will quickly take over. Just you watch!"

"You're not wrong, but surely after Li Hong's death they'll be more wary and less tyrannical, won't they?"

"That's right! Those hunters from large clans fear death much more than us nameless hunters. Now that Li Hong's dead, they'll surely go easier on us, but as for the hunter who killed him..."

"The Li clan just announced that they're going to review all the hunters who were at the blackwater sands today—they're willing to kill innocent suspects just to get at the true culprit!"

"Heh, are they? I'm staying right here in the settlement: they can try to kill me if they want."

"I'm sure there's no need to worry: who doesn't know what the Li clan is like? If that hunter was daring enough to kill Li Hong, I'm sure they would have a plan for evading capture."

"That's true, isn't it?"

The gathered hunters were far more sympathetic to Li Hong's killer than Li Hong himself. After all, the Li clan—and Li Hong in particular—was widely vilified within the settlement for being too arrogant and domineering.

Zhang Lie hadn't heard any rumors about him or Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's teams, so he whistled as he walked away. They'd cleaned up the scene of the murder well enough that there were hardly any traces left behind.

Li Jin might not even be able to find where they'd buried the corpse, and even if he did, nothing would link that corpse to them. It had been too long since Li Hong had died, after all.

And Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng would hardly be suspects: teams like theirs were far too weak to pose any sort of threat to Li Hong.

However, just as Zhang Lie was turning to leave, a small hand tapped his shoulder.

"I smelled you from quite a distance away. What are you doing skulking around here?" Zhang Lie turned to see Chu Xun, from the Chu clan.

What was she doing here? "Girl, aren't you being a little too familiar? You'd better not push it, or I'll tell your brother to beat you up!"

"My brother, beat me up? If he touches me, my grandfather will certainly skin him! There's no one around who would dare beat me up!"

She was, in all certainty, a spoiled brat.

Zhang Lie clicked his tongue. "What do you want?"

"Nothing much. I'm a little bored, so won't you go shopping with me?" Chu Xun beamed.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I'm very busy, and I have no time to play games with you!"

"Umm, how about this, if you can't play with me, then how about I play with you? Bring me where you're headed."

Zhang Lie shook his head again. "We might have met once before, but surely you wouldn't leave the settlement with a hunter you barely know."

"I don't care! If you don't promise to bring me out, I won't help you out with that favor you wanted!" She scowled.

"You..."

How could this girl be such a nuisance?!

After thinking it over for a moment, Zhang Lie didn't see too large an issue with bringing her with him. He was only intending to head to the Bloodcrystal Valley to harvest some more blood whiskers, which wasn't too far from the settlement.

"I might consider bringing you out with me, but you have to promise to listen to my every command. Otherwise, if you die, I'm not letting your clan blame me."

She was naturally overjoyed to see Zhang Lie change his mind. "Don't worry, don't worry! I promise I'll listen to your every word!"

"You'd better not forget your words when we're outside. Have your guards send word to your brother: tell him where you're going, and tell him that I won't guarantee your safety. You'll be responsible for your own actions. Do you understand?"

Chu Xun nodded fervently and beckoned her guards over.

In truth, under these circumstances, what guard would feel safe leaving their charge with a strange, cloaked hunter? One guard was sent back to bring news to the Chu clan, but the other three tailed Zhang Lie and Chu Xun out.

As a reincarnated hunter with decades of experience, Zhang Lie easily discovered his tails. Upon passing through a small, dense forest, he managed to shake them off.

After half an hour, Zhang Lie and Chu Xun arrived at the hill overlooking the Bloodcrystal Valley. Zhang Lie hadn't intended on bringing the girl up with him. He was planning on leaving her at the base of the hill, but she refused to comply.

She even claimed to be a gliding expert, one who could easily handle gliding from this height. As a wind-attuned hunter, it was true that she likely wouldn't die from a fall here.

Zhang Lie had no choice but to bring her up to the hill with him.

"I'm fine with you harvesting those blood whiskers, but you have to hand them to me, do you understand?"

Chu Xun nodded seriously, but Zhang Lie felt like he couldn't let down his guard given her sparkling eyes.

"No, no, I changed my mind. Stay right there!"

"What? How can you be like that? You promised me that you'll let me try it! No, I'm heading down!"

Amidst a gust of wind, she leapt down from the hill. Her green wind-attuned genetic energy formed a slipstream behind her as she propelled herself down the hill.

Zhang Lie had no choice but to chase after her, activating his white-grub soulshard and morphing it into a gliding suit.

Wind-attuned hunters had a natural advantage when it came to anything dealing with the air. If there were no obstacles or disruptions around, the girl would likely be able to glide down safely.

"Ah—Ahhh!" However, just as Zhang Lie relaxed, she let out a shrill cry.

She was being harassed by a few blood ants, and her casual glide had morphed into the disastrous tumbling of a one-winged mosquito.

Zhang Lie grumbled, but quickly shot after her.

Chapter 49: Impending Trouble

With a few quick slashes from Venombane, Zhang Lie bisected the blood ants on Chu Xun's body.

"Be more careful!" he admonished.

Before she could respond, he glided past her. Compared to her, Zhang Lie's gliding required far more skill, but he seemed even more adept at it than she was. As he shot silver strands out of his palms, he rapidly flew past the opening of several of the caves and masterfully harvested the blood whiskers there.

Chu Xun, having been rescued once, became much more serious about the affair, and she attentively watched Zhang Lie's harvesting technique.

Although she was mischievous, she was also quick-witted, and was able to obtain quite a number of blood whiskers during the glide down the hill—even more than Zhang Lie had collected during his first attempt.

"Alright, hand me what you have!"

As soon as they landed, Zhang Lie extended a palm toward her. She immediately handed over the blood whiskers she had gathered. Of course, she wasn't being perfectly honest: she had kept one or two stalks in her pouch for herself.

Zhang Lie guessed that she would do so, but he didn't much care about one or two stalks. Furthermore, after this harvest, it wouldn't matter whether or not the Chu clan learned of the blood whiskers' potency.

They glided down thrice more before Chu Xun lost all interest in the matter entirely, and she indicated that she would simply stay on the hill and watch Zhang Lie from now on.

Zhang Lie was very glad that she was finally deciding to do so: after all, every time she glided down with him, she seemed to cause even more trouble. How could Zhang Lie not be relieved that she was planning to stop?

As the winds blew around the hill, Zhang Lie began to gather the remaining blood whiskers in the Bloodcrystal Valley rapidly. As his strength grew, so did his efficiency. Without the girl disrupting him, Zhang Lie shot from cave to cave, almost seeming to leave afterimages with how quickly he moved.

While he was busy harvesting his blood whiskers, Li Jin, who had arrived at the blackwater sands, found Li Hong's corpse and was informed of a mysterious black-cloaked man who could be implicated in the murder.

A storm of revenge was brewing on the horizon.

Now that he had a target, Li Jin immediately announced a bounty for information on this mysterious man across the entire settlement. Anyone who could provide information about this man would be able to obtain a thousand points from the Li corporation.

Under normal circumstances, this bounty would go unclaimed: Zhang Lie was a careful hunter, and there wasn't anything particularly distinctive about him. There were lots of hunters who went around in black cloaks. How could the hunters in the settlement distinguish among them?

However, Zhang Lie had been seen with the youngest daughter of the main branch of the Chu clan, Chu Xun. She was famed for her mischievous personality, and ordinary hunters would naturally keep an eye out for her so as to be able to get out of her way.

Many had seen them leaving the settlement together, and the Li clan's search could therefore be narrowed down.

Afterwards, amidst the temptation of all sorts of rewarding bounties, teams of hunters began to deduce and analyze where the pair could have gone.

In the best room in the Blackgold Inn, Li Jin sat waiting on a throne-like seat.

"Are his whereabouts known now?"

"Yes, Head! He's in the Bloodcrystal Valley!" his right-hand man answered.

"Li Hong was a useless hunter, but he's still a member of the Li clan, after all. We need to let the hunters in this settlement know what happens to those who dare go against the Li clan. Lead our

best team of hunters out to the Bloodcrystal Valley. You know what to do: afterwards, hang his head outside the settlement gates for seven days as a warning to others!"

Li Jin might have seemed amiable from the outside, but he was actually a cold and cruel man.

"Yes, Head! In that case, what should we do with Chu Xun?"

Li Jin scowled. "Take her down if necessary, but make sure not to harm her. She's the prized granddaughter of the Chu head, and we can't touch her!"

"Understood, Head!" He was right about to lead his men out when Li Jin called him back,

"Wait! With that girl around, I don't trust you to handle it. I'll lead the team myself."

As the Li clan mobilized, Chu Feng, who had just returned to the settlement after a day of hunting, heard about what happened to his sister almost as soon as he returned.

"What? She left with that mysterious hunter? And he even said that he wasn't going to guarantee her safety?! Why didn't you tail her?!" Chu Feng yelled at his guards, but they, having failed in their duty, didn't dare to rebuke him.

"Where did they go?"

"The Bloodcrystal Valley, young master!"

"The Bloodcrystal Valley? Forget it, punishing any of you now won't do any good. What are you waiting for? Gather a team of hunters and head there immediately!"

"The Feng scouts just reported that he's the fellow who killed Li Hong, and that the Li clan's heading straight for him! Chu Xun's with him, so she might be in danger. What do you think will happen to you if she gets hurt? Even I wouldn't be able to protect you then!"

Chu Feng's two guards paled as they were reminded of what the Chu head was like when he was angry, and they rushed off in a gust of wind.

With both the Li and Chu clans mobilizing, the tension in the Blacksteel settlement reached an apex.

Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others, who had left for an inn after the feast, naturally heard the news. The six of them sat before each other.

"What should we do? They're all going after the captain!" Fang Yi was the first to speak, his tone implying that he wasn't going to sit still and wait.

"What else can we do? We have to find him and help him out!" Li Feng, who tended to be shy, gathered the courage to say what they were all thinking.

"Right, we have to help! He even shared a few superior gene fragments with us, so how can we ditch him when he's in trouble?" Yang Ze added.

"We certainly can't just sit here, but given how weak we are, we won't be able to handle a direct confrontation either." Sun Mengmeng identified the key problem.

"Sis, we don't have any time to waste!" Sun Xiaowu muttered worriedly.

"Let me think for a moment. It's exactly in such situations that we need to be careful about how we act. You know that our captain isn't an easy fellow to deal with, and even if the Li and Chu clans work together, I doubt they'll be able to deal with him. As for us, we need to come up with a plan. If we head there without a good plan, we could well expose ourselves to retaliation, and we might mess up our captain's plan as well."

Sun Mengmeng's analysis was spot on. If they were to rush there the moment they heard the news, they might end up more hindrance than help.

"Since they're headed for the captain, they must suspect that he's the killer. Why don't we try to muddle the waters a bit?" Fang Yi suggested.

Chapter 50: Targeted Clash

"Muddle the waters? You mean, attack the Li clan now while they're busy chasing after him?" Sun Mengmeng asked for clarification.

Fang Yi nodded. "That's right. However, we have to do so under the guise of our captain!"

"Under his guise? Isn't our captain's identity a secret? How can we pretend to be him?" Yang Ze seemed quite confused.

Fang Yi explained, "We might know his identity, but no one else in the settlement does, do they? To them, Li Hong's killer is a man cloaked in black and skilled at stealth! Can't you pretend to be such a hunter? Can't I? Even Sun Mengmeng could!"

"What do you mean, even I can? I bet I could portray his likeness better than either of you with some careful makeup!" Sun Mengmeng scowled.

"You mean, we should all disguise ourselves as the captain and strike at the Li clan while they're all gone, so as to draw attention away from him?" Yang Ze finally seemed to understand.

Sun Mengmeng smiled. "That's right. It sounds like a simple plan, but the execution will be quite difficult. If we're ever caught off-guard, we might easily die from the Li clan's retaliation. As a result, we'll need a careful plan of attack. I already have a few ideas in mind, but since we're short on time, let's talk as we head out. Pack your bags and we'll meet at the door!"

Moments later, six black-clad men suddenly emerged from the settlement gates. Their outer appearance made them look quite similar to Zhang Lie.

Back in the Bloodcrystal Valley, Zhang Lie, sitting with Chu Xun near the top of the hill, was happily roasting a blood ant. After a few hours of gliding, he had harvested essentially all the blood whiskers in the Bloodcrystal Valley.

The blood ant smelled so good that she was salivating.

"Hey, Blackie, are you done yet? I'm hungry!" Her strange nickname for Zhang Lie left much to be desired, but given her status as the prized grandchild of the Chu head, he couldn't say much about it. He handed her a skewer from above the fire pit.

She bit into the crispy ant meat with gusto, her lips glistening with oil.

Just then, Zhang Lie discovered a horde of hunters from the southwest heading in their direction. He didn't pay them much mind at first, thinking that they were from some clan who had decided to hunt the blood ants, but when they were near the bottom of the hill, Zhang Lie spotted Li Jin amidst the crowd.

Li Jin? Wasn't he in the middle of investigating Li Hong's death? What was he doing here? Zhang Lie glanced at the hunters beneath him, then at Chu Xun by his side, instantly understanding the situation. Of course, they had to be here for him!

Instead of panicking, however, he smiled.

By that time, they were making such a fuss that even Chu Xun had noticed.

"Blackie, what's going on down there? Isn't that Li Jin and his team?"

"I suspect they're here for me. Well, I won't be able to accompany you anymore. If I'm not wrong, you should have a venombane-scorpion soulshard on you. Why don't you find a place to hide and get ready to watch the show?"

There was no trace of urgency in Zhang Lie's voice.

"For you? Why, what did you do? Ah—you couldn't have been the one who killed his brother, Li Hong?!"

Zhang Lie didn't deny it. "He deserved it. Well, go hide! I won't be able to spare you any attention later."

"No, there's no need. Li Jin wouldn't dare to touch me, or he would—"

"Stop talking nonsense, and never joke around with your life on the line. It's a terrible habit to pick up, and you'll be much safer if you just hide!" She was quite a stubborn character, but Zhang Lie would tolerate no refusal. He seemed like he would beat her up if she were to rebut him again.

She didn't know why, but she, who feared almost nothing in the world, instinctively backed down. Pursing her lips, she leapt up into a nearby tree and then turned invisible.

Zhang Lie sat back down and continued enjoying his ant skewers.

Footsteps pittered and pattered around him as Li Jin's large group split in two. One group blocked the valley off from below, and the other, with Li Jin at the lead, headed straight for him. By the time he had finished consuming a blood ant, Li Jin was only fifty meters away.

"What laudable efficiency!" Zhang Lie praised. "You found me so quickly after Li Hong's death."

He tossed the skewer in his hand aside.

"You bastard, you won't be getting away today! Reveal your identity and hand over all your soulshards, and I might grant you a painless death. Otherwise, I'll make you regret being born!"

"You think someone like you deserves to know my name, to hand over my soulshards? You'll make me regret being born? What a joke!"

Zhang Lie spat on Li Jin's shoes.

"Li Hong deserved to die. If you back down now, I'll spare you on account of the upcoming Void Cup! Otherwise, the five clans of the Blacksteel settlement might soon become four, you understand?"

"Haha! You, a lone hunter, capable of bringing down the Li clan? What a farce! Today, I'll show you what it means to be dominated by absolute strength! Charge! Destroy him!"

Zhang Lie's brash words had completely enraged Li Jin. On his command, his gathered hunters shot toward Zhang Lie like arrows loosed from a bow.

Zhang Lie leapt down from the hill.

"You think I haven't planned for this? Ranged attackers, prepare to loose!" With Li Jin's shout, arrows brimming with all colors of genetic energy shot toward Zhang Lie, forming what seemed like a multicolored net ready to entrap him.

Of course, Zhang Lie anticipated this. He curled his arms around his body and began to twist rapidly as he went into a dive, repelling the projectiles with the force of the wind around him. Only a rare few made it past the wind barrier and onto his white-grub armor, but they had been sapped of most of their momentum and were all but harmless.

Zhang Lie's speed was so extreme that, after the first wave of ranged attacks, he had already flown out of range. As he glided over the largest cave in the valley, where the strongest blood ants were located, he threw a little black and red object inside.