

U. Warlord 51

Chapter 51: Blood Ant Swarm

A gigantic explosion rocked the entire valley, and the shrill screech of ants filled the air. The blood ants of the Bloodcrystal Valley were completely enraged, and they swarmed out of each and every cave.

At the same time, Zhang Lie, who was still gliding in the air, seemed to vanish from sight.

"A stealth-type soulshard!" Li Jin's face turned ugly: he realized what Zhang Lie was trying to do. But since he was here with all his elites, how could he just let Zhang Lie retreat? He would make a mockery of himself if he were to do so!

"Block the valley entrance and spread flash powder everywhere. Trap him inside the valley—we'll see how long he can hide!"

Flash powder was quickly tossed into the air upon Li Jin's orders, but it didn't have any effect. Zhang Lie truly seemed to have disappeared.

At the mouth of the valley, the rampaging blood ants, led by a superior-grade blood ant, clashed with hunters of the Li clan.

"Heh, do you think you can kill us just with this swarm of ants? With our numbers, the superior-grade blood ant will be no more than an additional reward for our trouble! You won't leave this valley alive!" Li Jin's shout boomed through the entire valley. Zhang Lie, stealthed by a secluded crag, naturally ignored his words.

However, just because he ignored it didn't mean that other creatures would—for instance, the rampaging superior-grade blood ant, furious that its cave had been partially destroyed.

Upon hearing Li Jin's shout, it shot a blood arrow toward him.

"Shield!" Li Jin yelled out. The elites surrounding him immediately used their shielding techniques, protecting Li Jin and his vicinity in a dense, multicolored barrier formed from overlapping shields.

The barrier and blood arrow both exploded as they came in contact with each other, and Li Jin hadn't moved at all.

His elites were comparable to those subordinates that he had brought with him to the venombane glade. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been so confident as to proclaim that he would kill the entire swarm of ants.

The superior-grade blood ant, the size of a small mountain, rushed toward Li Jin when it saw that its long-ranged attack had failed. Its pincers were the size of polearms, its legs sharp and as hard as steel, its translucent wings shot through with blood-red demarcations, and its gigantic, bulbous eyes crimson with anger.

"Defend!" Li Jin shouted again. The blood ant's blood-red genetic energy clashed with Li Jin's team's multicolored energy, leading to a huge explosion.

Dozens of bodies were knocked up into the air in the aftermath. Before the hunters could react, the blood ant cut them apart with its pincers.

"Don't try to face it head-on! Surround it and slowly exhaust its energy! Where's the debuff team? Attack!" Li Jin yelled out.

A small group of hunters wearing unusual pieces of armor began to approach the blood ant carefully. The rest of Li Jin's elites began to attack and harass the blood ant, occupying much of its attention.

However, the blood ant rapidly shot out another blood arrow. At point-blank range, several of the elites were pierced by the arrow without being able to defend against the technique at all. Their bodies immediately began to crystallize, forming four blood statues at the top of the hill.

Li Jin had only ever read about the superior-grade blood ant; he'd never seen it in person, and he hadn't expected it would be so difficult to deal with. It had tough chitin, frightening close-combat abilities, a piercing long-ranged technique, a 360-degree field of vision, and the sharp senses of a bug-type lifeform. With the multiplicative enhancement afforded by its superior-grade nature, it really had no weak points.

However, Li Jin couldn't take back his words now: if he were to retreat, he would have lost half a dozen elite hunters for nothing.

"Now! Use the astral web!" Li Jin commanded, the moment the blood ant tried to launch another blood arrow.

As he did so, the hunters who had spread out around the blood ant tossed a web into the air, covering the blood ant within it. The moment the web landed on the blood ant's chitin, it began to screech, and the tough chitin began to steam where it touched the web.

Each silver strand behaved like a scorching-hot steel wire. The blood ant's movement was severely restricted. It tried to curl up its body, as though it were immensely fearful of this web.

The astral web was woven by the natural predator of these blood ants: the astral weaver. This was a web from a superior-grade astral weaver, which Li Jin had procured at great expense. Allegedly, it would be able to restrain a large variety of bug-type lifeforms. The truth of that was playing out right before his eyes.

Li Jin wasn't about to give up such an opportunity. As he spread his arms, a magnificent bow and shadowy arrow emerged amidst the glow of genetic energy. The bow was as tall as he was, with a radiant glow that made it obvious that it derived from a superior-grade soulshard.

On the other hand, the shadowy arrow was so dark that it seemed to be sucking up the light all around it, evoking a primal fear from the gathered hunters. It was also derived from a superior-grade soulshard—a consumable one, which boasted absolute power for one instant in time.

Li Jin would secure this kill in one shot!

"[Black-Winged Deicide]!"

Li Jin drew the bow to its maximum extent. As he released it, an umbral shadow, so fast it seemed illusory, launched toward the blood ant.

And at that moment, the superior-grade blood ant, curled up and defending itself against the astral web, suddenly stood straight up. Sensing the threat of death, it immediately used the one technique at its disposal: [Bloodbath].

Its exoskeleton erupted in blood-red flames, burning the astral web to cinders.

However, by the time it freed itself, the shadow was already right by its head.

Two blood arrows shot out from its body. It let out a grating screech as the blood-red flames covered its pincers, then swiped at the shadowy arrow directly in front of it.

"Amazing, a clash of superior-grade techniques! Blackie didn't lie to me: hiding really did turn out to be safe and interesting!" As Chu Xun mumbled to herself, the air at the top of the hill seemed to compress and fold into itself, before exploding in so extreme a manner that it sent tremors all the way down the hill.

Chapter 52: Quick Reflexes

The world seemed to erupt in black and red.

Chu Xun, hiding a fair distance away, whooped in amazement.

As the commotion settled, a screech emerged from amidst the dust, and beams of red light shot straight toward Li Jin.

"Shield—" Li Jin, who had used the majority of his genetic energy in that one blow, was in a weakened state, and would have been unable to block the blow on his own.

Another multilayered barrier sprung up around him, but this one was far weaker than the one before. It broke apart almost as soon as those beams of blood struck it, unable to block the blood arrows that had been consecrated in the blood ant's lifeblood.

At the same time, the superior-grade blood ant, whose pincers had been smashed apart, whose head was half-caved in, skittered out of the dust toward Li Jin.

Three unlucky attackers were quickly cut apart. Even so, Li Jin's elites didn't back down. Right before them was a heavily wounded superior-grade lifeform—of course they would charge forward!

If they were able to land the finishing blow, they would get a great boon from the clan, and even perhaps a little of its flesh.

Unfortunately, they underestimated the strength of a superior-grade [Bloodbath], and a dozen hunters died in the melee.

"Spread out and stall it! It won't be able to last for too long!" Li Jin shouted. He was an adept commander: [Bloodbath] was designed for head-on attacks, and if Li Jin were to be blinded by greed and sent his elites charging forward to land the finishing blow, they would surely succumb to the blood ant's last stand.

However, if they were to take advantage of their numerical superiority to harass the superior-grade blood ant until its [Bloodbath] wore off, Li Jin could easily claim the kill without any unnecessary losses.

Li Jin was intelligent, but the blood ant wasn't unintelligent, either.

After killing a dozen of his hunters and sensing that the duration of [Bloodbath] was almost over, the blood ant thought to retreat. It tried to skitter back to the Bloodcrystal Valley, but it was too late.

"You think you can run now? Ha! Throw another astral web over it!" Li Jin shouted in glee. It was time for the harvest! He brandished a golden polearm in front of him as he rushed down from the hill.

Another astral web appeared, tangling up the blood ant. It cried out in agony and anger, and countless mutated-grade blood ants, like an ocean of red, emerged from the valley. Unfortunately, they were too slow and too weak for Li Jin's elites, and could hardly hope to save the superior-grade blood ant.

"[Radiant Slash]!" Genetic energy extended the blade of Li Jin's polearm until it was seven or eight meters tall, then swiped down with immutable force.

With a screech, the superior-grade blood ant, weakened after its use of [Bloodbath], crashed to the ground. As the golden energy-blade penetrated its body, a large piece of its carapace fell off.

Then came the steel of the actual blade, reinforced with superior-grade materials. It left a huge gash in the blood ant's body, but at the same time, the blood ant, which seemed to have given up retaliating completely, suddenly shot a blood arrow at Li Jin.

The blood arrow was an extremely rapid attack, and even Li Jin wouldn't be able to dodge it at close range.

However, Li Jin had anticipated this last-ditch effort. The moment the blood arrow appeared, a sturdy, intricate tortoiseshell shield appeared in Li Jin's hands. It was so large that it almost covered Li Jin's body completely. From its intricacy and majesty, it was obvious that it was also derived from a superior-grade soulshard.

As the young head of the Li clan, Li Jin naturally had all manner of superior-grade soulshards.

With a dull thud, the blood arrow was unable to penetrate the shield, but the force of the blow was beyond Li Jin's expectations. He stumbled back a few steps, and a trickle of blood dripped down his lips.

Li Jin was somewhat injured, but he didn't much care. He smiled in glee: that was likely the superior-grade blood ant's final retaliatory blow. Now that he had overcome it, he would be able to reap its rewards.

Unfortunately, his dreams were about to be dashed.

The moment Li Jin moved his shield aside, he saw a black shadow and a faint purple glimmer. His eyes widened. It was the hunter who had killed Li Hong! He was right here! All his attention had been devoted to the fight against the blood ant, and Li Jin had temporarily forgotten about Zhang Lie.

Who would be crazy enough to wait right by the blood ant's side until he was about to strike his finishing blow?! This clearly wasn't something Li Jin had anticipated.

Regardless of Li Jin's thoughts, Zhang Lie's blade was coming right for him.

Li Jin barely blocked it with his polearm, but his right cheek was still grazed by the glancing blow.

The blow gave him some measure of his opponent's strength, and his first instinct was to retreat: after all, he had suffered some injuries from the fight against the blood ant, and a prolonged fight would be disadvantageous to him.

Unexpectedly, Zhang Lie also retreated.

Li Jin was confused by his opponent's actions until the will of the world announced in his mind, [You participated in the successful kill of a superior-grade blood ant. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade blood ant, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

As the superior-grade blood ant drew its final breath, a ruby-like soulshard found its way to the black-clad man's palm.

"Thanks for the soulshard!" With a cheery tone that sent angry shivers through Li Jin's body, Zhang Lie patted the superior-grade blood ant's carcass and vanished with it from Li Jin's sight.

"Just you wait! If I don't mince you to pieces today, I'll renounce my name!"

His face was such a deep red that it was shocking that he didn't explode right then and there.

Chapter 53: Diversions and Distractions

"Bombard the area!" Under Li Jin's command, waves of energy spread through the area where Zhang Lie had been.

Unfortunately, the attacks were to no avail. The veins of Li Jin's forehead throbbed as he glanced all around him, but regardless of how angry he was, it was clear that today's mission was a complete failure.

Not only had Zhang Lie managed to escape despite Li Jin's overwhelming numerical superiority, he had even snatched away the superior-grade lifeform that Li Jin had spent so much effort trying to kill!

The Li clan had suffered grievous losses, but the final reward had all gone to Zhang Lie! If he were to let Zhang Lie escape now, the entire Li clan would become a laughing-stock. Li Jin had no choice but to dedicate even more manpower to the search.

"Block off the entire valley and perform an exhaustive search of the grounds. Don't let any living creature pass you by!" Li Jin's voice was rather loud, as though he weren't afraid that the black-clad man would overhear his plans.

In truth, under these circumstances, it didn't matter whether or not he could: Li Jin's plan was the simplest, but also most direct and effective, approach. If even an exhaustive search weren't enough to hunt down the other party, Li Jin would have no further recourse.

The Li elites on the hill systematically started scouting the area, whereas those in the valley left carnage in their wake as they pushed further inside the valley in search of Zhang Lie.

What Li Jin didn't know was that, while all his elites were in the Bloodcrystal Valley, several locations outside the Blacksteel settlement and under Li control were under attack.

The blue-squirrel stream was located in a mountainous region by the southeastern side of the Blacksteel settlement, so named for the blue-tailed squirrels that were commonly found around it, and was the closest territory controlled by the Li clan in that direction.

These blue-tailed squirrels were generally regular-grade and possessed relatively weak combat abilities. However, their soulshards would dramatically increase a hunter's agility, and were therefore in high demand. As a result, the Li clan had taken over the area.

Under usual circumstances, there would be heavy security around the region, but at that moment it was barely guarded.

A few figures outside the stream were using a pair of binoculars to determine the strength of the remaining guards.

"Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, you were both right! There aren't any elites around here right now!" Yang Ze cackled in glee.

As Sun Mengmeng had predicted, Li Jin's mobilization order would bring together the Li elites and leave the areas they controlled under scant security.

The Li clan controlled quite a few territories around the settlement, so it was still likely that there would be some areas more heavily guarded than others, but both Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had chosen to head to this particular spot.

It was clear that they had made the right decision.

"Don't get too excited yet. The area's not under heavy guard, but there are still quite a lot of hunters from the Li clan around. Why don't you consider how we're going to proceed?" Sun Mengmeng replied, her tone casual, as though she had already devised a plan.

"With our strength, do we need a strategy at all? Can't we just head in there and kill them all? The six of us can attack them head-on!" Yang Ze's words had Fang Yi rapping him on the head almost instantly.

"You fool! If we do that, what do you think the Li hunters will report to their clan? Something like 'A mysterious team of hunters raided the territory while our elites were gone! We suspect they're from a hostile clan!?' Don't forget that our goal is to divert attention from our captain! Our goal isn't to raid the territory for resources, but to make the Li clan think that we're the true culprit!"

Yang Ze rubbed his head. "Ah, I know! In that case, one person needs to attract the attention of the scouts, and the other five can sneak into the territory. And then—"

"If you already know the plan, what're you waiting for? Get going!"

"Ah, me?!"

"Of course it's you! Your body's the closest match to the captain's among any of us here, and you're water-attuned as well. Who else would it be?"

As the other five hunters watched on with stifled laughter, Yang Ze, clad in black, appeared in front of the Li hunters guarding the region.

"Who's there?!"

"Is this territory controlled by the Li clan?" Yang Ze asked.

"That's right. Identify yourself! What are you doing here?"

"The Li clan that Li Hong belongs to?" Yang Ze asked again, without replying to any of the guard's questions.

His attire and speech couldn't help reminding the guard of Li Hong's mysterious killer, whom they had all been told to keep an eye out for. As he released his genetic energy, the guard repeated, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to take your life."

Before that guard could react, three of his fellow guards, who were gathering around him, had perished. By the time the guard turned back around, the man in black had vanished. He could hear screams coming from within the territory.

With all the elites in the territory gone to assist Li Jin, and with such a mysterious killer on the loose, he had no desire to fight at all.

"Flee! Report back to the clan and tell Young Master Li that the killer's right here in our territory!" Following his command, the dozen or so people in the territory began to run away, but in the end, there were only two survivors, one of whom was the guard who had seen Yang Ze.

Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's plan had gone off without a hitch.

Li Jin rapidly heard about the news, but he was stupefied when he did. The mysterious killer who killed Li Hong had just been sighted at the blue-squirrel stream? Was this a joke? He had just faced off against that killer! How could he have gotten to the blue-squirrel stream in that short a time?

Surely he couldn't have gone that far... could he? After all, his hunters were securing the entire area! In that case, what could be going on at the blue-squirrel stream?

Chapter 54: Monkey in the Middle

Regardless of the veracity of the information, Li Jin couldn't spare any attention for it. So what if the blue-squirrel stream had been controlled by another party? Once he finished matters here at the Bloodcrystal Valley, he could easily reclaim that territory.

Through a messenger, he relayed to those hunters at the blue-squirrel stream to hold out as long as they could. Once he was done here, he would make those raiders pay for what they had done.

Explosions rattled the battlefield in the valley below them: up till now, both the ant swarm and Li Jin's elite hunters had suffered significant losses from the battle.

Of course, Li Jin's group still had the upper hand, but the blood ants were known for their numbers and rampaging ability. The superior-grade blood ant had commanded and reinforced territorial behavior, but now that it had perished, the only thought on their mind was to destroy all that opposed them, all that stood in their way.

The blood ants that emerged from the caves would activate [Bloodbath] almost instantly, ramping up their offensive capabilities before charging into the midst of the hunters.

Hunters weren't robots, and although the Li hunters present were all elites, they would still eventually get tired. They had persisted and engaged in battle for over half an hour, and even Li Jin was getting fatigued, let alone the common hunter.

However, the territory that Li Jin wanted to secure was too large to control unless he used up all his reserve troops as well.

This implied that the hunters would have no backup or replacements, and that they would have to keep fighting despite the stamina drain. Sooner or later, one would falter, and the encirclement would break apart.

And once that happened, that damned black-clad bastard would be able to escape.

This was the outcome that Li Jin most wanted to avoid. In his anger, Li Jin didn't realize the major loophole in his plan: given Zhang Lie's combat ability, it wouldn't be difficult at all for him to break out of the entrapment.

"Quick, search the hilltop as fast as you can. Then, help the hunters at the bottom of the valley!" Li Jin commanded.

Although this would decrease the efficiency of the search, it would still be preferable to the alternative.

"Young Master Li, Chu Feng's here!"

Li Jin had no time or attention to spare for Chu Feng. Even worse, the Li hunters had found no sign of Chu Xun, and had no idea where she could be hiding. If something were to happen to her, the Li clan could face serious repercussions.

"Get out here, Li Jin!" Chu Feng shouted, right after Li Jin reminded his subordinates not to hurt Chu Xun if she were found.

Li Jin scowled, knowing that he had no choice but to deal with Chu Feng now.

On the hilltop, Li Jin and Chu Feng faced each other with their subordinates in tow.

"Where's my sister?" Chu Feng asked.

"Young Master Chu, I can't answer that question. I haven't seen any trace of your sister around! You must have heard that the Li clan's here to catch Li Hong's mysterious killer, and we're not here for your sister. We were told that your sister had travelled in this direction with the mysterious killer, but if she's here, she hasn't revealed herself."

Chu Feng judged that Li Jin's words were trustworthy. Chu Xun had quite a reputation in the Blacksteel settlement, and he doubted that Li Jin would dare to do anything to her knowing what the Chu clan would do in retribution.

"Brother, I'm right here!" Chu Xun, seeing her brother deep in thought, leapt down from a nearby tree and ran toward him. "Brother, you're too late! You missed the best part of the show!"

Chu Feng huffed in mock annoyance. "Who allowed you to run around outside the settlement with a stranger you barely knew? What would I have done if something were to happen to you?"

"Don't worry, Brother! I can take care of myself, and if I have to run away, I have the soulshard you gave me. Brother, I bet you couldn't have imagined what just happened!"

In front of Li Jin, Chu Xun began describing in meticulous detail all that she had witnessed from her vantage point up on a tree.

It was as though she had ripped open Li Jin's wounds and scattered some salt in them. He would have attacked anyone else who dared to do so, but she was Chu Xun, beloved of the Chu clan, and Chu Feng and a large group of Chu elites were right there with her.

Li Jin could only sulk in silence. His troops were overburdened just dealing with the blood ants in the valley; he certainly couldn't rouse the Chu clan's ire now.

"Young Master Chu, since you've found your sister, I won't accompany you any further."

Chu Feng, who had just heard Chu Xun describe how Li Jin's superior-grade blood ant had been snatched from right before his eyes, laughed out loud.

"Li Jin, I advise you to give up now. You've already sustained such severe losses and lost whatever reward you could have hoped to obtain: if you keep your troops fighting even longer, you'll only end up with more casualties. And, to be frank, this sort of formation is far too easy to break out of. If I were trapped in this manner, I would have at least five different ways of escaping."

"Young Master Chu, there's no need to burden yourself with the Li clan's affairs. If there's nothing else, please, leave the valley!"

Chu Feng had spoken out of pity for Li Jin, but Li Jin was too blinded by anger to listen to reason. In that case, he needn't waste his breath any longer. He nodded, then turned to leave with Chu Xun.

"Brother, I don't want to leave! Blackie hasn't come out yet!"

Chu Feng smiled. "What Blackie? That mysterious hunter?"

His sister nodded. "Yes! He won't be hurt, will he?"

"If he's as mysterious as you claim, I'm sure he'll be able to make it out. Who's to say he hasn't already left?" Chu Feng told his sister, but she still seemed rather disbelieving.

"Really? Is he already gone?"

"Of course! When have I ever lied to you?"

Chu Xun cocked her head for a moment, deciding whether or not to believe her brother. In the end, she gave in and departed with the main Chu coalition.

Li Jin stared at the departing Chu clan with serious doubts in his mind about whether Zhang Lie was really still around.

"Young Master Li, that killer appeared again! He's taken over the Thunderscale Cave!"

Li Jin was left agape by this piece of news.

Chapter 55: The Boundless Blade: First Form

"Retreat! Retreat at once!"

"Young Master Li, if we retreat, all our work will be for naught!" As Li Jin commanded a retreat, one of his subordinates quickly reminded him of the consequences for doing so.

"I said, retreat! Don't make me say it a third time!" Li Jin was so furious that no one dared to speak up after that.

By then, Li Jin was certain that Zhang Lie had returned to the settlement after stealing his kill using some mysterious technique. Then, he had started decimating the territories controlled by the Li clan. In that case, it would be meaningless for him to stand guard here.

Without the superior-grade blood ant, and without Li Hong's mysterious killer, there was no reason for all of them to stay at the Bloodcrystal Valley. On the other hand, they would have to regain control of their lost territories before Zhang Lie irrevocably damaged them.

What had occurred in the valley had to be written off as a sunk cost, and he had to plan for the future instead.

Zhang Lie, hiding by the side of one of the numerous caves in the Bloodcrystal Valley, was rather surprised by the Li clan's sudden retreat. After all, he had anticipated that the furious Li Jin would expend all his manpower trawling through the caves for any sign of his existence.

How could he retreat just like that? It bothered Zhang Lie that things weren't going to plan.

However, he immediately came to his senses. Was he going to let Li Jin retreat just like that? Of course not!

Zhang Lie immediately followed after the hunters of the Li clan.

By the mouth of the valley, a dozen or so hunters who were trying to retreat inadvertently left a gap in their defenses, and they were rapidly swarmed by a tide of ants. By the time the ants passed through where they were, there was nothing left of them, not even a scrap of clothing or remnant of flesh.

"Retreat! Retreat at once!" Li Jin shouted, and his elites rapidly rushed out of the valley.

Just as Li Jin's team on the hilltop met up with the Li hunters in the valley, the black-cloaked Zhang Lie emerged at the front of the gathered group.

Li Jin was completely stupefied.

The black-cloaked hunter's aura, stature, and height were all the same as those of the hunter he had fought, and Li Jin was absolutely certain that this fellow was precisely the hunter who had stolen the superior-grade blood ant from him.

Hadn't he left?

What was going on? Was the Chu clan in cahoots with this hunter against the Li clan? No, that couldn't be, at least not based on Chu Feng's reaction to the whole affair.

In that case, could this mysterious hunter have been working with a few accomplices?

It didn't matter: the truth would be revealed as soon as he caught him.

Li Jin stopped short, forcing the rest of the Li hunters behind him to do the same. In ordinary circumstances, such a halt wouldn't be a big deal, but there was a veritable sea of ants chasing after them.

"Young Master Li, hurry up! You can't fall behind!" The hunters by his side immediately began to run forward again, as did Li Jin, but his sudden halt had doomed the Li hunters unlucky enough to be at the end of the group.

The ant tide claimed a dozen more elites.

They were running over a flat expanse of land now, and the terrain was far more disadvantageous compared to the narrow, constricted valley.

"Rush forward at full speed, but try to catch that guy if you see an opportunity!" Li Jin commanded the guards beside him, then rushed out of the crowd of hunters.

Evidently, he was still very interested in subduing Zhang Lie, figuring out just who he was, reacquiring his spoils of battle, and then killing him.

As for Zhang Lie, his intention was evident: to attract Li Jin's attention, prevent the Li hunters from escaping the ant tide, and whittle down their numbers as much as he could. And if there were an opportunity, he would try his best to kill Li Jin. After all, Li Jin's soulshards were far too tempting to resist.

The moment he appeared in front of the Li hunters, Zhang Lie had begun amassing genetic energy. Now, he evoked the overwhelming majesty of the ocean, threatening to drown them in either his attack or in the sea of ants behind them.

Li Jin was caught completely off-guard by the strength that the mysterious hunter showed. Zhang Lie's sneak attack from before had left Li Jin with a rather negative impression of his capabilities. He certainly didn't expect that his mysterious opponent would display a strength rivaling that of the top twenty hunters on the gene leaderboard.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" As Zhang Lie thrust downward with Venombane, the frothing water-attuned genetic energy transformed into a gigantic carp, which seemed as though it would swallow the Li hunters whole.

"[Golden Dawn]!" Li Jin stood his ground against the gigantic carp, striking at it with his golden polearm. A ferocious gold-furred tiger coalesced from the energy gathered around the polearm and pounced toward the carp.

The clash of genetic energy created an explosion of gold and blue.

Zhang Lie, his genetic energy almost all consumed after that one strike, darted into a dense patch of forest without even glancing at the outcome of his attack. After all, his strike wasn't meant to kill Li Jin, but instead to block him and his fellow hunters from escaping.

That Li Jin had to defend himself against the attack was enough: he and his entire group had to halt lest they were caught up in the explosion. This wouldn't normally be a problem, but, after all, their circumstances were hardly normal. Behind them was a tide of red ants, nipping at their heels.

Each time Li Jin and his group halted, they would suffer grievous losses. Zhang Lie's one blade had caused the red tide to surround half his group.

It was then that Li Jin realized Zhang Lie's true intentions: to kill him, to kill the Li elites that he had spent so much effort developing, to kill them all within this bloody sea of ants!

He gritted his teeth, feeling as though he had never hated someone so completely before.

"You'd better not let me catch you, or you'll wish that you had died in this valley today!" Li Jin muttered to himself, then turned to one of his trusted aides. "Li Quan, escape with the rest of the hunters. I'll take care of that hunter myself!"

Li Jin darted into the dense forest before Li Quan could respond.

As soon as he did so, a large explosion erupted from behind him. Beneath a billowing mushroom cloud of dust, the remaining hunters, led by Li Quan, were completely trapped amidst the sea of ants.

Zhang Lie had anticipated what Li Jin would do, and he had buried a few landmines underneath the patch of land that the Li hunters would have to pass through.

Chaos descended on the group. The explosion itself wasn't particularly damaging, given the hunters' protective auras of genetic energy, but it slowed them down significantly, giving the tide of ants a chance to swallow them whole.

"Quick! We have to break through at all costs!" Li Quan yelled, genetic energy exploding from his body as he tried to forge a path out of the sea of ants.

However, not all the Li hunters present were as strong as he was.

Chapter 56: The Wealthy Li Clan

After a short skirmish, only about a dozen elites escaped the ants' entrapment, leaving the remaining hunters to drown in the sea of ants. This would undoubtedly be the worst day the Li clan had experienced for years to come.

"You damnable bastard, get out here!" Li Jin yelled out hoarsely, having witnessed the death of so many of his subordinates, but Zhang Lie had vanished as though he were a ghost.

In fury, Li Jin tossed out a glowing white orb, which exploded in mid-air in a dizzying array of light.

This white orb was a rare, consumable soulshard that could break all manner of stealth. As a consumable, its only selling point was its reliability: it was otherwise expensive, short-lasting, and with a small area of effect, and wasn't something an ordinary hunter could afford.

The stealthed Zhang Lie was slowly revealed by the light.

"You even have that gimmick? You should really have used it earlier, huh?"

Zhang Lie walked up to him, still shielding his eyes from the light. He didn't seem at all anxious that he had been discovered.

"Die!" Li Jin, enraged beyond belief, shot a golden spear in his direction.

Zhang Lie dashed to one side, not wanting to pit his strength or genetic energy against Li Jin's in his weakened state. Nevertheless, he was as calm as ever.

"You were struck by my blade, but you don't seem poisoned at all, so you must have some superior-grade soulshard that grants poison immunity. Not bad, not bad! As expected of the successor to the Li corporation—you must have at least five superior-grade soulshards on you! How about this? If you hand over your soulshards, I'll spare your life."

"You think you can handle me?" Li Jin dashed forward and launched a flurry of attacks at Li Jin.

As he did so, Zhang Lie activated the superior-grade blood-ant soulshard he had just obtained, encapsulating Zhang Lie in a cloud of mysterious red steam.

Li Jin headed right into the cloud. He felt a sudden impact and saw a spray of blood, his pupils contracting. Before he could react, he suddenly felt a chill in his extremities, and he fell paralyzed to the ground.

From start to finish, Li Jin had seen nothing but a red blur at the edge of his vision.

In truth, even Zhang Lie was amazed by the increase in his strength.

"Argh! Aren't the side effects of this soulshard a little too extreme?!"

Of course, the stronger the enhancement, the stronger its side effects. After that one attack, Zhang Lie slumped against the ground, feeling as though his body was melting in a heap of molten lava.

Even Zhang Lie, who had gotten used to all sorts of injuries in his past life, was whining in pain, his teeth and fists tightly clenched. Fortunately, he had only activated the soulshard for a short period of time, and the pain was quickly dissipating.

Within ten seconds, it had receded to a level that Zhang Lie could tolerate.

As for Li Jin, when he heard Zhang Lie complaining about the soulshard, he was so enraged that he almost spat out blood. He hadn't expected that the soulshard would provide such an extreme boost, as though he were facing a hunter magnitudes stronger than himself.

Of course, most frustrating was the fact that he had been so close to obtaining the soulshard himself!

"Who exactly are you? Why are you targeting the Li clan?!" As he lay on the ground paralyzed, he had no choice but to accept the reality that he had been downed in a single blow.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you," Zhang Lie replied. "I don't bear any ill will toward the Li clan, and I haven't been targeting it. To be frank, it's too weak to be worth my time. Li Hong tried to steal a kill that was rightfully mine, and then to slaughter the witnesses nearby. And what about you? If you're bringing such a large horde of hunters intending to kill me, I'm obligated to act in self-defense, aren't I?"

Li Jin couldn't help but laugh in self-mocking. He'd grown too used to dominating over the hunters in the Blacksteel settlement, but he had no idea when someone like Zhang Lie had emerged from the Blacksteel settlement.

"A superior-grade stealth-type soulshard, and a black cloak... you couldn't be..."

Li Jin was stupefied. Who else could this mysterious hunter in front of him be? It had to be the hunter in the venombane glade who had toyed with the representatives of the six largest clans of the Blacksteel settlement!

"Are you sure you want to keep guessing?" Zhang Lie asked, giving his blade a few casual swings.

He wasn't too worried about his identity being revealed. After the auction he'd attended, along with the bountiful harvest from the blackwater sands, he was just about ready to concoct Potion #2. Once he did so, he would have nothing and no one to fear within the Blacksteel settlement.

Whether or not Li Jin could hazard a guess as to his true identity was irrelevant.

"Hand over your soulshards, and I just might spare your life!" Zhang Lie offered again.

"How can you guarantee it?"

"What guarantee do I need? You can choose whether or not to hand over your soulshards, but are you sure you want to risk your life on the gamble?"

Zhang Lie held Venombane directly above Li Jin's heart, then slowly lowered his hand. It sliced through layer after layer of armor, piercing the skin...

"Wait, wait! I'll hand them over!" Li Jin succumbed to his fear the moment Venombane drew blood. Was there anyone who didn't fear death? All conscious life had an innate fear of its antithesis.

Once Li Jin made up his mind, he instantly handed over five superior-grade soulshards. Four were weapons, and the last was augmentation-type.

Of the four weapons, Zhang Lie had seen three of them: a longbow as tall as he was, a resplendent golden polearm, and a sturdy, intricate tortoiseshell shield. The last weapon was an obsidian spear curved like a snake. All four weapons were high quality, and he would gladly collect as many such soulshards as he could find.

The augmentation-type soulshard took the form of a green bead. According to Li Jin, this bead could negate the effects of a large class of poisons, and once absorbed into a hunter's soulspace, it would dramatically increase that hunter's self-healing capabilities, even allowing for limited regrowth of flesh and limb.

Zhang Lie was very pleased to have obtained five superior-grade soulshards in one fell swoop, and he had to admire the Li clan's wealth.

Chapter 57: Handing Out Soulshards

"Not bad. Do you have any more?"

Zhang Lie's face was the epitome of greed. But under these circumstances, no matter how excessive his demands were, Li Jin could only agree to them with a smile.

"You want mutated-grade soulshards too?"

"Of course! Those are still points, after all."

Li Jin's eyebrow twitched, but he opened up his soulspace again. In another blinding flash of light, more than thirty mutated-grade soulshards, each like a resplendent gem, appeared in front of Zhang Lie.

This time, he was too lazy to even inspect each one. Instead, he swept them all up into his potbellied-toad pouch. This was essentially all the profit that Zhang Lie could extract from Li Jin.

"Very good. For your sincerity, I'll spare your life!"

Zhang Lie's sword gleamed as he stabbed down past Li Jin's chest and splintered his genetic core. From that moment on, Li Jin would forever be a cripple.

"No! Why?! I've done everything you told me to! Why?!" Li Jin roared in rage.

"Of course it's because I don't want you to seek revenge. You're not a threat to me, but it would be quite annoying. And now, I won't have to worry. See you around!"

Zhang Lie whistled as he walked away, quickly vanishing from Li Jin's sight, leaving him alone in the forest, howling, "Bastard, kill me! I dare you to kill me!"

By then, Zhang Lie was too far away to hear his screams.

He headed back to the settlement to deposit his spoils for the day. Coincidentally, outside the settlement, he found quite a few black-cloaked hunters dressed exactly like him. He was currently stealthed, and when he walked closer, he immediately discovered their identity.

"Fang Yi, Yang Ze, Sun Mengmeng... what are the three of you doing?"

The three of them had been hiding by the settlement grounds and scoping out the Li clan's movements, and the sudden voice that seemed to come from midair gave them all a big shock.

However, they quickly realized that that voice was very familiar.

"Captain! I recognize your voice, it has to be you!"

"Are you safe now?"

Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's concerned tone left Zhang Lie a little confused. "What trouble could I be in?"

"Weren't you caught by the Li clan?" Sun Mengmeng asked.

"How did you guys know about this?"

Fang Yi was speechless. "News about the Li clan's mobilization was spread throughout the settlement! How could we not hear about it?"

Zhang Lie patted his head. "Ah, that's right, it would have caused a big commotion. In that case, what are you doing here?"

Sun Mengmeng replied, "What else? Of course we're trying to divert the Li clan's attention! How are you? Were you injured?"

Zhang Lie shook his head, seeming to have guessed something. "No wonder Li Jin was trying to retreat! You made a ruckus somewhere, didn't you? Alright, alright, rein everyone back in! We can't bully the Li clan too much, can we?"

Zhang Lie's words confused the three hunters. In truth, they couldn't imagine what dreadful odds he had faced, alone against a veritable horde of Li hunters. So what was with this talk of bullying?

"We'll talk back at the inn," Zhang Lie added, then began walking toward the settlement gates..

While the hunters didn't quite understand the situation, the fact that Zhang Lie was so unperturbed must have meant that there was nothing to worry about. They immediately recalled the other three hunters to the Blackgold Inn.

It was when they saw the five resplendent, egg-sized superior-grade soulshards lying on a table that they realized what Zhang Lie had meant by 'bullying'.

They gaped at Zhang Lie's spoils.

Was there something wrong with the news that they had heard? Could it be that the captain had surrounded the Li clan with his own hunters instead? No, that couldn't be! The entire settlement was in an uproar about the Li clan's mobilization: how could there have been a mistake?

"Captain, how did you... What happened?!" Fang Yi could hardly believe his eyes.

Zhang Lie smiled. "I just took advantage of two opposing forces."

Sun Mengmeng suddenly cried out, "The blood ants of the Bloodcrystal Valley? You managed to provoke a superior-grade blood ant into attacking Li Jin?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "Good guess. Li Jin wasn't weak, but his experience as a commander was far too limited, and I was able to take advantage of his naivete. I destroyed his genetic core, and about four-fifths of his elites were killed in the fight against the blood ants. I suppose soon there'll only be five great clans in the Blacksteel settlement—or, I suppose, four."

The gathered hunters glanced at their captain in shock, hearing his words but not being able to process them. Was he still human? He alone had caused such massive destruction amidst the ranks of the Li clan?

Zhang Lie ignored their stupefied looks.

"You all did well causing a distraction, and you made Li Jin panic near the very end. As the team leaders, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, take your pick of one of these five soulshards!"

What? Surely they must have misheard?

These were superior-grade soulshards, so rare and precious that there were never any on the trading post, not that they would ever be able to afford any. Zhang Lie would let them pick one, just like that?

"Isn't this t-too much?" Fang Yi stammered.

When he had volunteered to take action against the Li clan to distract them from Zhang Lie, he didn't anticipate that this would be the reward.

"Don't look so shocked. Don't you think I understand that you could well have perished given the risk you took? You might even have implicated your families! Your willingness to help me out despite such a massive risk to yourselves is worth far more to me than a superior-grade soulshard."

A moment of stunned silence passed, then two. They were just ordinary hunters trying to grow strong, still nothing more than weaklings on the pecking order. What they had accomplished at risk to their own lives was something that barely affected Zhang Lie, but he understood their struggles and was rewarding them for it.

From that moment, they truly developed a sense of loyalty to Zhang Lie.

Not any ordinary leader would be willing to hand over such precious commodities to their subordinates. In the dimensional world, where strength was power, who would give up such a rare source of strength? Familial ties had been broken for less.

Fang Yi picked up the obsidian spear with the snake motif, and Sun Mengmeng the sunbird bow.

"Captain, I, Sun Mengmeng, pledge my eternal loyalty to you!"

This was a superior-grade soulshard, a superior-grade soulshard, something that even some among the top fifty hunters in the settlement didn't have! And now, she had one of her own, one that was particularly compatible with her own attack style.

This particular soulshard would double—no, triple, at least—her strength. In the past, she would have to work together with her teammates to kill a few strong mutated-grade lifeforms, but now, with superior gene fragments and this superior-grade armament, she thought she would be able to kill them alone with just one arrow.

Chapter 58: Frightening Statistics

Fang Yi felt exactly the same way. His new obsidian spear would be as powerful an augmentation as Sun Mengmeng's sunbird bow.

Instead of flattering Zhang Lie as he was wont to do, however, Fang Yi simply looked Zhang Lie deeply in the eyes. Sometimes, that was all the communication that was needed.

After handing Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng each a superior-grade soulshard, Zhang Lie kept the remaining three. He was intending on keeping the soulshard with the potent regenerative ability for himself and handing the other two soulshards out, but now wasn't the right time: the other hunters would first need to develop skills of their own, and handing them such a strong weapon now would affect their growth negatively.

He wasn't even sure he had made the right decision with regard to Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng.

He couldn't help reminding them, "You should all know where I got these soulshards from, and you'd better be wary of activating in public. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng nodded earnestly.

They were well aware of the trouble that could result if anyone saw them using those soulshards, and they immediately affirmed that they would avoid using them in sight of other hunters if at all possible.

Zhang Lie relaxed, then turned to the other hunters.

"Don't get too jealous. As long as you all follow me loyally, I won't be stingy with you. I promise that, before you all take part in the Void Cup, you'll each have at least one superior-grade soulshard of your own."

The other hunters whooped and proclaimed their loyalty, pledging that they would follow him come hell or high water.

In truth, who wouldn't want a captain like Zhang Lie? He was strong, practical, intelligent, resourceful, and, most importantly, generous.

After handing out the soulshards, Zhang Lie once again sent them on their way, indicating that they should start surveying the superior-grade lifeforms from the booklet he had given them.

As for himself, he was preparing to cook the prey he had hunted that day: the superior-grade blood ant.

Since he was going to consume it, he would have to remove its exoskeleton, which would serve as excellent raw material for forging.

Zhang Lie was very careful to preserve as much of the chitin as he could. He was planning to use the superior-grade blood ant's chitin, along with the venombane scorpion's carapace, to construct superior-grade armor for himself.

In that case, he would possess both a superior-grade weapon and superior-grade armor.

After deftly removing large pieces of chitin and storing them in his pouch, Zhang Lie finally began to prepare the ant flesh.

The superior-grade blood ant's flesh was white, and looked no different from crab meat. It wasn't as fresh as seafood, but its superior-grade nature gave it a surprisingly delectable texture, much like that of marbled beef.

There were many ways of preparing ant meat, steaming and frying being the most common among them. Zhang Lie chose the technique he was most familiar with: frying.

He dipped strips of marinated ant meat in a boiling-hot pot of oil, turning the white meat an appealing golden-orange. A mouthwatering scent filled the entire room.

Zhang Lie let the strips cool down for a moment, and then ate them piping-hot. As he consumed the veritable mountain of meat, the will of the world announced in his mind:

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade blood ant, you received one superior gene fragment.
Current total: 26]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade blood ant, you received one superior gene fragment.
Current total: 27]

[...one superior gene fragment. Current total: 33]

He spent two whole days solely eating and cultivating, and finally finished the last piece of meat on the afternoon of the second day. All in all, he had gained eight superior gene fragments, and was now at a grand total of 33.

This alone would put him within the top twenty hunters of the Blacksteel settlement.

It was relatively easy to hunt regular- and mutated-grade lifeforms, but far more difficult to hunt superior-grade ones. Not only were they difficult to track down, they were also difficult to kill. A regular team of hunters, all of whom had maxed out their mutated gene capacity, would need ten or more members in order to kill even the weakest superior-grade lifeform.

The additional superior gene fragments that Zhang Lie gained strengthened his body and constitution. Over the last two days, as he digested the nutrients from the superior-grade meat, his

[Ninecarp Transformation] reached the peak of the first form, and he felt as though he would be able to advance to the second form after consuming the flesh of one or two more superior-grade creatures.

Zhang Lie was a little curious as to just how strong his evolving framework would become then. His current stats were already extremely impressive, so what would further evolution bring?

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ninecarp Transformation, First Form: Carp

Techniques: Rippling Walk (advanced), Three-Wave Crescendo (advanced), Calm Waters (advanced), Fists of the Silent Sea (novice), The Boundless Blade (novice)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 100; Superior, 33

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Galewolf (mutated), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (superior), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior)

He had reached and long since exceeded the regular gene capacity, reached the mutated gene capacity, obtained 33 superior gene fragments, and had broken through with his foundational framework.

His three high-grade techniques, [Rippling Walk], [Three-Wave Crescendo], and [Calm Waters] had all reached advanced-level, and the pinnacle-grade [Fists of the Silent Sea] and the mythic-grade [The Boundless Blade] were all at novice-level.

As for his soulshards, he had the utilitarian transformation-type white-grub soulshard, the armament-type venombane-scorpion soulshard, which endowed him with powerful stealth and poison capabilities, the augmentation-type blood-ant soulshard, which granted him an extremely powerful boost, and the particularly rare augmentation-type eternalspring-cocoon soulshard, which boasted supreme regenerative abilities.

And all four were superior-grade soulshards.

Zhang Lie was certainly as strong as the top ten hunters on the gene leaderboard at present, and once he concocted Potion #2 and broke through the mutated gene capacity, he would easily be able to take on the top ten hunters on the gene leaderboard even if they came at him together.

He would soon be past the most difficult stage of his reincarnation, in which he was still weak and had to use all sorts of tricks to shore up his strength, and would quickly advance to the second stage of his plan: leading mankind to salvation.

Speaking of Potion #2, it had been over a week since he had requested that the auction house acquire the ingredients he needed, so he opened the trading post interface to contact his representative there.

Chapter 59: An Unexpected Profit

"Honored Mr. Peppercorn, I'm elated to be serving you today. Might I ask what services I may render for you?"

Zhang Lie was able to contact the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion without much effort. Perhaps because he was a million-class customer, he was afforded significant respect. The customer representative serving him today was, once again, Daffodil.

"I'd like to ask about the order I placed with you around a week ago. How many of the herbs have you managed to acquire?"

Daffodil's tone was regretful. "I apologize, Mr. Peppercorn, but we haven't been able to complete your order despite prioritizing it."

Zhang Lie couldn't help frowning. "You haven't? In that case, how much progress have you made?"

Daffodil was silent for a moment, as though she were pulling up the relevant file. "At the moment, we're still missing the bear's-heart grass, electroblade leaf, jadeconch flower, and amethyst starfruit, Mr. Peppercorn."

"Only these four ingredients?!" Zhang Lie was flabbergasted. After all, he had handed Daffodil a list of over a hundred ingredients. Most were herbs used for Potion #2, as well as a few supplementary ones for Potion #3. To think that Daffodil had managed to acquire all but four in just a week!

"Yes, Mr. Peppercorn! Of the four remaining ingredients, we expect to be able to acquire the jadeconch flower and amethyst starfruit relatively quickly, but there's currently a shortage of bear's-heart grass and electroblade leaf with our suppliers at the moment. Once again, I apolog—"

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm already quite amazed by your efficacy so far. Send me what you have now, and I'll try to obtain the last two ingredients on my own."

Zhang Lie had sent Daffodil this list of ingredients just to chance his luck, and while he had anticipated some success, he hadn't imagined how effective delegating this task had been.

In hindsight, however, it wasn't unexpected. At present, herblore was largely a neglected field, and had hardly developed into the enterprise it had been for the past Zhang Lie.

Now was, without a doubt, the best time to acquire rare herbs and resources whose uses were yet unknown.

Zhang Lie immediately sent points over for the gathered ingredients, then passed another list of ingredients to Daffodil to be sourced and purchased, with herbs even rarer and of higher-quality than those in the previous list.

The Thousand-Treasure Pavilion was happy to receive such bulk requests from as direct and easygoing a customer as Zhang Lie, and Daffodil replied that she would do her best to acquire as many ingredients on the list as she could. After all, the Pavilion stood to make quite a significant profit from the sale, even excluding the fee that Zhang Lie had to pay for such requests.

Zhang Lie knew about this, but he didn't mind at all. As long as he had all the necessary ingredients, he would be able to increase their value hundredfold, even thousandfold.

Within five minutes, three black sock-like sacks were teleported to Zhang Lie's room. These socks served a similar purpose as Zhang Lie's potbellied-toad pouch. They didn't look very impressive from the outside, but from the inside, each was a pocket of expanded space.

Zhang Lie inspected each sock and found them all stuffed to the brim with box after box of herbs, a dizzying sight to behold.

"Haha, I'm rich!" He couldn't help whooping in joy before calming himself down and carefully sorting through the herbs.

He dumped out the herbs in the three socks, then returned the socks to the teleportation device. Because of the unexpected haul, he was just one ingredient away from Potion #2: all he was missing was bear's-heart grass.

Most importantly, this grass wasn't a precious ingredient, just one that wasn't too common in the dimensional world, and one that was easily mixed up with a more common herb, which led to shortages from time to time.

As an accomplished pillmaster in his own right, Zhang Lie essentially had an invaluable compendium of herbs stored in his mind. In fact, he knew of five locations in the first realm in which bear's-heart grass grew, and none of them were particularly dangerous.

He immediately left the inn, but rather than heading outside, he turned toward the settlement's forge. It was true that he was impatient to concoct Potion #2, but that didn't mean he couldn't marshal his emotions and keep them in check. A lifetime of experience told him that it was precisely in such situations that he would have to be most patient and careful.

It was already evening, and nighttime in the dimensional world was dangerous indeed. It wasn't as though the bear's-heart grass wouldn't be there in the morning, and he could spend the night preparing to brew the concoction before gathering the grass tomorrow instead.

The reason he was venturing out into the settlement now was to have his superior-grade armor made. He was filled with anticipation for the armor that would result from combining the superior-grade venombane scorpion's carapace and the superior-grade blood ant chitin. After all, he had a relatively complete set of the two superior-grade lifeforms' exoskeletons.

The settlement was extremely lively at night. There were all sorts of robots in the settlement that provided unique services that every hunter made use of.

Zhang Lie headed to the S-ranked robotic forge. This was the most expensive forge in the settlement, with the costliest fee but also the best service. It exclusively accepted custom-made requests using superior-grade ingredients.

After having his identity verified, a robotic voice said, "Welcome, Mr. Zhang Lie. What may I help you with today?"

"I'd like to craft a superior-grade armor."

"Very good. What materials will you be supplying, and in what proportion?"

"60% superior-grade blood ant chitin, 30% S-gold alloy, and 10% superior-grade venombane-scorpion carapace."

"Please hand over the materials."

The lid of a large chest in the room slid open, and Zhang Lie quickly deposited his materials inside. He added, "There's S-gold alloy here, isn't there? I'll pay the standard price in points for its use."

As the lid of the box retracted, the robotic voice sounded again, "I understand. Please confirm your selection."

Equipment: superior-grade armor.

Materials: superior-grade blood ant chitin, superior-grade venombane-scorpion carapace, S-gold alloy.

Cost: 800,000 points.

Duration: 12 hours.

Once you confirm the order, you will be asked to select a design for the piece of equipment you wish to forge."

A screen appeared before Zhang Lie's eyes, detailing the choices he had made.

Zhang Lie glanced over the contents of the screen briefly, then confirmed the order.

Chapter 60: Encounter at the Bar

After Zhang Lie handed over the appropriate number of points, a design interface popped up. There were quite a lot of options possible, and he would have to choose the design he preferred most. Once he made his selection, the process was over: the robotic forge would take care of the grueling forging process for him.

All he had to do now was wait. In twelve hours, he could either return to the forge to collect the armor, or have it teleported to where he was.

It was rare that he would head to the center of the settlement, so instead of returning to the Blackgold Inn, Zhang Lie took a stroll around the stores all around the area. It was reminiscent of the heart of a metropolis. The stores largely belonged to the settlement itself, with only a rare few being owned—at significant expense—by the six great clans.

Zhang Lie stopped by a pub.

The dimensional world was rife with danger, and the hunters who fought here day and night lived in primal stress. The struggle and pressure to survive was magnitudes more intense than one would normally experience out on Earth, and methods to relieve said stress were commensurately more popular.

In fact, the entire street was filled with bars.

The reason Zhang Lie stopped in front of this specific bar was because it seemed to be owned by the Yun clan.

"Welcome!" Upon seeing the black-cloaked Zhang Lie, two hostesses rapidly walked over. "Why don't you come in and have a drink? We've just launched our newest offering, an electrifying liquor that's sure to leave your throat sizzling!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "In that case, I'll have to give it a try."

The two hostesses were naturally overjoyed to have roped in a paying customer, and they immediately welcomed him in. The interior of the bar was like a different world entirely. The music was so loud that the entire bar trembled in beat. Hunters, wearing all sorts of strange clothing and even armor, were splayed out in the bar, intermittently visible under the multicolored, strobing lights.

The hostesses brought Zhang Lie to a secluded corner and handed him a menu, which Zhang Lie didn't even glance at. "I'll have a flask of that electrifying liquor you mentioned!"

The two hostesses reared their heads in surprise, and one carefully whispered in his ear, "Sir, have you looked at the price?"

Zhang Lie glanced at the menu, and his eyes bulged in shock. 800 points for a flask?! Isn't this daylight robbery?

He should have returned to the inn! But he'd already said that he would get a flask of that liquor, so it would be embarrassing to take back his words now.

"Serve me a flask!" he repeated, waving his hand in mock largesse.

"Sir, would you like an escort?" Zhang Lie glanced around to see hostesses accompanying guests at all the tables around him.

"No, no, there's no need. I'm just here to enjoy the atmosphere." Zhang Lie rejected the offer and sent the two hostesses away.

He'd been to bars on Earth, but never in the dimensional world. It was certainly an... interesting experience.

The tables in the pub were relatively close together, and the guests at a neighboring table were easily able to overhear Zhang Lie's order.

One hunter, dressed in a black and white suit, couldn't help laughing at Zhang Lie's appearance. "What's this bar coming to? I thought it catered to a rather distinguished clientele, so how did someone like him make it in here? He's just a country bumpkin playing at wealth—did you see how his eyes bulged when he learned how expensive the new wine was?"

There were people who enjoyed causing trouble everywhere, weren't there? Zhang Lie was just trying to have a new experience or two, and then...

"You think you're all that?" Zhang Lie turned to the boorish guest.

When the other hunters at the table heard him talk back, they immediately made a fuss.

"Eh, the bumpkin's getting mad!"

"Do you know whom you're speaking to? The second son of the head of the Qin clan, one of the ten largest clans of the Blacksteel settlement!"

"Bumpkin, it's not too late to apologize. Otherwise, if you offend him, you won't be able to survive in the Blacksteel settlement for much longer!"

"Don't you know how valuable Young Master Qin's time is? And here you are, getting mad at having his attention!"

Zhang Lie scoffed. "What ten major clans? Aren't there only six in the settlement? Is this the same Qin clan that Qin Xiao's in?"

Some of the hunters at the neighboring table stood up, enraged.

"What, you don't know the Qin clan?"

"You bumpkin, you'd better apologize now, or I guarantee you won't be taking a step out of this bar today!"

"I pity your teammates, saddled with an ignorant fool like you! You'd better kneel down and apologize now. Young Master Qin obtained a superior-grade soulshard today, and he's feeling rather generous at the moment, so he might spare you if you show him proper respect!"

Zhang Lie glanced at them superciliously like he was looking at a trio of clowns. He had no intention of listening to them any longer, let alone apologizing. If this Qin clan wasn't the same Qin clan that Qin Xiao was in, then they were nobodies in the Blacksteel settlement.

Zhang Lie regretted speaking with them at all: it was too damaging to his reputation to be seen with a bunch of fools.

The hunters at the neighboring table began to walk over, as if they were about to start a fight.

"Brat, are you really looking for trouble—"

"Qin Feng, are you sure you want to offend someone like him? Don't blame me for not warning you: you'd better apologize now if you don't want your clan to be utterly ruined!" A female voice suddenly spoke up from behind Zhang Lie.

Qin Feng jerked in his seat, recognizing the voice.

What was a little devil like Chu Xun doing in this bar? Now that she was here, he would have to greet her. Otherwise, if he were to rouse her anger, he and his clan would be in for a bad time. He would even be willing to let matters lie with this country bumpkin if she requested it.

Qin Feng turned to greet Chu Xun, only to jump up in his seat.

"Young Master Chu, Young Miss Yun—w-what are all of you doing here?"

He was frozen stiff. Chu Feng, Yun Bing, Chu Xun, and Yun Meng were all at the bar to talk to him? No, they couldn't be here for him!

Who was he, Qin Feng, to deserve the attention of scions from the Chu and Yun clans themselves? A message to the Qin clan would be all it took for him to be delivered wherever they wanted, trussed up like a pig!

But if they weren't looking for him, then... Qin Feng's pupils widened. "Could it be..."