

## U. Warlord 61

Chapter 61: Interrogation at the Bar

Could the person that the Chu and Yun scions were here for be the mysterious fellow in front of Qin Feng? Surely not. That fellow possessed no sense of noble bearing at all!

"Don't you know what happened to the Li clan today?" Chu Xun prompted Qin Feng.

"Ah, of course I do. The majority of the Li elites perished, and Li Jin himself was stripped of his cultivation..."

"And you're daring to provoke the hunter who caused it all? I don't have to remind you about the difference in strength between the Li clan and your Qin clan, do I?" Chu Xun smiled, as though she were watching an entertaining spectacle.

Qin Feng's brain stalled. "Y-You mean that he, he's..."

"That's right. From today onwards, there will only be five great clans in the Blacksteel settlement, not six. The instigator of this entire affair, well, he's the hunter you just tried to terrorize."

Chu Xun's mocking words struck Qin Feng and his subordinates like bolts of lightning.

Did they have no sense of self-preservation? How could they have tried to taunt and frighten someone like him? Qin Feng clambered out of his seat and knelt down in front of the mysterious hunter.

As he kowtowed, he begged, "Sir, please forgive me for my insolence. I offended you in my ignorance, and I beg for your mercy. Please, allow me to pay for all your expenses at the bar today!"

Naturally, his subordinates followed suit.

"Esteemed hunter, compared to you, I'm nothing more than a fart. Please let me out!"

"Please, forgive us! I have a family to care for at home, elders and children, so won't you show us some clemency?"

Those hunters who had mocked Zhang Lie earlier were all kneeling on the floor, kowtowing in equal proportion to the crudeness of their earlier remarks.

If this hunter was someone who could ruin even the Li clan, then he surely wasn't an existence they could provoke at any cost! And their lives were certainly far more important than their pride.

Zhang Lie stared somewhat speechlessly at the kneeling Qin hunters on the floor. "Little girl, why do I see you everywhere I go?" he asked Chu Xun.

She pinched her nose with a dainty hand. "I can't help it. Your scent is just too strong! Deep-fried superior-grade blood ant meat must be tasty, but it's no good to enjoy such delicacies alone. Don't you have any left for me?"

Zhang Lie immediately ignored her and turned to the others. "Young Master Chu, Young Miss Yun, this is your territory, I take it? I'm sure I don't have to invite you to take a seat."

Chu Feng, Yun Bing, and the others all sat down by his table.

"Honestly, if you hadn't motioned for us to sit, we wouldn't have. After all, your performance today was just too shocking! We worked together in the past, but you seem to have grown so much stronger and more fearsome in a matter of days!" Chu Feng began, expressing his awe toward Zhang Lie.

Yun Bing and the others didn't speak up, but from their gazes, it was evident that they felt much the same way.

The Qin hunters kneeling on the floor began to quake.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Am I all that frightening? After all, this Young Master Qin certainly didn't seem to fear me, and I'm sure you must be stronger than he is."

His words caused the Qin hunters to slam their heads against the floor even more forcefully, and some of them were even bleeding from their foreheads by this point.

"Alright, alright, that's enough. If this goes on any further, I'm sure Yun Bing will blame me for ruining the mood in this bar. You'll remember not to bully country bumpkins like me in the future, won't you? Go on, get!" Qin Feng was so far beneath Zhang Lie's level that he felt it damaging to his reputation to play around with him too much.

"Yes, sir! I'll keep this lesson imprinted in my mind!" Qin Feng cried out.

"Thank you, sir!" his subordinates chorused.

They all stood up thankfully as they turned to leave.

"Wait!" The moment they turned around, the silent Yun Bing spoke up.

"I apologize for our behav—"

Qin Feng was interrupted halfway through his apology. "Do not worry. If this hunter wants to let you go, I certainly will not contradict his decision. I simply called you back to inform you never to return to this bar again. Do you understand?"

Qin Feng didn't dare say no. He nodded to Yun Bing, bowed again, and then scurried out of the bar.

Qin Feng's kowtowing had drawn the attention of the guests in the bar, as did Chu Feng and Yun Bing's appearance. The guests by the nearby tables all had their attention focused on this mysterious hunter, whom even Chu Feng and Yun Bing were showing respect to.

Zhang Lie didn't much mind: after all, he was still cloaked in black, and it wasn't as though they would be able to see his face.

On the other hand, Yun Bing and Chu Feng were unused to such public scrutiny. As scions of the Yun and Chu clans, if they ever went to a bar, they would head straight for the suites reserved for them on the upper levels, never to mingle with the common hunter on the ground floor.

Uneasy at being gawked at, Chu Feng motioned to Zhang Lie. "When are you going to take off that dreadful black cloak and show us your true appearance?"

Chu Feng was being surprisingly direct, but Zhang Lie only gave him a relaxed smile in response. "You'll learn about my identity once the time's right. I just fear that you won't be able to believe what you're seeing then."

Chu Feng laughed.

"What's there not to believe? The Blacksteel settlement is so large that I'm sure it boasts quite a few hidden talents. Surely you can't be, oh, say, that hunter at the bottom of the gene leaderboard?" Chu Feng replied casually, but his words caused Zhang Lie's eyes to narrow for a moment.

No one noticed anything.

"Oh? And what if I am? What would you think?"

Chu Feng blinked twice, not knowing how to respond.

"Chu Feng, haven't you led the conversation in a rather strange direction?" Yun Bing spoke up, turning to Zhang Lie. "The reason all of us are here today is because we have an important question for you."

Zhang Lie motioned for her to continue. "Ask what you will. I'm feeling good today, so I might even tell you the truth!"

Chapter 62: Two Girls

Upon hearing Yun Bing's words, Chu Feng also turned serious.

"Our question is simple: were you the hunter who stole the kill of the superior-grade venombane scorpion that night at the venombane glade?"

Chu Feng's earlier levity had all but vanished. After all, the answer to this question was far too important for him to remain relaxed.

Yun Bing, Yun Meng, and Chu Xun were all looking at Zhang Lie intently, as if they were trying to see through his hood and into his eyes.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Does it really matter to you? What if it were me? What if it weren't me?"

His insouciance deeply troubled the gathered scions of the Chu and Yun clans.

"If you aren't, then there's nothing to say, but if you are, don't you think you should explain yourself to us?" Chu Feng asked pointedly, stressing his words.

Zhang Lie cocked his head. "What do you mean? If you're unhappy that I stole your prey, shouldn't you blame yourself for not being strong enough? What do you want me to say? And so what if I were to tell you that I was the one who killed it?"

"Will you gang up on me in the Blacksteel settlement? Or will you try to target me back on Earth? But of course you don't know my true identity yet. Even if you did, are you sure you'd be able to take me down?"

Zhang Lie's response was startling. The Chu and Yun scions knew that Zhang Lie was a mysterious hunter, but was he so fearless or confident in his own strength that he would admit to what he had done?

"Do you realize that we almost died that night?!" Chu Feng was on the verge of losing his composure.

"As I've said, that just indicates how weak you are. What does that have to do with me?"

"..." Chu Feng knew that he had to continue the conversation, but he didn't know how.

Of course, they hadn't come to the bar in search of Zhang Lie just to have a drink, but they weren't here to cause trouble either.

Instead, they had a request to make of Zhang Lie. They were hoping to gain the initiative in the conversation by pressuring Zhang Lie, but now...

Zhang Lie could see through what they were doing, of course, or he wouldn't have acted so casually.

In contrast to Yun Bing and Chu Feng's speechlessness, Chu Xun and Yun Meng's curiosity toward Zhang Lie had reached its peak. Since the four of them had come to the bar together, they naturally knew a little of what was going on, as well as their brother and sister's attitude.

But they hadn't expected that Zhang Lie would be able to gain the upper hand so quickly, or even at all. They had never seen their older siblings conceding the upper hand before, and what they were witnessing today made Zhang Lie seem even more powerful in their minds: he was strong, mysterious, domineering, and fearless.

What was Chu Feng supposed to say? He was still so angry at the venombane fiasco that he feared he'd sour relations between them if he were to speak now. And in that case, how was he supposed to ask Zhang Lie to purchase white-grub cores from him?

In the end, it was Yun Bing who was forced to speak up. "What's over is over, and it doesn't really matter whether or not you were the hunter who stole the kill. To be honest, both our clans benefited from the aftermath, and we might even need to thank you for what you did."

Yun Bing's words turned the two girls' curiosity into awe and respect: after all, Yun Bing was essentially admitting defeat—she was thanking a hunter who had almost caused her death!

The two girls could hardly believe what they were hearing, particularly Yun Meng. This was the first time she had ever seen her sister give in! They turned to Zhang Lie with stars in their eyes.

Zhang Lie's smile grew wider. "There's no reason for thanks. I didn't cause the debacle intentionally, and, regardless of whether it was the Yun or Chu clan that chased after me, the outcome wouldn't have changed.

"Both then and now, my only intention has been to acquire superior gene fragments, and I don't plan on targeting any clan in particular. If I really wanted to do so, you wouldn't be sitting here now. In truth, the reason I decided to make a deal with your clans is because I found the two of you more amenable to me than the scions of the other clans.

"Of course, if you can't swallow your losses, feel free to come at me at any time."

Zhang Lie's words stunned Yun Bing and Chu Feng.

They were representatives of two of the largest clans in the settlement, so just how strong did this mysterious hunter have to be if he were confident that he could take them on?

"In that case, I propose that we let bygones be bygones." Yun Bing hesitated for a moment, then raised a cup of wine toward Zhang Lie. "With this toast, let us start afresh."

While Yun Meng and Chu Xun were still glancing at the three of them in stupefaction, they had each downed a cup of wine, and they suddenly seemed closer than before.

"It looks like I made the right decision in partnering up with the two of you," Zhang Lie murmured. "In that case, let's get to the heart of the matter. What do you need from me?"

Yun Bing and Chu Feng glanced at each other before Yun Bing spoke up. "We'd like you to help us contact Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Lie almost spat out the wine in his mouth. There was only one reason that they would be in search of Zhang Lie, but he didn't want to let on just yet. "Searching for Zhang Lie? For what purpose?"

"Surely you must know that he has developed a huge stockpile of white-grub cores?" Yun Bing ventured.

Zhang Lie laughed. "Is that so? In that case, you're searching for him to acquire more cores?"

Chapter 63: Girl in the Room

Yun Bing smiled. "Ah, it seems that you know everything already."

"Have the white grubs in the white-grub cave already been hunted to extinction?" Zhang Lie asked, mirroring her smile.

"In truth, they were more or less all gone by the time we went searching for them. After repeated trials, of the three types of food you listed, the white-grub cores were the ones that gave the best efficacy. In that case, would you be will—"

"I can certainly contact him, but I can't guarantee that he'll accept your request to trade," Zhang Lie interrupted, anticipating the question.

"As long as you can arrange a meeting for us, we'll handle the rest. After all, as representatives of two of the major clans, Chu Feng and I are confident that we'll be able to handle someone like him!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "As long as you're confident. But don't get too excited—he's not as easy to deal with as you might think. Be careful that he doesn't scam you!"

Upon hearing Zhang Lie's words, Chu Feng and Yun Bing immediately caught on to the fact that the mysterious hunter in front of them had some sort of relationship with Zhang Lie. In fact, he might just be the anonymous poster whose threads on the forum had caused such a huge ruckus.

But no matter the identity of this mysterious hunter, he was someone that neither of them wanted to offend. After all, he was too strong for them to handle, and seemed to possess knowledge from a mysterious source.

The Li clan wasn't all that powerful, but their clans certainly wouldn't have been able to crush it with such short notice.

"Let him try! As long as he's willing to sell the cores, we'll give him a price that'll satisfy him!" Yun Bing proclaimed, not seeming to be worried that Zhang Lie would pass the message on.

"In that case, you'll hear back from me soon."

Before Zhang Lie could leave, Yun Bing quickly added, "Please try to be as quick as you can."

"Oh? You must have made quite a bit of progress with the breakthrough, then."

"Things are going fine. We have had about thirty successes to date, and our tests show excellent improvement in all areas after the breakthrough. Our clans have decided to promote this technique as widely as we can, and even Chu Feng and I have decided to purge our techniques and start from scratch after participating in the Void Cup."

Zhang Lie was a little surprised that the two of them would be willing to give up what they had already achieved just for ten limit fragments, but it spoke to their resolution.

"Not bad, not bad! You'll need this sort of dedication if you really want to reach the peak of all hunters."

Zhang Lie downed the cup of liquor in his hand, feeling as though a bolt of lightning had shot down his mouth and all the way through to his stomach. Instead of a charring sensation, however, he felt relaxed and invigorated all over.

"This wine's not bad!" he praised.

"Come over whenever you like. As thanks for helping us arrange a meeting with Zhang Lie, this bar will never charge you for any of your expenses."

"In that case, I'll thank you in advance!" Zhang Lie hadn't anticipated Yun Bing would be so generous, and he quickly decided to make the most out of it, ordering as much of the wine as he was able to drink. Of course, he wasn't going to get himself drunk: he prized a clear head over anything else, after all.

It was only at two or three in the morning that Zhang Lie, somewhat tipsy, walked back to the inn. He stumbled into bed and slept all the way until morning the next day.

Because the settlement's walls were rather tall, there were only a few places where the sun could reach in the morning. One of these few places was naturally the VIP suites in the Blackgold Inn.

Zhang Lie opened the windows, basked in the sun, and stretched.

"You're awake!" Just as Zhang Lie was luxuriating in the warmth, he heard a female's voice from behind.

He stumbled, then turned around.

What's she doing here? What's going on? Didn't I come back alone?

How could this girl be here? Nothing untoward happened last night, right...?

Zhang Lie then glanced downward at his own body.

"What're you looking at? Don't you recognize me anymore? It's only been one night!"

Chu Xun glanced at Zhang Lie as though she had suffered some grievance: was she so annoying that he had to look at her so disdainfully?

"No, I mean—you, I, what sort of situation is this?!" Zhang Lie stammered, his mysterious image shattering to pieces.

Upon seeing Zhang Lie's flustered appearance, Chu Xun immediately laughed. "What do you think?"

Her laugh actually caused Zhang Lie to relax.

He glanced at her critically and noticed the master key in her hand, which would grant her access to all rooms in the inn. Of course she couldn't have been in his room last night! She had likely only entered right before he woke up.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Alright, you little nuisance. How did you end up with that master key?"

He immediately felt as though he was forgetting something important.

"Given who I am, would it be difficult for me to obtain such a key from the three corporations?"

She put her hands on her hips, a smug smile on her face, but Zhang Lie's face darkened, because he realized what he had forgotten: all he was wearing at the moment was underwear, and Chu Xun had seen his face!

Come to think of it, that didn't seem like such a big deal. So what if his identity were exposed? He had the strength to defeat anyone who would try to oppose him, after all.

That didn't excuse the girl's actions, however. He stared at her severely. "Does that mean you recognize who I am?"

Chu Xun tilted his head. "Of course I do! Aren't you Blackie? You don't look ugly, so why do you have to drape yourself in that ugly black cloak all day long? Are you just trying to be mysterious?"

Or perhaps his identity hadn't been revealed after all: Zhang Lie might have been infamous among the regular hunters of the settlement, but would someone like Chu Xun care about who he was, or even what he looked like?

Of course not!

Zhang Lie schooled his features. "Are you proud of breaking into my rooms?"

It was then that Chu Xun realized that Zhang Lie might be mad at her for what she did. After all, she was already of age, and this certainly wasn't an appropriate prank for someone like her to play.

"Ah, I'm sorry, I-I just wanted to see you again! Your scent's so unique that I noticed you the moment I passed by the Blackgold Inn! Don't get mad at me!" Her eyes turned red, and she seemed on the verge of tears.

Zhang Lie was never able to stand such hysterics. "Alright, alright, don't cry! What's the matter? What's so urgent that you had to barge into my room so early in the morning?"

Chapter 64: Accepting All Challengers

"Er, well, there's nothing urgent. I was just bored and... wanted to invite you to play?" Chu Xun ventured carefully.

"To play? Who do you think I am, a companion of yours? I tolerated your behavior the last few times on account of your brother, but I'm not letting you get away with this anymore, do you hear me? Now, immediately, at once, get out!"

Zhang Lie pointed at the door as he marshalled Chu Xun out of his room.

He felt that drastic measures were necessary on account of the expression that Chu Xun was giving him. If he didn't make matters clear, he might accidentally endorse her attraction to him, and that would be troublesome indeed. The best way to prevent that was to be blunt, so blunt that he couldn't be misunderstood.

"I'm leaving! You don't have to be so mean!" The sudden antipathy in Zhang Lie's actions left Chu Xun quite bewildered, and she, who had been pampered from birth, hardly knew how to react to such a circumstance. With tears in her eyes, she covered her face as she fled from the room.

"How ridiculous!" Zhang Lie clucked, once she had left. Wasn't he the victim? "Alright, I don't want to think about it anymore! It's time to check on my armor."

Zhang Lie shook his head fervently as he decided what to do next.

When Zhang Lie returned to the S-ranked robotic forge, the robot who handled Zhang Lie's order immediately recognized him.

"Welcome back, Mr. Zhang Lie. Your order is finished. Would you like to retrieve it now?"

"Yes, retrieve it."

"Please inspect the goods." As the robotic voice spoke, the lid of a box on the countertop slid open to reveal a set of exquisite, elegant armor appeared in front of Zhang Lie.

The dark red of the blood ant had merged perfectly with the deep violet of the venombane scorpion with impeccable design and functionality. The contours of the armor fit him perfectly and reflected the two superior-grade lifeforms from which it had been made. The appearance of the armor was majestic enough that even Zhang Lie was somewhat dazzled by the sight.

The armor consisted of six pieces: helmet, cuirass, tasset, greaves, pauldrons, and vambrace. Each piece was flawless, and fitted perfectly with the other pieces.

Zhang Lie had seen the design for the armor beforehand, but when he saw the finished product in front of him, he was still amazed by its overall quality.

It was totally worth the price he'd paid—materials from two superior-grade lifeforms, along with 800,000 points!

Zhang Lie couldn't resist the temptation to put on the armor immediately. Moments later, the black-cloaked Zhang Lie became a warrior in gleaming red and purple.

With the activation of his genetic energy, a shimmering, pale blue shield appeared before the armor's surface. Zhang Lie tested its durability and was very pleased.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, your order has been completed. We wish you luck in your hunt!" the robotic voice piped up again, seeing Zhang Lie wearing the armor with a satisfied smile.

Zhang Lie nodded at the robot, draped his black cloak over the armor, and then left the forge. With his new armor, Zhang Lie was perfectly confident of being able to harvest the bear's-heart grass. In fact, because of this armor, he would be able to approach a more dangerous harvesting spot, accomplishing two goals in one swoop: harvesting the herbs he needed, as well as obtaining a few more superior gene fragments.

The Bear Spires was a location far past the outskirts of the Blacksteel settlement, with intense, fluctuating magnetic fields that caused the spires—great hunks of rock and steel—to levitate in mid-air.

Because of the fluctuations in the field and the instability of the levitating spires, there were frequent rockslides in the area, which were particularly dangerous for hunters caught unawares.

This was the native habitat of a class of giant bear-type lifeforms that were naturally insensitive to the magnetic field in the region, known as the bimu bears. These lifeforms possessed earth-attuned genetic energy, and had massive, strong bodies.

Most adult bimu bears were superior-grade lifeforms, about seven to eight meters tall at full extension, with a weight of about a few dozen tons, and the ability to toss around boulders the size of small hills: the paradigm of brawny strength.

Most frightening was the fact that these lifeforms lived in packs: they would wander around in groups of two and three, and regular hunters certainly wouldn't dare to try to hunt them down.

Elderly bimu bears, in their dying days, would travel to a certain spot on the spires and peacefully await their death. Under the influence of the magnetic field and geography of the region, crystalline stalks of grass would grow right by the hearts of these bear carcasses.

These special stalks of grass were the last ingredient that Zhang Lie needed for Potion #2, and the spot where these elderly bears would go to die was known as the Bimu Harbor.

It was true that the Bimu Harbor wasn't the only place in the Bear Spires where the bear's-heart grass could grow; after all, some elderly bears would die before they could reach the harbor.

Under these circumstances, it was rare that bear's-heart grass would grow, but there was always a vanishingly small probability of their doing so. Zhang Lie's original intention had been to head to the vicinity of the harbor under stealth, hoping to find these accidental growths, but with his new armor, he felt that he would be able to sneak within the harbor itself and to slaughter the elderly bears that lay dying there.

Naturally, the Bimu Harbor was a sacred place for the bimu bears, and they wouldn't allow any other lifeforms to approach. If Zhang Lie were to carry out his plan, he would inevitably attract the attention of such bears, and would certainly have to fight them off.

As the Bear Spires came within sight, the corners of Zhang Lie's mouth lifted with excitement, and his body slowly faded into nothingness. Wielding Venombane in one hand, Zhang Lie activated the strongest stealth he could sustain, then headed quickly toward the spires.

The moment he stepped forward, he felt his body begin to sink, as though gravity had increased dramatically. Zhang Lie naturally began to adjust his breathing and movement to suit the high-gravity environment, but just as he took a heavy step forward, gravity seemed to vanish entirely.

Caught blindsided, Zhang Lie wobbled into visibility in the next moment.

He smiled again at the spires looming before him. It looked as though navigating the terrain would be his first obstacle. As a hunter, however, Zhang Lie was no stranger to such trials, and even grew excited at the prospect of overcoming such hurdles.

After all, since his rebirth, he had always been in a rather sheltered environment, and it had been quite a long time since he had had to struggle with such obstacles. Now that he was finally experiencing a challenge again, his indomitable will swelled with excitement.

Given his years of experience, navigating the terrain quickly became trivial to him.

After traipsing through the surroundings and gaining a sense for the unpredictability of the magnetic field, Zhang Lie was successfully able to step into the spires and begin his hunt for traces of the bimu bears.

#### Chapter 65: Making Preparations

In truth, this was Zhang Lie's first time at the Bear Spires, and he had no experience from his past life to draw upon.

Amidst the floating spires, Zhang Lie, cloaked in black, began to walk faster and faster. His slow, faltering steps turned into a fast walk, and then a rapid dash. He took only fifteen minutes to get used to the fluctuating magnetic field, then began to scout the region for traces of the bimu bear.

He acclimated so quickly not only because he had refined control over his body, but also because of the functionality of his new armor.

Once Zhang Lie found a bimu bear, he would be able to track down the location of the Bimu Harbor. After about ten minutes, Zhang Lie finally noticed traces of a superior-grade bimu bear within a valley.

This valley was a massive bowl-like depression, and at the very bottom, Zhang Lie saw two bimu bears playing with each other. Seven meters tall, weighing dozens of tons, white-furred all over, with sharp teeth and strong jaws—they were a fearsome sight to behold.

What distinguished bimu bears from their terrestrial counterparts was that they had three eyes lined side by side, making them all the more terrifying. According to rumors, adult bimu bears even had some ability to control the magnetic field around them.

That being said, Zhang Lie wasn't very interested in this pair, because they were both adult bimu bears, possessing frightening combat ability, and would be near-impossible to isolate.

However, after wandering around the spires, Zhang Lie noticed no other bimu bears around.

Fatigue drained his strength: traversing the complicated terrain and dealing with the field fluctuations took quite a toll on his body. Zhang Lie had no choice but to rest.

It took him two whole days before he eventually found the Bimu Harbor that he had only heard about in his past life.

Glancing at the pristine, snowy-white stone in front of him, Zhang Lie couldn't help but marvel at the majesty of the dimensional world, and also at the fact that rumors couldn't be entirely trusted.

After all, the so-called Bimu Harbor wasn't a harbor at all, but rather a large outcropping of white rock with a flat top. Against the backdrop of the deep blue sky, the outcropping looked as though it led toward an ocean of blue, granting it its name.

And on top of that outcropping lay the bones of a bimu bear.

The bear's-heart grass was, Zhang Lie thought, also rather inappropriately named. Rather than calling it bear's-heart grass, bear's-bone grass would be more suitable. The crystalline blades of grass grew not where the bimu bear's heart was, but rather on its bones. They were simply more concentrated around its ribcage.

However, even after finding the Bimu Harbor and the bear's-heart grass, Zhang Lie didn't make a move: right then and there, at this mass grave of bimu bears, there were at least a dozen aged bears still with some mobility and fighting strength.

Under such circumstances, Zhang Lie certainly wasn't going to act rashly. Instead, he began a second wait, one that lasted a whole week.

By then, half the aged bears had died, and none had entered within the last two days. There were only five elderly bears left, and Zhang Lie's chance was finally here.

He jumped up onto the outcropping, instantly noticing that gravity seemed to have increased by yet another magnitude. If he hadn't spent the last few days acclimating himself, he could well have dropped out of stealth.

As he got used to the even higher gravity, Zhang Lie approached the closest bear carcass and began harvesting the bear's-heart grass. His movements were gentle and slow, but exceedingly tiring in such a fatiguing environment.

Zhang Lie could sense the stamina draining out of his body at a rapid pace.

He had only harvested ten blades of grass before he felt as though he couldn't lift his arms any further. In fact, were it not for his armor, he thought that he might not have been able to move about on this outcropping at all. The armor was negating much of the increased gravity, and what he was experiencing was only a small fraction of its usual intensity.

Under ordinary circumstances, without the need for stealth, Zhang Lie would be able to revitalize and invigorate his body with genetic energy, but Zhang Lie had no choice but to overcome the magnetic field with nothing but his mortal body.

He lasted two more minutes, harvesting almost all the bear's-heart grass on the first carcass, before his stamina finally gave out.

He retreated from the Bimu Harbor.

The next few days were a cycle of resting, waiting, recuperating energy, and harvesting grass.

His muscles ached, and he was often bored, but Zhang Lie was proud of what he was able to accomplish.

Unfortunately for him, this idyllic period wasn't to last. In just three days, there were four more aged bears up on the Bimu Harbor.

Zhang Lie found it hard to imagine just how many bimu bears had to be wandering around the floating spires. After all, these were superior-grade creatures, which were relatively rare in the first realm of the dimensional world.

In retrospect, however, it shouldn't have been surprising. The unique geography and environmental factors in the region would prove a significant disadvantage to most hunters, even those at the top of

the gene leaderboard. And if no one were to hunt these bimu bears, if they were at the top of the food chain, then certainly their numbers would just keep going up.

Zhang Lie rested for another three days.

On the last day, Zhang Lie found, at long last, an opportunity to give a dying bimu bear a lethal blow.

He didn't know whether the will of the world would recognize such a contemptible attack; as it turned out, it did. After the aged bimu bear died from Venombane, the will of the world spoke up in Zhang Lie's mind,

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

Naturally, Zhang Lie, under the cover of night, stuffed the bimu bear he had killed into his potbellied-toad pouch.

And then he continued his harvest.

It took him two whole weeks before he was ready to leave, after having collected over a thousand blades of bear's-heart grass. At the same time, he trained and strengthened his body dramatically in the grueling high-gravity environment of the Bimu Harbor.

After his harvest was complete, he immediately left the Bear Spires, then headed back to the Blacksteel settlement as fast as he could. Of course, this time around, instead of heading to the Blackgold Inn, he went to the settlement-owned Blacksteel Inn. He didn't want to have another run-in with Chu Xun, nor for any rumors to spread about what they were doing in a room together.

After getting a high-class suite in the Blacksteel Inn, Zhang Lie prepared for a long stint of seclusion. During this period of time, he was planning to consume the bimu bear's flesh, concoct Potion #2, and advance all his genetic techniques.

#### Chapter 66: Zhang Lie's Growth

With his preparations complete, Zhang Lie began to brew Potion #2. Compared to Potion #1, the brewing process was at least tenfold more complicated.

First, the various ingredients had to be individually prepared.

The main ingredient, black coral, had to be nourished with genetic energy until it turned a golden yellow before its herbal properties could be extracted.

The bear's-heart grass had to be incinerated into ash, before being combined with the extract of the eye-of-night flower.

Preparing each ingredient was a lengthy, tedious, and time-consuming process, one that occupied much of Zhang Lie's time and attention.

When he grew hungry, he would consume some roasted bimu bear meat as he continued cultivating his genetic techniques. [1]

After ten days, as Zhang Lie ate his thirtieth meal of bear meat, he obtained yet another superior gene fragment, his seventh from the bear.

At the same time, his genetic core, under the guidance of [Ninecarp Transformation] began to tremble. As the core trembled, it also seemed to compress, and Zhang Lie felt as though something were about to condense in his core.

His intuition was right: an S-shaped black strand suddenly emerged within the core. After it appeared, it wrapped around the nimble fish inside. The pale pink fish seemed to lose its vitality, allowing the black strand to cocoon it.

As Zhang Lie continued to eat and cultivate, the genetic energy that entered his body all seemed to transform into black strands. In a matter of moments, the fish was completely hidden from sight within a black, elongated cocoon.

Zhang Lie felt a curious straining sensation coming from his core, followed by a compression and evolution of his genetic energy. Under such unusual circumstances, he naturally stopped his work and began to focus completely on his genetic core.

It took him an entire day to process the evolution, but when it was all over, Zhang Lie's [Ninecarp Transformation] had entered its second form: the serpent. Out of the black cocoon had emerged a black serpent, which was now happily darting around his core.

At the same time, Zhang Lie's water-attuned genetic energy gained a second aspect, that of darkness. It was so dark that Zhang Lie felt as though it would leave an indelible stain on anything it touched.

The first form, the carp, was water-attuned and mitigated fire damage. The second form, the serpent, was dark-attuned and endowed his attacks with the power of decay and corrosion.

Zhang Lie's framework was now dual-attuned, and the metamorphosis had caused the framework to grow to medium-grade, improving his rate of recovery and of condensing genetic energy.

Zhang Lie was overjoyed by his growth.

He made a gripping motion with his right hand, and an orb of black, crystalline material flashed into existence. From afar, it looked like a crystal orb, but from close up, it seemed like a ball of mysterious, inky water, combining both the expanse of the ocean and a strong corrosive nature that could ruin all that it touched.

With his left hand, he grabbed a pipette and touched it against the orb. Black mist rose into the air, and the bulb of the pipette vanished from existence.

"With this power and Venombane, the Void Cup should be a fun experience," Zhang Lie murmured, marvelling at his newfound abilities.

However, he quickly returned to the task at hand: brewing Potion #2. After a few simple tests, Zhang Lie retracted his genetic energy and returned to the brewing process.

It took Zhang Lie a whole month to process the hundreds of ingredients needed for Potion #2, and then to begin the brewing process in earnest. The final result of his struggles was two test tubes, one black and one white.

At this critical juncture, Zhang Lie was very nervous—whether all his work within the last month would pay off depended on this very moment. If he were to fail, he would have to restart the arduous month-long process again.

He picked up both test tubes, trying his best to allay the trembles in his hands, and began to pour them into a third test tube, ensuring that the two liquids mixed evenly and rapidly with one another.

The combination of the black and white liquids produced a sizzling sound within the test tube, and golden wisps of smoke slowly drifted out of it.

Only when he saw these golden wisps did Zhang Lie relax, his face warping with excitement.

He had succeeded! He really had! A whole month of effort for the test tube in front of him... He completed Potion #2 on his very first try!

Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed as he stared at the concoction still smoking away on the countertop.

If he consumed this potion, and if he filled up his missing gene fragments to capacity, then he was sure he would dominate the entire Void Cup.

After waiting a few minutes for the mixture to settle, Zhang Lie picked up the sole mixture of Potion #2 in existence and drained it in one gulp. Potion #1 had been exceedingly spicy, and Potion #2 seemed to be smooth and buttery. Before he could savor the taste of it, it had already slid down his throat, leaving only a refreshing scent of herbal fragrance behind.

The next moment, it was replaced by wave after wave of potent herbal strength.

Potion #1 made him feel as though he were inflicted with the technique endemic to blood ants: [Bloodbath].

Potion #2 made him feel as though he were being submerged in an ocean, his body battered and bruised by each wave that came his way, then reassembled and made whole again. Destruction and regeneration, regeneration and destruction, in an endless cycle.

Even with his high pain tolerance, Zhang Lie found himself rolling on the ground, moaning as the potion wracked his body. At the same time, with his body screaming in pain, Zhang Lie could clearly feel his cells bursting with vitality.

His pores widened and contracted, his muscles spasmed, his arteries and veins and capillaries were broken down and reinforced.

His body seemed to be reforging itself on a fundamental, genetic level.

Black, foul-smelling impurities stained his clothing, and he began to sweat as though he had just recovered from a debilitating sickness.

His impurities purged, Zhang Lie had gained a measure of resistance against the potent medicinal energy, and he immediately began to marshal it as he activated his [Ninecarp Transformation].

The medicinal energy, like cresting ocean waves, rushed into his genetic core. The black serpent within happily frolicked in the golden waves, and Zhang Lie felt the purity and density of his genetic energy reach a new threshold.

Chapter 67: Picking a Target

Zhang Lie couldn't wait to see what his stats looked like now.

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ninecarp Transformation, Second Form: Serpent

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

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 100; Superior, 40

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

To be honest, if anyone were to see Zhang Lie's stats now, they would likely receive a tremendous shock. Based on his stats alone, Zhang Lie was superior to most hunters at the top of the gene leaderboard.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng likely still had more superior gene fragments than he did, but he didn't think himself inferior in any other area.

With his framework advanced, and with his potion complete, Zhang Lie's month-long seclusion came to an end. His next step was naturally to saturate both his mutated and superior gene capacities.

He exited the inn and quickly found Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng. Before he started brewing the potion, he had informed the two of them about his plans, and they would leave a hunter or two outside the Blacksteel Inn daily, waiting for him to emerge.

Upon seeing Zhang Lie again, the gathered hunters all noticed the change to Zhang Lie's aura and genetic energy. Although they didn't know precisely what had happened, they were certain that Zhang Lie had just made a great leap forward in his growth as a hunter.

Of course, they hadn't been slacking either. Zhang Lie had given them an additional task beyond scouting the whereabouts of superior-grade lifeforms: filling up their mutated gene fragments to capacity.

With the superior gene fragments that Zhang Lie had shared with them, and with the superior-grade soulshards that their team leaders possessed, the gathered hunters easily finished this task.

"Captain, it feels like you've grown much stronger," Fang Yi remarked, flattering Zhang Lie out of habit.

Still exuberant from his success, Zhang Lie nodded. "A big improvement indeed, but I could say the same for all of you. You're all maxed out on mutated genes, aren't you?"

"Captain, you've given us such favorable conditions for success—of course we wouldn't fail you now!" Sun Mengmeng cried out.

The other hunters nodded.

Zhang Lie laughed. "In that case, how about your other task? How many of the lifeforms in the booklet have you tracked down?"

"All but ten or so of them, Captain! We wouldn't dare slack off on a task you personally assigned us," Fang Yi jumped in.

"All but ten? You're not lying to me, are you? I must have listed at least fifty superior-grade lifeforms in that booklet!"

Zhang Lie couldn't believe how efficient Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had been.

"All but ten," Fang Yi reaffirmed. "We wouldn't lie to our beloved captain! We've tracked down most of the lifeforms in the booklet and investigated most of their habitats and behavioral tics. If you're ready, we can start the hunt immediately!"

"In that case, what are we waiting for?" Zhang Lie began to smile in earnest. "You've spent a lot of work preparing this information, so why don't you recommend what our first target should be?"

Fang Yi took out the small booklet that Zhang Lie had handed him in the past. "Captain, I suggest the longhorn dawnbeetle! Its soulshard grants a rare aural attack to its bearer, and it can replace the soulshard you failed to obtain when you hunted the dreadtoad."

Zhang Lie glanced at the booklet, which illustrated a giant bug-type lifeform with black chitin dotted with fiery red stars. He had hunted such a lifeform in his past life, and was able to recall quite a bit about it.

The longhorn dawnbeetle was a superior-grade fire-attuned lifeform that looked like a massively enlarged version of a terrestrial longhorn beetle.

It possessed a supremely hard exoskeleton, and its pincers could erupt in flame, enhancing its extremely strong offensive capabilities. Its cries were aural attacks that could easily bypass shields. Even amidst superior-grade lifeforms, it was a strong existence indeed.

Of course, no matter how strong it was, Zhang Lie was confident that he would be able to deal with it now.

"A soulshard that grants an aural attack, along with a number of mutated-grade lifeforms in the vicinity... this isn't a bad choice. In that case—"

"Wait!" Just as Zhang Lie was about to announce that the longhorn dawnbeetle would be their first target, Sun Mengmeng interrupted. "Captain, while I think the longhorn dawnbeetle might be a good choice, it's not the best choice. I would suggest the forest wolfman!"

She picked up the booklet and flipped to the corresponding page.

"The forest wolfman is a humanoid, life-attuned lifeform, with immense regenerative abilities and considerable physical strength. Most importantly, its transformation-type soulshard turns its bearer into a wolfman, which means it preserves the use of techniques and soulshards while in a transformed state. Furthermore, the wolfman also has a penetrating aural attack. Captain, I believe these strengths are particularly suited to you!"

Both Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi had made their recommendations based on what they knew of Zhang Lie, but Sun Mengmeng had, once again, shown herself to be more thoughtful.

The forest wolfman's soulshard was more unique, and granted a larger variety of benefits relative to the longhorn dawnbeetle's. At present, although Zhang Lie had amassed quite a few superior-grade

soulshards, he was still missing two main types: a humanoid transformation-type soulshard, and a summoning-type soulshard.

A transformation-type soulshard consumed a significant amount of genetic energy, but it could also provide a commensurate amount of strength or flexibility in certain circumstances.

A summoning-type soulshard was the rarest of all soulshards, and could only be produced when a superior- or higher-grade lifeform died with extreme regret or unwillingness. A soulshard that formed under such circumstances would be able to house such a lifeform within it.

Zhang Lie had never hunted the forest wolfman in his past life, but he had seen a fight by a hunter who had a wolfman soulshard.

His memories of that fight were particularly vivid: that hunter recovered impossibly quickly, possessed frightening physical strength, and was both surprisingly agile and endowed with a piercing aural attack.

The soulshard would augment almost all aspects of his strength, and since Sun Mengmeng and the others had discovered such a superior-grade lifeform, it certainly should be given priority over the longhorn dawnbeetle.

Zhang Lie made up his mind. "Since you were able to find traces of the forest wolfman, we'll start with that. A humanoid transformation-type soulshard is more precious than all but a summoning-type soulshard, and it should certainly be given priority.

"Our target is the forest wolfman. Go make your preparations now!"

"Yes, Captain!"

## Chapter 68: Forest Wolves

The broadleaf forest was, as its name suggested, a forest composed solely of broadleaf trees.

Within that forest lived all sorts of wolf-type, rodent-type, and bird-type lifeforms.

A seven-member team of hunters was proceeding quickly into the depths of the forest, making such a ruckus that they were clearly unconcerned about attracting the attention of the lifeforms all throughout the forest.

Of course, this team of hunters was none other than Zhang Lie's Team Zenith.

As they rushed forward, Zhang Lie asked, "Mengmeng, how far away is the forest wolfman's lair?"

Sun Mengmeng glanced around her. "We're only about three miles away, Captain!"

"In that case, let's proceed at full speed." Black mist shrouded Zhang Lie as he darted forward even faster than before, wind trailing in his wake.

Seeing their captain pulling ahead, Sun Mengmeng and the others immediately sped up as well. It took only moments before they all arrived at the wolfman's lair, a cave in a rocky mountain of middling size.

Around the cave sat about a dozen or so wolf-type lifeforms, like royal guards protecting their monarch from harm.

Upon seeing Zhang Lie and his team rushing forward, they immediately howled and blocked their way. When they stood up, they were over two meters tall, with sharp horns protruding from their head.

The hunters' faces were all calm and collected; after all, these forest wolves might look intimidating, but they were only mutated-grade lifeforms, and hence of essentially no threat to the gathered hunters.

The wolves that blocked Zhang Lie's path were each cut apart with a few clean strokes from Venombane, some of them still howling even as they died. With the other hunters dealing with the stragglers, all the wolf guards perished in just one minute.

Unfortunately for Zhang Lie, none of them dropped a soulshard. Zhang Lie didn't want to take any chances against such valuable prey, so he was rather concerned about what to do next.

As he was deep in thought, however, wolf howls echoed throughout the cave and the mountain. In a matter of moments, hundreds of forest wolves had emerged from the vicinity, surrounding Zhang Lie and his team.

The wolves stared at the seven hunters, eyeing them but not rushing forward.

At the same time, from within the cave emerged a five-meter tall, bipedal forest wolfman. The forest wolfman was a superior-grade lifeform that evolved from the mutated-grade forest wolf. It was bipedal, with its shoulder and elbow joints having transformed to become more human-like.

Except for its hind legs, its anatomy was no different from that of a regular human. Of course, from appearance alone, it still looked like a wolf. Fur covered its entire body, and it had lupine claws and a snout filled with sharp teeth.

Upon seeing the carcasses in front of Zhang Lie and the others, it howled, prompting the gathered wolves to rush down from the mountain and leap toward Zhang Lie.

"Kill them!" Zhang Lie shouted, rushing forward and facing the pack of wolves straight on.

The wolves' bodies seemed to split apart almost before they reached Zhang Lie, most of them dying before they could even get a good look at his appearance. The disparity in their strength was simply too large.

Even Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others found it quite easy to deal with even such a large pack of wolves. A dozen had already fallen to Fang Yi's obsidian spear, and Sun Mengmeng's sunbird bow was all but designed for such fights. The wolves couldn't even approach her, let alone harm her.

Despite seeing their comrades perish, the wolves didn't shrink back. As the wolfman howled again, they surged forward at full strength, emboldened and fearless. The wolfman himself joined in the fight, pouncing toward Zhang Lie.

However, what surprised the hunters—and even the wolfman himself—was that Zhang Lie darted toward the left flank of wolves instead, continuing to slaughter them rather than face the wolfman.

Why would he avoid a direct confrontation now? Wasn't their objective the forest wolfman? Given their captain's strength, he could certainly handle the wolfman easily, so why wasn't he fighting?

Zhang Lie scowled as he tore apart wolf after wolf. He was having a remarkably bad string of luck, and he hadn't yet obtained a mutated-grade forest wolf soulshard yet.

He needed one to guarantee that a superior-grade soulshard would drop, so he certainly didn't want to attack the forest wolfman until he had one in his possession.

The forest wolfman was naturally enraged that its opponent was simply ignoring it. With a fearsome howl and an explosion of life-green genetic energy, the vines in the forest began to grow rapidly, shooting toward and wrapping around Zhang Lie as if they had been endowed with life.

"Captain, we're coming to help you!" The other hunters immediately began shooting long-ranged attacks toward the forest wolfman, trying to distract it from its attack.

However, the moment they made their move, Zhang Lie shouted, "There's no need! Just protect yourselves and leave him to me."

A flurry of quick slices cut apart all the vines heading in his direction. At the same time, Zhang Lie beheaded a mutated-grade forest wolf rushing toward him. With a puff of green smoke, a dark green soulshard condensed on its head.

Zhang Lie's eyes lit up expectantly. With this mutated-grade soulshard in hand, he was sure to get a superior-grade forest wolfman soulshard now!

As he reached out for the soulshard, the forest wolfman, wreathed in sparks of green genetic energy, pounced toward him.

#### Chapter 69: Soulshard in Hand

With a huge crash, the forest wolfman's pouncing attack smashed a huge hole in the ground, but Zhang Lie's body vanished the instant his claws swiped through it.

The next moment, in a flurry of shadows, before the forest wolfman could respond, Zhang Lie appeared behind his head. A violet shortsword struck him, seemingly from an extradimensional space.

Just before the attack landed, the wolfman's fur rose up and shot out in the direction of the attack, preventing what would have been a lethal blow and sapping Zhang Lie of his momentum. While Zhang Lie was dealing with the fur, a claw came from his right, forcing him to defend against the sudden attack.

Zhang Lie activated [Rippling Walk], then vanished from sight once more. Reappearing by the wolfman's left flank, he thrust at the wolfman's unprotected side.

Clang! Despite his speed and stealth, the blade still struck a claw. As expected, a superior-grade lifeform was superior-grade indeed. Even if the wolfman weren't able to sense Zhang Lie until the very last moment, his agility and reflexes were still sufficient to block Zhang Lie's blow.

However, the corrosive strength of Venombane caused the wolfman to let out a pained howl. His claw had only touched it for an instant, but it was already corroding, and his paw was bloodied and throbbing.

Fortunately for the wolfman, his life-attuned genetic energy was a perfect counter for Zhang Lie. In a flash of green light, his claw was refreshed, and his injuries vanished as though he had never sustained them.

Zhang Lie immediately understood that this was an opponent he couldn't hope to exhaust to death. His techniques and reservoir of genetic energy were insufficient to overcome the wolfman's regeneration. If he were to eke out a victory, he would have to be fast and decisive.

Enraged, the forest wolfman took the offensive. As it howled, tendrils after tendrils of vine snapped up from the ground, stitching together into a large, intricate web all around it.

Zhang Lie had to admit that this particular forest wolfman was quite gifted at combat, having identified the weakness in Zhang Lie's stealth in just two or three clashes. The web of vines would massively reduce the space in which Zhang Lie could operate and hinder his ability to perform sneak attacks.

Ding! Ding! As the vines filled the air, the forest wolfman clashed with Zhang Lie in close combat, claws against blade. The wolfman's actions were particularly agile, and his claws seemed to strike at Zhang Lie from all directions.

Surprisingly, he was able to fight on equal footing with Zhang Lie.

The strength of this particular forest wolfman was shocking. Although Zhang Lie had yet to use any of his soulshards but Venombane, nor any of his higher-grade genetic techniques, an ordinary superior-grade lifeform certainly wouldn't be able to withstand Zhang Lie's strength after he consumed Potion #2.

And yet, under these conditions, the wolfman was about to gain the upper hand. As the vines filled the air around them, Zhang Lie's mobility became severely restricted.

"I have to admit I've underestimated you. In that case, take this! [Fists of the Silent Sea]!" As Zhang Lie defended against the wolfman's claws with Venombane in his right hand, he attacked him with his left fist.

Fist and claw met in a giant explosion, filling the air with ripples of dark genetic energy. These ripples struck the wolfman's left arm and elbow, distorting them as though marring a surface of still water.

With a few loud cracks, the forest wolfman's arm was paralyzed and hung limply by his side.

The forest wolfman howled, and the web of vines he was controlling snapped apart. With his left arm severely injured, he had no choice but to give up on attacking Zhang Lie and to retreat instead.

As he howled, a wave of sound shot toward Zhang Lie, not intending to wound him, but only to deter his subsequent attacks. One fist, just one fist, had caused the bones of his left arm to crack and splinter, and even his life-attuned genetic energy wouldn't be able to heal such a severe injury instantaneously.

Of course, Zhang Lie wasn't going to give up on his prey. As the wolfman retreated, Zhang Lie gathered all his genetic energy and broke through the wolfman's barrier of sound.

The wolfman had just retreated, and the bones of his left arm just about to reform, when he sensed a shadowy figure by his back. Before he could react, Zhang Lie's left palm had already struck his back.

With a loud thump, the black ripples appeared once more, and the forest wolfman spat out a mouthful of fresh blood. He felt as though all his organs had suffered internal injury in the aftermath of the attack, and the genetic energy throughout his body instinctively retreated to his genetic core, lowering his defenses to their minimum.

He would pay a price for exposing such weakness, and that price would be his life.

A violet shortsword thrust deeply into the wolfman's unprotected head. Corrosive dark genetic energy burst from the wound, causing the wolfman's head to decay instantly, a lethal blow. As dark green blood shot out of the wound, the forest wolfman let out a dying howl.

Zhang Lie's left hand, hidden from sight, smashed a mutated-grade forest wolf soulshard to splinters. On top of the wolfman's head, a fist-sized, dark jade soulshard was rapidly condensing.

Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the gathered hunters' faces lit up at the sight. From their perspective, it wasn't all that difficult to find a superior-grade lifeform; what was rare was to have it condense a soulshard after its death.

This was especially true for the rarer superior-grade lifeforms, such as the forest wolfman. It was certainly more likely than not that no soulshard would condense after a kill, so the fact that Zhang Lie had gotten the exact soulshard he wanted on his first attempt shocked them all.

Not everyone could claim to have such good fortune, after all.

On the other hand, Zhang Lie wasn't surprised: after all, his secret knowledge changed what would otherwise be a stochastic event into a deterministic one. With a sweep of his hand, he stored the superior-grade forest wolfman soulshard in his soul space.

The pack of forest wolves rapidly backed down upon hearing the forest wolfman's dying howl, disappearing without a trace.

Having gotten what he wanted, Zhang Lie didn't intend to give chase. He gathered the other hunters over, had them store the mutated- and higher-grade carcasses, and then left with them.

Thus ended their first hunt as Team Zenith. They had accomplished all their objectives, and Zhang Lie was in a particularly good mood. Instead of heading back to the settlement directly, however, they went straight toward their next target: the longhorn dawnbeetle.

## Chapter 70: A Surprise Encounter

Even with his entire clan, the forest wolfman wasn't able to do much against Zhang Lie, let alone a solitary lifeform like the longhorn dawnbeetle, which died after just two or three attacks.

However, it was exactly because such lifeforms were solitary that it was difficult to find many such mutated-grade dawnbeetles, and Zhang Lie was therefore unable to guarantee that a soulshard would condense. This particular dawnbeetle did not, and all Zhang Lie and the others would get from it was its flesh.

However, that didn't matter much to Zhang Lie, who had already obtained the better superior-grade forest wolfman soulshard.

After killing two superior-grade lifeforms, along with the various mutated-grade lifeforms they encountered along the way, it became dark, and Team Zenith's first day of hunting was over.

The hunters had all witnessed Zhang Lie's strength, and they were particularly glad to have someone like him as their captain. Some of them were already making plans to head to the city of Ning to meet Zhang Lie in real life.

Team Zenith sat around the table in Zhang Lie's suite at the Blacksteel Inn. Ever since they had taken Zhang Lie as their captain, they had always divided up their spoils in one inn or another. In the past, they didn't have such a surplus of points that they could afford to stay in one of the inns, and had to set up camp in a designated part of the Blacksteel settlement instead.

The carcasses of several mutated-grade lifeforms, as well as the two superior-grade ones, were casually laid out on the floor of the large, expansive, living room.

"Mengmeng, Zhou Ying, I'll leave the cooking to you two again! Everyone else, help set up the table and prepare. This is a feast we all worked hard for!" Under Zhang Lie's command, the gathered hunters got to work.

In almost no time at all, a sumptuous feast was ready to be served, and the ravenous hunters dug in with joy, their conversations punctuated by announcements from the will of the world.

As the feast was wrapping up, Yang Ze stood up somewhat tipsily and bowed deeply toward Zhang Lie. "Captain, I was awed by your strength today. I was beginning to suspect that you were a hunter who had even filled up his superior gene fragments to capacity! Who else would be able to kill a superior-grade lifeform in two or three blows?"

"Tomorrow, I'll be heading toward the city of Ning. Please accept me as a disciple and teach me how to grow stronger!"

Zhang Lie hadn't anticipated something like this, but he reacted quickly. "You want to be my disciple? Come if you'd like."

His response was surprisingly casual. Zhang Lie was already making plans for the construction of the Zenith dojo, and Yang Ze's request came at a particularly opportune time.

When the other hunters saw how easily Yang Ze managed to become Zhang Lie's disciple, they were all quite envious, particularly Li Feng, whose family background wasn't illustrious. How could he give up this opportunity to grow stronger? He immediately emulated Yang Ze, requesting to head to Ning and become Zhang Lie's disciple as well.

Zhang Lie was intending to open a dojo, so he certainly didn't mind accepting multiple disciples. Seeing Yang Ze and Li Feng's successful apprenticeships, the other four hunters, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng included, all naturally became Zhang Lie's disciples as well.

The hunters promised that they would leave the dimensional world that night and teleport themselves to Ning early tomorrow. As a result, they wrapped up their sumptuous feast rather early. After finishing up the last dish, they departed to pack and to prepare for the journey lying ahead of them.

In truth, they were quite interested in meeting with each other in real life, and also with Zhang Lie.

The lively suite quickly turned quiet, and Zhang Lie felt a trace of loneliness. Of course, that loneliness dissipated as soon as he inspected his stats.

After consuming the flesh of two superior-grade lifeforms and four mutated-grade lifeforms, Zhang Lie's stats had gained another big boost.

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ninecarp Transformation, Second Form: Serpent

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

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 132; Superior, 55

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

For a hunter of the first realm, these stats were ridiculous. He had obtained fifteen more superior gene fragments, and had thirty-two excess mutated gene fragments. These excess mutated fragments were limit fragments that were even more impactful than thirty-two superior gene fragments.

If he were to face off against the forest wolfman from that morning again, the wolfman likely wouldn't be able to withstand a single blow from him now.

These additional gene fragments caused Zhang Lie's strength to grow to a jawdropping level, and even Yun Bing and Chu Feng, whose superior gene fragments were almost at capacity, wouldn't be able to compete against him.

As Zhang Lie was lost in his thoughts, the doorbell rang. He commanded the robot in the kitchen to begin cleaning up as he walked to the door.

Zhang Lie expected that his errant visitor would be a hunter from Team Zenith who had misplaced an item or two in his suite, but after his encounter with Chu Xun, Zhang Lie had begun to take visitors much more seriously.

He almost jumped in shock as he saw the hunters waiting outside: Yun Bing, Yun Meng, Chu Feng, and Chu Xun. How had they found him so quickly?

But since they were already at his doorstep, Zhang Lie didn't intend on hiding any further. He opened the door, not even putting on his black cloak beforehand.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng recognized him immediately.

"Zhang Lie!" they shouted at once, thinking that he was in the middle of a meeting with the mysterious hunter in black.

After all, who would guess that Zhang Lie and the mysterious hunter were one and the same? The disparity in strength between them was simply too large.

As it turned out, Chu Xun would. She had seen Zhang Lie's appearance before, and when she heard her brother and Yun Bing calling out Zhang Lie's name, she was quite flummoxed. Isn't this Blackie? How could it be—unless, unless Blackie is... Zhang Lie?!