

U. Warlord 611

Chapter 611: A Great Kick

"Captain, here I come!" Yang Ze drew his greatsword. White fog burst forth from around him, surrounding the entire space.

Zhang Lie nodded. "You've grown faster than before, and your manipulation of water-attuned genetic energy is deftly controlled. It's just that—"

Hundreds of sharks swam toward Zhang Lie.

"—there's nothing interesting about repeating the same attack on a larger scale." Zhang Lie snapped his fingers. "[The Boundless Blade: Fade]!"

Ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him. Even without loosing a punch, he was able to cause his water-attuned genetic energy to reverberate through the air, sending the fog and shark hordes flying.

However, there was nothing in sight. Yang Ze had darted to Zhang Lie's back, where he lifted his greatsword high over his head.

Zhang Lie twisted his head and looked at him, at which point Yang Ze's body dissipated like ripples disturbing a calm body of water. Zhang Lie was able to make use of his genetic energy to conjure illusions; Yang Ze was even more skilled at this technique than he was.

"I'm right here, Captain!" Under the effects of [Mirrored Refraction], Yang Ze seemed to phase in and out of existence.

Zhang Lie had to admit that Yang Ze had a very deep understanding of [Mirrored Refraction]. He swam through the air, leaving buds of water behind. Zhang Lie had seen him use these buds to great effect in the past, and they were extremely annoying to deal with.

Yang Ze had unusual skill at manipulating his genetic energy.

Zhang Lie had no choice but to counter his technique with brute force. He punched toward a direction with nothing in sight, but Yang Ze, still swimming through the air, suddenly seemed shocked.

He launched a [Fists of the Silent Sea] of his own in yet another direction. The two punches didn't seem as though they should intersect, but unusually, they did. The two fists met head-on, and Yang Ze's body burst into another wave of ripples.

Fang Yi swore—the Yang Ze who had appeared in mid-air was actually just a detailed illusion! And Zhang Lie was standing in an entirely different position than he had been just moments before.

Fang Yi had been tricked precisely because of this technique that both Zhang Lie and Yang Ze seemed to have honed to an unbelievable level—he couldn't help but think that they were opponents very well suited for each other.

It was completely impossible to determine whether the Yang Ze that he could see was real or fake; he had known that Yang Ze might pull something like that, but try as he might, he couldn't find any tells.

He might very well send his strongest attack against a clone, and present his back to what he thought was a clone but was actually Yang Ze himself.

Yang Ze's combat style was to wreath himself in illusions so detailed one couldn't discern them from reality, and he completely countered someone like Fang Yi, who relied on simple martial ability.

The fight between Yang Ze and Zhang Lie was essentially one of technique, not strength.

Everyone else was likewise captivated by the fight. All of them had thought that the Yang Ze in front of them was the real thing, but it really was difficult to tell. They hadn't managed to distinguish Yang Ze from his clones, either.

Indeed, the members of Team Zenith uniformly avoided fighting with Yang Ze as much as they could, because he was too disgusting an opponent.

Bursts of water filled the battlefield, and the buds that Yang Ze had placed initially finally exploded. Lotus flowers made of pure water blossomed from the buds, each an intricate construct of genetic energy.

As the flowers bloomed, they released ripple after ripple of water-attuned genetic energy, criss-crossing in mid-air and exploding into huge torrents of water. The battlefield soon became a roaring sea, and waves seemed to crest over the two combatants.

Any ordinary hunter would have been torn to pieces by the water-attuned genetic energy.

This was a new technique that Yang Ze had developed by dedicated training: [The Lotus Blooms].

He knew that this technique wouldn't be able to hurt Zhang Lie; unless he had the time to amass a thousand such blooms, Zhang Lie could easily negate the force of this genetic energy. He was a water-attuned hunter as well, and one who had more mastery over his element than Yang Ze.

Unless Yang Ze had the time and energy to overwhelm Zhang Lie in one massive explosion, he wouldn't be able to use this technique against him. The first time he had tried out the technique in combat, Zhang Lie allowed him to amass his genetic energy and launch his technique at full strength.

This was the one and only time that Zhang Lie had gotten serious during training; he eventually caused the blooms to dissipate with brute force.

Ever since then, Zhang Lie hadn't given him the time to charge up his technique to full power.

As the lotus flowers blossomed, however, the density of water-attuned genetic energy reached a critical point.

"Have a taste of my blade!" Yang Ze shouted. Water-attuned genetic energy gathered around the two combatants. As the aura of [The Boundless Blade] exuded from Yang Ze, a giant shark emerged behind him, opening its maw wide so everyone could see its rows upon rows of sharp teeth.

"Captain, here I come! [The Boundless Blade: Shark's Wrath]!"

Yang Ze swung down with his greatsword, and the giant shark flicked its tail and launched itself toward Zhang Lie.

Its maw was large enough that it seemed as though it could swallow up even earth and sky, and its sharp teeth and ferocious aura caused even the members of Team Zenith and Zhang Hanxiang to take a step back.

If that shark were to smash against the ground, a huge wave of water would swamp them all.

Zhang Lie smiled, reminiscing the past. "Do you remember a similar bout we had back in the Zenith Dojo?"

He lifted an arm, and a serpent materialized around him. A black serpent uncoiled from behind Zhang Lie's back. As it raised its head, waves of dark energy flooded the room. As the serpent hissed, black ripples spread out from its body, releasing waves of corrosive energy that scoured the battlefield.

The members of Team Zenith had grown since then, but so had Zhang Lie. Even before the giant shark clashed against the waves of corrosive energy, it grew weaker and weaker as it approached Zhang Lie.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Zhang Lie punched forward, but Yang Ze didn't dare to meet his attack fist for fist. He knew that doing so was asking to die—even with the best regenerative potion that the Yeluo clan had to offer, he would be bedridden for a week at least.

As the giant shark struck the serpent, its body dissolved into water-attuned genetic energy. Zhang Lie kicked the air, sending Yang Ze, still thirty meters or so away, flying out of the battlefield and skidding over the ground for more than a hundred meters before his momentum was completely sapped.

Chapter 612: Squeezing Out Potential

"You've done very well for yourself. It's clear that you've mastered the combination of spatial and water-attuned techniques in your arsenal," Zhang Lie praised.

Yang Ze sighed as he scrambled up from the ground. "Ah, I'm still too weak! Captain, if you came at me seriously, I probably wouldn't be able to defend against a single blow of yours."

Yang Ze's shark had been dispelled immediately upon smashing against the serpent's corrosive body. He understood that the difference between him and Zhang Lie was like that between a chicken's egg and a diamond.

"Nonsense—your current development is already excellent. You've surpassed me down your chosen combat style and route as a hunter."

Notably, Zhang Lie didn't ask Yang Ze if he had intuited anything; he had already begun developing his own techniques that made up for his shortcomings and increased his repertoire of options.

Meanwhile, Fang Yi seemed to be as straight and direct as a spear, without any flexibility whatsoever.

Zhang Lie hoped that Fang Yi could learn from Yang Ze, who was as formless as water. He was difficult to sense or see, who made use of the battlefield creatively and had dozens of tricks or techniques for avoiding, deflecting, baffling, confusing, and misdirecting his opponent while setting the stage for himself.

"I've already tested Fang Yi and Yang Ze, so which of you is up next?"

"Me, me!" Sun Xiaowu rushed forward. Unlike Fang Yi's speed and strength, Sun Xiaowu focused on sharpness.

Zhang Lie was very pleased with the results of Fang Yi and Yang Ze's training. From the aura emanating from Sun Xiaowu, he seemed to have made equally significant progress.

As for Sun Xiaowu, he certainly didn't dare take it easy against an opponent like Zhang Lie. Their captain hadn't slacked off; he seemed to be progressing farther and farther ahead compared to them.

Sun Xiaowu raised a hand, his polearm gleaming with resplendent light.

"[Blinding Flash: Hundredfold Echo]!" Sun Xiaowu's body split into over a thousand clones, so many they seemed to fill the sky. "[Golden Divide]!"

The thousand clones all used [Golden Divide] simultaneously, coloring the sky in a burst of golden feathers as they rained down on the battlefield. However, the golden feathers all seemed to skirt by Zhang Lie without touching him.

"To have honed [Golden Divide] to such an extent must have required intensive training," Zhang Lie remarked.

Sun Xiaowu had grown far stronger than he had expected, surely a result of an endless amount of hard work. A minute's worth of combat might have taken ten years' worth of experience, after all.

The thousand clones formed a battalion that charged toward Zhang Lie even as Zhang Lie began to smile.

"Show me just how much stronger you've become! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" The frightening aura that exuded from Zhang Lie like a flood, like a typhoon, vanquished all the clones and extinguished Sun Xiaowu's golden radiance.

"Take this! [Adamantine Aegis]!" A layer of golden runes covered Sun Xiaowu's skin, shining brightly as they absorbed Zhang Lie's attack.

The ground quaked; the sky shook. The strength of Zhang Lie's fists clashed against [Adamantine Aegis] and released what sounded like the deep tolling of a bell.

Waves of energy exploded from the point of impact. The members of Team Zenith and Zhang Hanxiang clutched their heads in pain as the runic script dissipated from Sun Xiaowu's body.

"[Blinding Flash: Thousandfold Echo]!" The next moment, Sun Xiaowu's body divided into thousands of illusions as Zhang Lie watched on in pride.

It was then that he sensed a fluctuation of genetic energy coming from behind. "Hmm? Interesting."

His lips curled up into a smile as he noticed something amiss.

"I'm behind you, Captain!" Sun Xiaowu called out in delight, thinking that his deception had succeeded. "[Goldenscale Palm: Split]!"

Golden radiance struck the land. Sun Xiaowu's palms brimmed with golden light as a dense layer of golden scales covered his skin. His aura suddenly shifted, and his right arm glowed with resplendent light.

Intense strength emanated from his body. Sun Xiaowu took a step forward, then punched with all his might, generating a dominating wave of genetic energy.

Zhang Lie met Sun Xiaowu's punch with one of his own in a direct strike, causing the golden energy to explode over the land. Sun Xiaowu's image cracked and fizzled away—that "Sun Xiaowu" had just been one of his clones.

Fang Yi chuckled bitterly. "Can't you all actually fight properly for once?"

But Sun Xiaowu wasn't finished. Golden radiance covered the sky as his clones gathered together, each seeming simultaneously real and illusory.

"[Goldenscale Palm: Qilin]!" Sun Xiaowu and all his clones leapt up into the air, performing exactly the same action. A golden glow radiated from all their bodies, basking the world in light.

Golden scales covered up Sun Xiaowu's arm as it grew thicker and thicker, and the image of a golden qilin appeared behind him. He rushed forward, golden scales appearing over his arm as he punched at Zhang Lie, who met him with nothing but his bare hands.

If anyone else had met his strongest blow with nothing but their unprotected body, Sun Xiaowu would have mocked them for their arrogance, but when he saw Zhang Lie do so, his eyes were filled with disappointment. Indeed...

Zhang Lie's palm alone was sufficient to stop the golden qilin's might. His palm was far smaller than the massive qilin, but it boasted ridiculous strength.

"Captain, you're far too strong!" Sun Xiaowu gasped.

Just then, Zhang Lie tossed the qilin back toward him, causing Sun Xiaowu to panic. He immediately activated [Adamantine Aegis]. The golden qilin struck Sun Xiaowu in a burst of golden light.

When the explosion cleared, Sun Xiaowu was left standing. His armor had transformed him into a ten-meter tall golden giant surrounded by runes.

Zhang Lie nodded. "Very good. I was about to lecture you on training your techniques but not your body, but you've clearly overcome that difficulty. It looks like you've developed both your offense and defense very well, so let's continue."

Sun Xiaowu shook his head fervently. "No, Captain, don't! You're far too strong; I've had enough!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "There's still more potential in you yet! Take this—[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Chapter 613: Swords of Light

Zhang Lie's punch sent a wave of roiling black energy toward Sun Xiaowu, destroying everything in sight.

"Captain, don't get so serious!" Sun Xiaowu jumped back in shock; this attack would be quite dangerous if it landed.

"Xiaowu!" Sun Mengmeng cried out in worry. She trusted Zhang Lie, of course, but she couldn't help but see her beloved brother in danger.

Under stress, Sun Xiaowu's latent potential sparked to life. Golden radiance emanated from his body as the runes surrounding him began to swivel and rotate at their maximum speed.

"[Goldenscale Palm: Explode]!" Layers of dense golden scales appeared on Sun Xiaowu's arms, and his right arm glowed with resplendent light. As Sun Xiaowu attacked, so too did the golden giant, bringing the strength of his attack to a new level entirely.

Sun Xiaowu punched forward with immense force and surprising speed toward the black serpent's body, but no matter how he attacked, the energy from his golden fists was corroded away the moment it touched the serpent's body.

Even so, Sun Xiaowu's [Goldenscale Palm] was indeed sapping away at Zhang Lie's strength, one small drop at a time.

As Zhang Lie's destructive aura drew closer and closer, Sun Xiaowu launched a blazing finisher.

"[Adamantine Aegis: Martial God]!" Sun Xiaowu's body flared with golden light so intense that everyone was forced to cover their eyes. He was surrounded by a storm of golden runes. The golden giant had grown to three times its size, with an even more imposing aura.

For some reason, the golden giant looked a little like Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie nodded to himself. The hunter with the most latent potential among those gathered here wasn't the skilled illusionist Yang Ze, nor the straightforward and direct spearmaster Fang Yi, but rather she who possessed the [Avatar of the Fae], Zhou Ying.

In terms of fighting potential, however, that honor went to Sun Xiaowu. Without pressuring him a little, it would be impossible to identify the limits of that strength.

"[Goldenscale Palm: Qilin]!" Golden light basked the entire land as a golden qilin emerged from Sun Xiaowu's palms.

The qilin was wreathed in a dazzling array of golden runes that made it look like a miniature sun. When it clashed against Zhang Lie's destructive strength, it... won out. The world regained its color. Sun Xiaowu lay weakly on the ground panting, his head raised toward the sky. He had squeezed out all his strength and energy, and he was too weak to even move his fingers now.

Sun Mengmeng released a deep breath.

Zhang Lie clapped. "Very well done, Sun Xiaowu. That was an excellent punch at the end."

That he was able to summon the qilin without relying on the strength of his clones represented a massive advancement.

Sun Xiaowu was one of those hunters who grew in battle; the more difficult the battle, the faster he advanced. Zhang Lie would have to keep pushing him so that he could discover his limits.

"However, I think you can make your attacks even more forceful. You may want to work on combining your [Blinding Flash] with your [Adamantine Aegis: Martial God]—I think that combination has a lot of potential."

Sun Xiaowu asked, "Captain, how strong was that punch of yours at the very end?"

"Perhaps... a hundredth of my maximum strength?" Zhang Lie had to think about his response for quite some time.

Sun Xiaowu chuckled bitterly to himself. There he was, dead to the world, and Zhang Lie had barely used his strength at all!

"As you know, if I attack at full force, I'll damage the integrity of the second realm permanently, so I can hardly use more than that." Zhang Lie turned to Li Feng. "I believe it's your turn."

"Here I come, Captain!"

"Very well. Show me how you've improved in the past few months."

Li Feng thrust his sword toward Zhang Lie and sent a silver dragon surging toward him. It was far stronger an attack than Zhang Lie had anticipated, but Zhang Lie dissipated it in the blink of an eye. Li Feng stumbled back in the resulting explosion.

"Not bad—you're as fast as expected for a light-attuned hunter."

"As fast as expected? Captain, I didn't even see your attack!" Li Feng might be outmatched, but he wasn't about to give up just yet. "[Light Dragon's Remnants]!"

Li Feng marshaled his genetic energy into the form of a few white dragons, which he shot toward Zhang Lie.

"Very good!" Zhang Lie scattered the dragons with a wave of his left arm as Li Feng morphed into a beam of light and shot toward him.

"[Dance of the Incandescent Wurm]!" Li Feng summoned dozens of serpents, flaring with blinding light.

However, the same thing happened again. The dozens of serpents were torn to shreds before they could touch Zhang Lie. How could it be? He had attacked at close range! Li Feng suspected that Zhang Lie had used some trick or another—for example, splintering space around him into a flurry of shards, which would dispel any attack directed toward him, or making use of his water-attuned genetic energy to form a series of formless blades that would serve as his shield.

Frowning, he asked, "Captain, just what are you doing?"

"Would your opponents tell you what they're doing?" Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "If they do, they're surely misdirecting you. Would you like to make this a mental battle, too?"

Li Feng shook his head earnestly. Fighting with Yang Ze was hard enough, but Zhang Lie was even more wily.

"[Birth of the Holy Dragon]!" Li Feng leapt high into the air and landed on the dragon's head, his sword gleaming brightly as though it had been dipped in liquid light. As he raised the sword to the skies, it glowed and expanded, morphing into a huge blade of light.

"Not bad!" Zhang Lie smiled. His palm clenched into a fist, which he struck at the beam of light descending from above.

With an explosion of black mist, a black serpent swallowed the dragon whole as the sword of light descended from Li Feng's hands.

Zhang Lie grabbed the sword with his bare hands. Compared to the gigantic blade, his palms were infinitesimally small, but his grip alone was able to halt its advance. As Zhang Lie squeezed the blade, it dissipated into motes of energy in mid-air...

Chapter 614: Do You Understand?

"[Arclight Dragon's Imprint]!" Li Feng waved his left arm, around which a torrent of light-attuned genetic energy was gathering. It took the form of a gigantic dragon's claw, bearing down on Zhang Lie like a beam of light.

Struck by the dazzling light, the onlookers had to shield their eyes.

"Come!" Zhang Lie's black serpent rushed forward and devoured the pillar of light, sending Li Feng flying into the distance. Li Feng clutched his palm in pain, sucking in air as he dealt with the backlash from the blow.

"Ah, sorry, I got too excited!"

"I can continue, Captain!" Li Feng's eyes grew resolute.

Zhang Lie nodded approvingly. "Let's do so, then."

Li Feng replied, "I've emulated one of your techniques with my own, Captain, and I'd like to get your opinion of it."

"Very well."

Li Feng's aura grew to its peak. Wrapped up in shining light, an arclight dragon emerged from his body and circled upwards.

"[Light's Bulwark: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Li Feng shouted. As he punched upward into the sky, all his genetic energy condensed in his fists, launching dozens of dragons into the sky.

The dragons' cries sounded like peals of thunder as they swooped through the air before diving toward the ground.

Li Feng's [Light's Bulwark: Hundred Dragons Soaring] mirrored his own variant of [Fists of the Silent Sea], except his black dragons had transformed into Li Feng's white ones. The quality and quantity of these dragons were incomparable to his, but they bore Li Feng's distinctive mark.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Dragon's Wrath]!" Zhang Lie punched forward, his genetic energy materializing in the form of the head of a bloody dragon, one that devoured Li Feng's dragons whole. The frightening energy shook the skies and splintered the heavens.

Just as the dragon was about to smash into Li Feng's body, Zhang Lie waved a hand and dispelled his attack.

Li Feng's body was drenched with sweat. He sank to the ground, whereupon Zhang Lie called out, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Captain, I simply can't believe your strength!"

"Did you intuit something from that last technique?"

Li Feng mulled things over for a moment. "Captain, your skill was too amazing. I simply can't absorb it all at the moment."

"Think about it some more, then try to test out what you understand from it." Zhang Lie patted him on the back.

The members of Team Zenith fell into deep thought. Hong Xi nodded as though she had understood something. Sun Xiaowu looked as though he had gleamed some inspiration, but lost it the next moment. Zhang Hanxiang turned to her brother and asked, "Brother, why do you have to be so mysterious?"

Yang Ze explained, "What our captain means is that we can learn from his techniques, from his behavior and philosophy, from his combat, but we can't emulate him completely. If we do so, we'd be ruining our own futures."

Zhang Lie nodded firmly at Yang Ze.

Of the four hunters he had tested, Sun Xiaowu and Li Feng had both been influenced by his skills, whereas Fang Yi persisted down his own path. As yet, however, Yang Ze was the only one who had developed something entirely his own.

That said, Zhang Lie didn't necessarily think that Yang Ze was doing the best of all the members of Team Zenith. Every hunter had their own strengths and weaknesses, and their paths to glory would be different.

In terms of combat ability, Sun Xiaowu took the lead. Yang Ze's finesse and thoughtfulness with his techniques were unparalleled, and Fang Yi's devotion to his path would surely bear fruit.

It remained to test the four females.

"Let me go first." Sun Mengmeng strode forward, her garuda bow materializing in her hands.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Three arrows, brimming with purple flame, flew toward her opponent.

With a wave of his hand, Zhang Lie caused the three flaming arrows to explode in mid-air.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Fire-attuned genetic energy burst from Sun Mengmeng's body as her body erupted in flames. She pulled her greatbow taut. Sun Mengmeng's right hand blurred as countless arrows of purple flame shot out of her bow like a meteor shower that tinted the air purple and gave the battlefield a phantasmagorical appearance. The air turned dry and arid, as though a cataclysm was nigh.

Under the brilliant purple sky, everything began to burn, drowned in a sea of purple flame. However, the flaming arrows seemed to avoid Zhang Lie entirely; even the purple flames spreading across the ground did the same.

Sun Mengmeng frowned. She loosed arrows more and more quickly, until her hands blurred. Purple arrows struck the ground like raindrops in a storm, drowning out Zhang Lie's figure. When her arrows exploded, they formed pillars of flame over ten meters high.

For an entire minute, Sun Mengmeng continued launching arrows through the battlefield. She panted for breath; her fingertips trembled. All she could see was purple flame.

"Is this all you've got?" Zhang Lie's voice sounded from amidst those flames. With a snap of his finger, ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him. The flames were easily extinguished by his spatial manipulation.

"[Baptism of Hellfire: Full Moon]!" Sun Mengmeng whirled her daggers all around her as a black moon rose into the air, blocking the pulse of energy from Zhang Lie's attack.

As the full moon rose, Sun Mengmeng leapt off the ground, then rushed forward with her daggers in hand.

The ground exploded. Flames burst into the sky. Cracks of lava spread across the ground.

The black moon behind her, the wind her wings, Sun Mengmeng rocketed herself forward, trailed by a streak of purple flame. She glowed with such brilliance that the spectators all stared at her agape.

With the barest hissing, she unsheathed a long dark-red dagger. As she thrust forward, Zhang Lie swiveled his body to the side to avoid her blade, grabbed ahold of her by the waist, and pirouetted on one leg to dissipate her forward momentum.

Sun Mengmeng's eyes shone with passion and scorching flame, as though she were trying to light Zhang Lie ablaze. Zhang Lie gazed directly back at Sun Mengmeng as he spun more and more rapidly. Sun Mengmeng closed her eyes and leaned forward—

Zhang Lie suddenly let go of Sun Mengmeng, sending her flying into the distance like a javelin. She flew higher and higher into the air, higher still, until she finally landed by the side of a mountain with so much momentum that her body was half-stuck in place.

The members of Team Zenith winced.

Zhang Lie clasped both hands behind his back. "Did you intuit something?"

Hong Xi turned aside, unable to watch the scene any further.

Zhang Hanxiang chided, "Brother, if you keep this up, you'll be alone for the rest of your life!"

Chapter 615: An Immense Blow

Yang Ze shook his head. "I was always very curious why our captain didn't have a girlfriend despite his personality and strength, and now I know..."

Zhang Hanxiang chided, "Brother, can't you read the room?!"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at her. "What are all of you thinking? We're here to train—or do all of you want to run a few hundred laps around the borders of Limit?"

Yang Ze hurriedly shouted back, "Well done, Captain, well done!"

Hong Xi murmured, "There's a lot to learn from that interaction, I think."

Zhang Hanxiang nodded. "Mengmeng's techniques were very good. She wrapped genetic energy around herself like a robe, bolstering her offense and defense—and she looked good while doing it, too. If not for the fact that she was fighting against my brother, she would surely have won."

Sun Mengmeng climbed out of the ground, her face gray with dust and caked with mud. She howled, "Zhang Lie!"

Her body burned with purplish-black flame so intense that it dyed the heavens the same color.

Zhang Lie nodded. "Very good! This is exactly the attitude you should bring to training, but I think you can magnify your aura some more—imagine, for example, that I were your father's killer. Did you manage to intuit something from our bout?"

"Intuit—you bastard!" Sun Mengmeng materialized her garuda bow, which instantly lit up with flame so hot it could burn the very air itself. Even from afar, the members of Team Zenith could sense the sudden change in temperature, and the scorching heat pricked their skin.

Zhang Hanxiang raised both her arms and called out, "Mengmeng, please don't open fire recklessly! We're innocent!"

Sun Xiaowu's mouth spasmed. "It looks like my sister's really angry."

Hong Xi rolled her eyes. "I would be, too. What a romantic scene—and she was tossed off into the distance just like that! I'd ignore my master for the rest of my life if he did that to me."

Fang Yi folded his arms. "I can understand what the captain's thinking. We're in the middle of training, and he's trying to help Sun Mengmeng, but she—"

Hong Xi narrowed her eyes at him. "That's why you and my master's love lives will never go anywhere. If my master ever wanted a woman, I guarantee you a flock would rush to his bed, but as for you..."

Hong Xi shot a glance at the spear in Fang Yi's hand. "All you'll have is your spear."

By now, Hong Xi was all but a member of Team Zenith, having survived battle after battle with them, and they were able to joke with each other easily.

Sun Mengmeng cast [Black Sun], forming a cordon of purplish-black flame around her. She activated her most impactful soulshards for battle, transforming from a young woman to a fierce warrior with a chitinous carapace, wreathed in black flame.

Her flames were so intense that the armor-type soulshard actually began to crack and split. Black flame seeped through those cracks, and the ground beneath her feet turned a glowing red.

By then, Sun Mengmeng had transformed into a fearsome warrior of hell. Black flame flared from her bow, transforming into an undead phoenix.

"Are you strengthening your fire manipulation by making use of your anger?" Zhang Lie nodded approvingly. "It's a natural and effective idea. By combining the force of your emotions with your fire-attuned genetic energy, you can improve the strength and temperature of your flames."

The flames around Sun Mengmeng's body grew even taller and hotter.

Zhang Hanxiang clutched her forehead. "Brother, stop provoking Mengmeng!"

Zhang Lie turned to her. "What do you mean, provoking? I'm commenting on her strategy and praising her!"

Zhang Hanxiang sighed. "Poor Mengmeng."

"[Netherworld's Torrential Flame]!" Hundreds of arrows, like beams of moonlight, shot toward Zhang Lie. Their flames felt as though they could destroy everything they touched.

Zhang Lie lifted his hand and deflected the stream of arrows as he turned to his sister again.

"Exactly what do you mean? Be clearer!"

Zhang Hanxiang shrugged. "I don't know how to explain it better. Deal with it yourself!"

"[The Nine Moons of the Underworld]!" Nine flaming moons appeared in the sky. They overshadowed the sun's radiance as they fell toward the ground. Zhang Lie sent a flurry of punches into the sky, causing the moons to explode in mid-air in a flurry of arrows.

Zhang Lie's face turned serious. Sun Mengmeng's wrath had elevated her strength and unlocked her potential; she was over ten times as strong as she normally was.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Dragon's Wrath]!" Zhang Lie sent a dragon of blood howling into the air. Space cracked; the arrows all above him were sucked into the void.

Sun Mengmeng continued loosing arrows in his direction. Her entire bow was blazing. Sacrificing all her remaining arrows, she created a glowing black moon in the sky, which exploded into rays of moonlight. Zhang Lie caused those rays to dissipate with a single punch, then shouted, "Come on, keep going! Expel all your rage and anger!"

The flames surrounding Sun Mengmeng erupted like a volcano, distorting space in a huge area around her.

The members of Team Zenith could easily sense how strong her genetic energy had become in her rage. Their faces turned wary—Sun Mengmeng's flames were simply too domineering. None of them would be able to approach her in this state, not even Fang Yi and Sun Xiaowu, who were best at close combat.

Even their strongest attacks might not be able to defeat the flames surrounding Sun Mengmeng.

Yang Ze's mouth spasmed. "We'd better avoid angering Sun Mengmeng in the future."

His illusions would instantly vaporize in her heat. He was a water-attuned hunter, and should have had the advantage over a fire-attuned one—in theory. If he met Sun Mengmeng in this state, however, he would immediately run away.

"How frightening a woman in love can be..." Hong Xi murmured.

The others nodded hastily. Everyone was a little scared of Sun Mengmeng now.

However, Zhang Lie didn't seem to feel the intensity of the heat at all. He strolled through the flames as though he were appreciating flowers in his garden. As he clasped his hands behind his back, he shook his head. "Keep going, Sun Mengmeng! Your flames can get even stronger, I'm sure of it!"

In truth, he was already very satisfied with her performance. Sun Mengmeng's flames had reached an intensity that bordered his own strength in the past—at this very moment, she was comparable to

a disaster-grade existence. In other words, she had obtained the qualifications to fight against a disaster-grade lifeform...

Chapter 616: Unleashed Potential

Sun Mengmeng howled into the air. Fire-attuned genetic energy erupted from her body, and her pitch-black eyes burned red. Flame howled and roared around her. She used no technique, but the flames formed a black hurricane with her at its eye. It burned everything in sight; lava rose to the ground where she stood.

The members of Team Zenith and Zhang Hanxiang hurriedly stepped back.

Zhang Lie stood right at the edge of the hurricane. The black flames scorched everything in sight, but he seemed entirely unperturbed and unaffected. He clapped. "Very good, very good! Keep up this strength!"

Sun Mengmeng's explosive strength had reached and even exceeded Zhang Lie's own, back when he had no disaster gene fragments to speak of.

"You're demonstrating incredible potential, Sun Mengmeng!"

Pitch-black flames sparked to life across her bow, causing the flames to grow even more intense.

"[Netherworld's Torrential Flame]!" A frightening fan of flames poured out from Sun Mengmeng's bow, an attack far stronger than the moonlight she had summoned. The intensity of her technique shocked everyone.

The flames arced in the air and fell toward Zhang Lie like a waterfall.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" With one punch from Zhang Lie, the waterfall dissipated into a rain of fire that scattered all over.

The members of Team Zenith hurriedly defended themselves. Fang Yi thrust forward with his spear, deflecting the flames that came from one direction.

Yang Ze waved his greatsword, sending a huge shark swimming forth.

"[Adamantine Aegis: Martial God]!" Sun Xiaowu's body flared with golden light, and runes revolved around his skin. His armor had transformed him into a ten-meter tall golden giant, one that shielded his comrades.

The three simultaneous techniques dealt with the fallout from Sun Mengmeng's blow.

"[Lunarflame Shot: Ninefold Phantasmagoria]." Sun Mengmeng's surroundings began to burn with dark red flames as she launched yet another attack.

Nine purplish-black phoenixes rose around her and shot toward Zhang Lie, but he was able to smash them all apart with just a single punch.

"Is this it, Sun Mengmeng?" Zhang Lie seemed a little disappointed.

From pure energetic output alone, Sun Mengmeng exceeded his former self, but her techniques were significantly weaker in terms of willpower and integrity.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Flames burst from Sun Mengmeng's body, but despite her anger, her flames had reached a limit. They grew higher, but their temperature didn't change.

Purplish-black flames gathered on Sun Mengmeng's bow once again, forming an arrow of pure black. The image of a golden garuda, limned in black, appeared behind her. As she loosed her arrow, it seemed to transform into a beam of light, moving so quickly that it bypassed the constraints of time and space, as though it could penetrate anything.

The arrow caused no earth-shattering explosion: Zhang Lie caught it with two fingers, preventing it from moving even a single inch forward.

"Is this it?" He asked again, breaking the arrow with a simple pinch of his fingers.

Sun Mengmeng tried to draw her bow once more, but Zhang Lie appeared before her in the next moment. She immediately transformed her genetic energy into defense, circling her flames inward to push back her attacker.

"It's pointless!" Zhang Lie's palm, covered in a thin layer of spatial energy, pierced through the curtain of flame and extinguished Sun Mengmeng's fire with water-attuned genetic energy.

Sun Mengmeng tried to draw her bow once more, but Zhang Lie appeared before her in the next moment.

"I said, it's pointless!" He gently flicked her forehead, sending her flying out into the distance. She broke the sound barrier and, again, flew into a mountain.

The mountain burst apart. Dust and smoke rose billowing into the air, only to be blown away by pitch-black flame in the next moment.

Black flames, stuck together, flowed like lava along the ground. Wrapped in flame, Sun Mengmeng strode forth. Her pupils had been replaced by black flame, and she looked like a demon who had climbed out of an abyssal pit.

The members of Team Zenith felt the heat creeping up their skin, and even Zhang Lie could sense the heat in the air even through his insulation. "Ah, perhaps I've gone too far."

"[Lunarflame Shot: Extirpation of the Garuda]!" As Sun Mengmeng infused her genetic energy into the bow, the image of a garuda appeared behind her. She released her arrow, which morphed into a human-faced, golden-winged bird in mid-air, radiating red light as it arced through the skies. It began to pulse with red fire, brimming with such energy that it seemed as though it would set the world aflame.

Sun Mengmeng's attack scorched the heavens and the earth, dyeing everything in sight a patch of black.

Zhang Lie watched the display in surprise. "Disaster-grade..."

Sun Mengmeng hadn't exceeded the boundaries of a disaster-grade lifeform, of course, but she did have the capability to take one down. Her techniques had true strength and image behind them; they weren't just shells.

Zhang Lie's eyes turned serious, and space around him began to warp.

"[Rune: Quell]!" A dragonturtle tablet rose into the air, quelling the fire-attuned genetic energy that filled the land.

Zhang Lie punched toward the sky, his water-attuned genetic energy combining with spatial manipulation to instantly quench the flame.

Even Sun Mengmeng, gone half-mad with anger, couldn't hope to surpass Zhang Lie.

"[Lunarflame Shot: Extirpation of the Garuda]!" She pulled her bow taut once more, infusing the rest of her genetic energy within. The image of a garuda materialized from thin air and shot out along with her arrow.

Even before the arrow landed, lava rose out of the ground, igniting the earth and sky alike. It was almost impossible to believe that this was an attack of a second-realm hunter without any disaster gene fragments to her name...

Chapter 617: The Enraged Sun Mengmeng

The enraged garuda rushed forward, bearing all of Sun Mengmeng's anger and strength.

Zhang Lie had to face this attack seriously—it was far stronger than any that Sun Mengmeng had launched at him in the past.

It would be straightforward for Zhang Lie to avoid the attack or destroy the attack, but behind him were the members of Team Zenith. Sun Mengmeng herself had collapsed weakly to the ground after using that attack, her genetic energy spent.

If Zhang Lie were to destroy the garuda just like that, the black flames that made it up would explode, striking the members of Team Zenith and Sun Mengmeng. The members of Team Zenith were strong enough to defend themselves, and far enough away that they would be severely injured at most, but Sun Mengmeng would be unable to bear even the aftermath of the attack in her weakened state.

Zhang Lie had to absorb that attack in its entirety.

"Come at me!" Water-attuned genetic energy emanated from his body in an abyssal torrent, causing the earth to shake and the skies to tremble. Black cracks appeared above the heavens.

With his finger as a blade, Zhang Lie activated [The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]. A beam of sword energy bisected the garuda horizontally, displacing its upper and lower halves before it exploded from the inside out, torn apart by thousands of beams of sword energy.

The members of Team Zenith stared open-mouthed at the sight.

Zhang Lie had only slashed forward with his sword once, but the garuda had been torn apart by what seemed to be thousands of such slashes.

Yang Ze's face was filled with doubt.

Sun Xiaowu was recalling the scene carefully but fruitlessly.

Fang Yi frowned. Suddenly, as though he had just understood something, his eyes opened wide.

Li Feng sighed and shook his head.

Zhang Hanxiang and Hong Xi just looked on in shock as the garuda disappeared within the spectacular explosion in a burst of genetic energy. It hadn't even managed to attack Zhang Lie once.

As the black flames slowly burned out, Zhang Lie glanced all around him. The ground was filled with molten streaks of lava; the superheated air was hot and dry. He didn't want to have to move to a different location, so he would have to repair the battlefield. Pressing his palm into the ground, the temperature of the air quickly began to cool down, and ripples of water-attuned genetic energy emanated from Zhang Lie's feet.

The remnants of the black flame were instantly quenched. The lava solidified into granite. Zhang Lie stepped on it to test its texture, and he nodded in satisfaction. The battlefield was even more sturdy than before—with spatial manipulation, Zhang Lie had flattened and compacted the granite.

"Haha, I'm useless." Sun Mengmeng lay weakly on the ground, so devoid of energy she couldn't even move a single finger. Tears welled up in her eyes—she wasn't able to do anything against Zhang Lie even with her strongest attack.

Zhang Lie hadn't countered or blocked it; he had nullified it in its entirety.

Sun Mengmeng knew that she couldn't hurt Zhang Lie even at full strength, but she had expected to at least be able to hinder him. How naive she was to think she could see Zhang Lie taken down a notch or two!

"I thought you had fainted," Zhang Lie remarked in surprise.

"Are you disappointed in me, Captain? I allowed myself to be controlled by my emotions and rage, and even then, I couldn't do anything against you. I'm a long way away from reaching your level of strength. Aren't I useless? I fell prey to my anger, and losing my self-control is taboo for a hunter and fighter—and even then, despite giving in to my anger, I was still unable to overcome you."

All her hard work seemed to be meaningless in front of Zhang Lie's strength.

Zhang Lie sighed. "Who said you were useless?"

He spread his arms wide. "Look at where I'm standing."

Sun Mengmeng blinked, not understanding what he meant.

Zhang Lie explained, "When I fought the other four members of Team Zenith before you, I didn't move a single step—but look at where I am now, and where I started."

Zhang Lie had deliberately stood as still as a pillar in the previous fights.

Sun Mengmeng grumbled, "But I'm a long-range attacker!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "As if the others don't have long-ranged attacks! They didn't have the strength to force me to step aside, but you did. You forced me to counter-attack you."

Sun Mengmeng blinked.

"Don't you think I would be able to deal with your bow and arrows by standing still? At the very least, I could exhaust all your stamina."

"And if you were to unsheathe your blade?"

Zhang Lie glanced up at the sky. "That's a different story."

"As expected..." Sun Mengmeng also turned to the sky and sighed.

"You might not believe me, but you'd believe the rest of Team Zenith, wouldn't you? Ask them how strong they think you are."

By then, the members of Team Zenith had walked over to Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng. Zhou Ying exclaimed, "Of course! Mengmeng, you were extremely impressive. Even from far away, we could feel the heat from your flames."

Sun Xiaowu added, "Sis, your last arrow was way too frightening. I don't think the six of us together would be able to defend against it."

Yang Ze nodded firmly. "We were barely able to deal with the aftermath of your flames, let alone your arrows."

Zhang Hanxiang stepped forward and clasped her hands around Sun Mengmeng's arm.

"Mengmeng, please ignore my brother. He's like a piece of deadwood, tough and hard, and you'd be better off without him."

Li Feng whispered, "It's all because you encountered a manic like our captain. Anyone else would have been burnt to a crisp already."

Zhang Lie turned to Li Feng. "You seem to have recovered quite well. Would you like to go for a second round? I think there's still a lot of potential in you that we might be able to squeeze out together."

Suddenly, Li Feng clutched his hand in pain. "Argh, my hand, my hand! My old wounds are reopening—I'm done for!"

Fang Yi nudged him. "What? Didn't you just drink a Yeluo restorative?"

"Scram!" Li Feng glared at him. He fell to the ground and began to roll around. "Argh, my wound, my wound!"

Zhang Lie turned back to Sun Mengmeng. "Even if you don't trust my words, wouldn't you trust the others?"

Sun Mengmeng raised her eyes and met his gaze. "Is that really true?"

Chapter 618: A Callous Male

Zhang Hanxiang prodded her brother with her hand. "Quick, praise Mengmeng!"

Zhang Lie blinked at her. "Haven't I already done so after our fight?"

Zhang Hanxiang stomped on her brother's foot. "Go on, do it! I can assure you, Mengmeng wants to hear your praise!"

Zhang Lie scratched his head. "Your explosive strength is more than sufficient for hunting down disaster-grade lifeforms, and you're already stronger than I was when I first started hunting them."

Her brother Sun Xiaowu might have the greater disposition for combat, but Sun Mengmeng's rapid-fire attacks and explosive strength were shocking.

Sun Mengmeng smiled, causing Zhang Hanxiang to sigh in relief. "Mengmeng will be happy now, I'm sure of it!"

However, Zhang Lie suddenly changed his tune. "That said, you need to keep working hard. Did you manage to intuit anything from our battle just now?"

Zhang Hanxiang palmed her face.

Her brother continued seriously, "Giving in to your emotions isn't a good idea. It can give you a temporary boost in strength, but as a hunter, you need to learn how to remain calm and collected at any time. Of course, there are ways to assimilate your emotions properly into your techniques, but you need to keep in mind that it's a double-edged sword."

Zhang Lie turned to face everyone. "I'm not speaking just to Sun Mengmeng, but to all of you. Strong emotion can unlock our potential, but the techniques derived in this fashion can be very unstable, and your opponents can easily take advantage of your emotional state."

Everyone nodded.

"This is why we have to master our emotions, rather than to let them control us. Take advantage of the strength they provide, but never lose control."

Everyone nodded again. They had been on countless battlefields before; they knew what to do, and this was a relatively simple matter.

Zhang Lie asked, "Mengmeng, can you stand?"

Sun Mengmeng glanced at Zhang Lie with anticipation as she shook her head.

"Hanxiang, why don't you help Sun Mengmeng up?"

Zhang Hanxiang suddenly folded her arms over her stomach. "Brother, I suddenly feel like I have a stomachache!"

"How about Hong Xi, then?"

Zhang Hanxiang kicked Hong Xi's shin, who startled and yelped, "Ouch, my leg! It hurts!"

Zhang Lie glared at her, causing Hong Xi to suck in a breath and stand up straight. "My leg stopped hurting."

"Very good. Help Mengmeng up," Zhang Lie commanded.

Hong Xi bowed and did as he said.

Zhang Hanxiang sighed. "Brother, you'll be alone for the rest of your life like this!"

Zhang Lie glared back at her. "There's no need for you to worry about me—worry about yourself first. It's your turn."

"Ah, my stomach is acting up again! Have someone else go first." Zhang Hanxiang scurried away.

Zhang Lie turned to Zhou Ying. "Are you ready, Zhou Ying?" Hong Xi had to take care of Sun Mengmeng, after all.

Zhou Ying stepped forward, pulled out her dagger, and got into a battle-ready stance.

"Very good. If Hanxiang were half as sensible as you are, there'd be nothing for me to worry about."

"Captain, here I come!" An outburst of green light shielded Zhou Ying. Her hair grew long enough to reach her legs, turning into a green the color of sparkling jade. She looked so beautiful that the members of Team Zenith were immediately enraptured.

The vitality radiating from her was visible to the naked eye. She seemed to have become one with the land.

Recently, Zhou Ying had been working on her [Avatar of the Fae], and she had developed the exceptional ability to undergo the transformation even without combining forms with the shaman of the wood spirits. Now, she was able to activate this transformation at will.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Earthbound Prison]!" Zhou Ying released all her stored energy at once, causing the ground to quake as thousands of jade-green wood dragons rushed out of the earth. Giant vines broke through the granite that covered the ground.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" Zhang Lie punched forward, shattering the earth. Waves of energy minced up the vines, but they simply regrew.

"This is quite an annoying attack. [Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Zhang Lie punched toward the ground, sending a huge chunk of granite flying up into the sky.

"Don't forget who your opponent is, Captain!" Zhou Ying had somehow appeared before him, her dagger gleaming green as she swiped forward.

As though he had predicted her move, Zhang Lie reached out with two fingers and pinched the blade of her dagger. "How could I have forgotten?"

Without the shaman of the wood spirit around, Zhou Ying had to make use of her own strength.

Assimilating with the shaman's body would endow her with significant strength, strength enough to affect the entire battlefield, but that strength ultimately didn't belong to her, and Zhou Ying had to spend all her energy and concentration to control and harness it according to her desires. As a result, she had to be stationary on the battlefield, but that wasn't her preferred style.

She was very good at planning and ambushing her opponents, rather than devastating them with brute force. Instead of attacking directly with an unfamiliar body and unfamiliar strength, she would rather make use of the burgeoning life-attuned energy she possessed.

Assimilating with the shaman of the wood spirits strengthened her abilities but was in conflict with her own combat style. Since then, she had been working hard on combining the advantages of both combat styles, and she had recently made a breakthrough.

The vines around her rapidly grew longer and thicker, and they began sprouting leaves. The leaves morphed into huge trees which rustled in the air.

Zhou Ying's body was extremely acrobatic. She twisted her waist and kicked out at Zhang Lie like a snake. As Zhang Lie caught her ankle, beams of green light shot toward Zhang Lie from all angles.

He frowned as he tossed her aside, only to have the leaves of the giant trees catch her and bring her protectively inside the forest she had just created.

Dozens of green beams shot toward Zhang Lie, but such an attack had no chance of hitting him. Contorting his body, he narrowly avoided a few of the green beams, then darted away.

Just as he stepped beyond the shrubbery, countless leaves flew toward him, each one as sharp as a knife. Amidst the storm of leaves, Zhang Lie waved his left arm, genetic energy rippling from it like a shield, protecting him from the barrage.

As the ripples struck the leaves, they rebounded into the air, but precisely at that moment, a green needle shot toward Zhang Lie, camouflaged by the leaves that obstructed his vision.

Chapter 619: Trying Her Best

With a resonant clink, Zhang Lie reached out and grabbed a tiny jade needle with his hand, one formed out of pure genetic energy. It was so thin that it could barely be seen with the naked eye.

"Excellent performance, Zhou Ying. Your fighting style is very mature, and you've surpassed my expectations! Your manipulation of genetic energy is precise and already extending into the microscopic."

In response, Zhou Ying sent a flurry of jade-green leaves rushing over toward him, a veritable tornado of green, each leaf as sharp as a blade.

A black serpent materialized from Zhang Lie's back and wrapped around him, dissolving any of the leaves that approached him.

A figure flew toward the serpent, wrapped up in a shroud of leaves, and struck it with a dagger. Beneath her feet, a great vine grew out of the ground.

Before the serpent could retaliate, Zhou Ying had jumped backwards, somersaulted into the air, and used the bark of a nearby tree as a springboard to launch herself at the serpent once more. She continued moving nimbly through the forest, with which she was as familiar as with her own backyard.

Her reservoir of genetic energy wasn't strong enough to unleash [Avatar of the Fae: Worldbound Enclosure], but her [Earthbound Prison] was a natural environment in which she could shine. The giant vines and forest that had sprung out of thin air would stymie her opponents and dramatically increase her maneuverability.

"Not bad!"

Zhou Ying moved at a rate so fast the members of Team Zenith were getting dizzy. As Zhou Ying plunged strike after strike into the serpent's body, it began to dissipate.

"[Storm of Leaves: Void Cut]!" She began to move even more quickly, darting through the air in a series of afterimages. She appeared atop Zhang Lie's head. As she clutched her dagger in a reverse grip and arced it downward, her face lit up in a smile. "I've succeeded."

Zhang Lie turned back with a smile, as if he'd guessed where she would be all along. Zhou Ying's eyes widened.

As Zhang Lie punched toward his back, he knocked Zhou Ying's dagger flying—along with Zhou Ying herself. She smashed against a tree, which caved in at the point of impact.

Zhou Ying was quite badly bruised, but she recovered almost instantly.

Zhang Lie's eyes turned serious. He clenched his fist, and space around him began to crack.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Abyssal energy materialized and exploded in Zhang Lie's vicinity. Zhou Ying's pupils contracted; she was scared stiff by the attack.

Fortunately, the attack barely missed her by inches, causing her to exhale in relief. She felt as though she had seen the gates of hell, that the god of death had brushed by her side. Zhou Ying glanced behind her with a shiver.

What Zhang Lie had evoked with his punch wasn't destruction, but annihilation. Beside Zhou Ying was a huge depression about ten meters wide and extending for over a few kilometers. The trees that Zhou Ying had summoned were all swallowed up by the energy.

Half the forest had vanished in an instant, leaving behind nothing but a wide chasm and strewn debris.

Despite Zhou Ying's mental resilience, she was still shocked—if that attack had touched her at all, she would have evaporated, leaving nothing behind. She was certain she wouldn't have been able to defend against the attack for more than a second.

Right then and there, she wholeheartedly believed the private nickname the members of Team Zenith had given their captain—a humanoid disaster-grade lifeform, no, one that surpassed disaster-grade. Zhou Ying had never seen a disaster-grade lifeform for herself, but she was nevertheless confident that no lifeform could best Zhang Lie's strength.

"Shall we continue?" Zhang Lie murmured softly.

Zhou Ying was so frightened that she shook her head violently, without speaking.

Seeing her terror, Zhang Lie blinked a few times. He suddenly seemed to become a regular hunter again, as though his terrifying aura had just been a dream.

"Very good. You've improved greatly, Zhou Ying."

Zhou Ying pursed her lips. "Captain, you're not just trying to console me, are you?"

Zhang Lie smiled as he shook his head. "No, of course not! I really am very impressed by your mobility in combat."

Zhou Ying was naturally overjoyed to receive such high praise from him.

"Did you intuit something?"

Zhou Ying frowned. She volunteered hesitantly, "It's useless to do anything in the face of absolute power?"

Zhang Lie shook his head again. "It looks like you haven't grasped the essence of my attack. You revealed your location too early on in the fight; your ability to control the terrain around you is exceptional, but you need to take more advantage of it. Hide yourself within that terrain and conform your attacks to it."

Zhou Ying nodded. "I did! I judged that controlling the trees and leaves like I did wouldn't be an effective means of attack against you, which was why I took the initiative to attack. I needed to create my own openings."

Zhang Lie nodded. "Indeed, that was good judgment. In that case, do you understand why you lost?"

Zhou Ying sighed. "If I did, I wouldn't have lost."

"You didn't calm down and think about your actions rationally. Everything before [Storm of Leaves], you did very well—but [Storm of Leaves] was your downfall."

Zhou Ying seemed flummoxed.

"You revealed your hand and attacked before seeing your opponent's condition—you relaxed."

Zhou Ying thought back to the battle. She hadn't relaxed, had she? She waited until the serpent dissipated, thought that that was her chance, and then attacked. And then...

She gaped at Zhang Lie. "Captain, were you the one who dematerialized your serpent? You shouldn't have had any problem maintaining it despite my attack..."

"It looks like you understand now." Zhang Lie nodded with a smile.

Zhou Ying screwed her face up. Zhang Lie was so strong—why did he have to play such tricks too! He could easily overwhelm them with brute strength—was he just treating them like lab rats?

Zhang Lie knew what Zhou Ying's expression implied, of course. "Just because I'm strong doesn't mean that I can't make use of tactics. No—it's precisely because I'm strong that I need to brush up on my tactics as well. More importantly, I want to help you all identify your blind spots and weaknesses."

He reached out and patted Zhou Ying's shoulder. "You have a lot of potential, and I hope you'll work hard to try to unearth it. Don't let yourself fall behind."

"I'll work hard, Captain!" Zhou Ying replied seriously. "I won't let you down!"

Zhang Lie turned to the others. "Hanxiang, it's your turn!"

Zhang Hanxiang suddenly folded her arms over her stomach. "Brother, it looks like my stomachache hasn't gone away!"

Zhang Lie glared at her. "Hurry up!"

"Alright, alright! My stomachache suddenly abated." Zhang Hanxiang jumped up and walked toward Zhang Lie.

"Don't say that I'm bullying you—Hong Xi, you come here too."

Hong Xi, who had been taking care of Sun Mengmeng, also stepped forward.

"The two of you will attack me together. If you can touch me, I'll count it as a win for you!"

The two females' eyes sparkled as they prepared for the battle.

Chapter 620: A Tall Mountain

Hong Xi activated all her combat-oriented soulshards. A fan of feathers materialized in her left hand, and a moonlit sword in her right. Behind her, multicolored light flared.

The domain of [Eclipse] spread out beneath her feet. She walked forward, moonlight radiating from her every move. A black sun appeared behind her, sparking where it touched the moonlight at her feet.

Wind howled. The sword in her right hand gleamed like the radiant moon. As she waved her fan, she summoned a twister in the air—but with a wave of his hand, Zhang Lie dispelled her technique.

Meanwhile, Zhang Hanxiang held her palm up and channeled bitter cold. [1] Cold air froze everything around her. A layer of frost covered the ground, and snow began to drift down from the heavens.

"If nothing else, you at least have the bravery to face me head-on."

Zhang Lie blocked his sister's palm strike with his own. He used no strength whatsoever; he simply matched her force with his palm. His palm was like a piece of glowing-hot steel, so hot no frost was able to condense on it.

Zhang Hanxiang frowned. She launched a flurry of attacks at Zhang Lie, channeling the might and intensity of a blizzard, a snowstorm. When the members of Team Zenith exhaled, they breathed out puffs of warm air.

As Zhang Lie's sister, Zhang Hanxiang naturally wasn't weak. Despite her young age, she was close to being able to catch up with the members of Team Zenith—but her opponent was none other than Zhang Lie. Despite her flurry of attacks, she couldn't hurt her brother at all. He deflected all her attacks perfectly.

Meanwhile, Hong Xi gave up on her long-distance techniques. She leapt forward with [The Elusive Moon], then activated a superior-grade illusory leopard soulshard to speed herself up further. She appeared behind Zhang Lie.

"[Moon Seeker]!" A silvery sheen emanated from her feet as she struck at his lower back—but she was sent flying into the distance somehow, without even seeing how Zhang Lie had turned around or attacked.

Making use of the momentum, Hong Xi revolved in midair and waved her fan. Her sword glinted with moonlight, and she shot forward once more.

Once again, Zhang Lie waved at his back and dissipated her attack.

As the snow fell, Zhang Hanxiang's ice glowed blue. Everything around her began to freeze.

Zhang Lie shot a punch in her direction, dissipating her evocation. The wave of energy sent the snow swirling in a flurry, forcing her to stumble back. Hong Xi hurriedly rushed up to support her.

"[The Hidden Moon]!" Her blade seemed to cut apart a silvery veil in the sky—but Zhang Lie intercepted her attack once more. She didn't see how; he had made his move after hers, but before she could reach him, his palm had already struck her chest.

Fang Yi recognized this move—it was infused with the power of time.

Zhang Lie's attack struck Hong Xi once more in a burst of flame. Hong Xi's spirit-fox robe sent a protective burst of foxflame toward Zhang Lie, but it didn't hurt him at all. His water-attuned genetic energy easily countered it.

Zhang Lie's body glowed with the telltale sheen of [Mirrored Refraction], one which extinguished the flame and knocked Hong Xi away. She crashed against tree bark. What had struck her wasn't the force of the explosion, but rather Zhang Lie's palm. It had bypassed her layers of protection and hit her directly.

Zhang Hanxiang skated over the frozen ground, her body as limber and agile as an acrobat's. Blades of ice formed by her feet, which she shot at Zhang Lie. But once again, without seeing just how Zhang Lie had countered her attack, she was sent flying into the distance.

She revolved in mid-air in an attempt to dissipate the momentum from Zhang Lie's attack, then ran around him in search of an opportunity to strike. Zhang Lie called out, "If you don't attack me, I'm going to attack you!"

Just then, a silver shadow appeared beside him. Hong Xi, wrapped in a gale of wind, struck at Zhang Lie with a silver flash.

That was Zhang Hanxiang's signal to act. She shot out a few icicles at Zhang Lie, who knocked them out of the air without any visible movement. At the same time, he caught Hong Xi's blade.

Zhang Hanxiang barreled forward, surrounded by a whirlwind of ice. As she came close to Zhang Lie, he punched in her direction and sent her flying. Zhang Hanxiang skidded sharply on the ice, sending a pillar of ice spiking upward to halt her backward momentum.

Meanwhile, Hong Xi attacked with [Fists of the Silent Sea], which Zhang Lie again countered with a kick. Hong Xi was sent flying up into the air like a rocket.

The aura around Zhang Hanxiang deepened. Her hair began to freeze over, and her fists had turned noticeably blue.

Zhang Lie felt a deep chill sweep over him. He smiled at his sister as he slashed downward with his hand, splitting the domain of permafrost in half. Genetic energy exploded from Zhang Hanxiang's body, sending chips of ice rising into the air.

Hong Xi fell from the sky in a heap, unable to arrest her momentum any longer. Upon seeing her companion's state, Zhang Hanxiang cried out, "I've had enough—that's it! We simply can't find a window of opportunity to strike!"

Zhang Lie asked, "Did you intuit something?"

Zhang Hanxiang sighed. "Brother, why do you keep asking that question? I've watched all your previous battles so far, but all I can tell is that you're disgustingly strong!"

The members of Team Zenith all nodded; they felt much the same way.

Zhang Lie sighed. "The fact that you're saying that means that you don't understand what you did wrong. There were plenty of opportunities for the two of you to demonstrate your strengths, but you didn't work together effectively. I'm very disappointed—I allowed the two of you to fight me together, but you didn't coordinate your attacks at all."

Zhang Hanxiang frowned. "That's not true! Hong Xi and I were in sync!"

"Cooperation doesn't mean you don't drag each other down—it means you work together with each other to augment both your attacks. You and Hong Xi were both attacking me at the same time, yes,

but you were doing so completely independently of each other. Furthermore, you never varied your techniques—you always casted them the same way. You need to reflect on these points and work harder in the future."

Zhang Hanxiang nodded, sighing.

Zhang Lie turned to Hong Xi. "As for you, Hong Xi, you're too reliant on your soulshards. You need to hone your technique as well."

By then, Hong Xi had fainted; she couldn't hear Zhang Lie's words.