

U. Warlord 71

Chapter 71: Unmasked

"You're Zhang Lie?!" In the end, Chu Xun couldn't resist asking the question right then and there, shocking Chu Feng and Yun Bing.

"That's right. Is there a problem?" Zhang Lie admitted to his identity with a smile on his face.

Her gobsmacked expression immediately caught the attention of the hunters around her. "In that case, y-you..."

"What's the matter, Chu Xun?" Chu Feng asked in concern. He then glanced at Zhang Lie. He might have had to show some respect to that mysterious hunter, but Zhang Lie didn't afford the same respect from him. After all, Zhang Lie had long been at the bottom of the gene leaderboard, and it would be trivially easy for the Chu clan to crush him.

"He, he's—" Chu Xun wanted to expose Zhang Lie's identity, but the more urgent she was, the more tongue-tied she became.

"That's right, I'm Zhang Lie. It looks like all of you must be in a hurry, if you've already found this place. Please, come in." Zhang Lie welcomed them into the suite, his voice lowering into the smooth baritone that he used as the mysterious hunter, but neither Yun Bing nor Chu Feng noticed anything amiss at first.

As they walked into the living room and processed the unusually familiar voice, however, they felt as though something was off, but couldn't pinpoint precisely what.

Chu Feng noticed a black cloak draped over a chair, the exact one that the mysterious hunter wore. He immediately pointed to it and exclaimed in shock, "Where's that mysterious fellow?"

Chu Feng felt as though he were disconnected from reality. All the clues were there, but his mind refused to process them. The same was true of Yun Bing and Yun Meng, who had suddenly realized why they found Zhang Lie's voice so familiar.

Why did Zhang Lie sound like the mysterious hunter? Why did Chu Xun behave so strangely when she saw Zhang Lie? Why did she seem to act so familiarly around him?

There was only one reasonable conclusion, but it certainly didn't seem reasonable at all: the mysterious hunter had to be Zhang Lie!

But how could this be? Zhang Lie was a weakling, and the mysterious hunter was stronger than even them! Could it be true?

"Yes, yes, I'm him and he's me. You understand what I'm saying, don't you?" Zhang Lie confirmed the doubts in their mind, but they were all shocked speechless by his words.

He was Zhang Lie? Zhang Lie was him?

A pregnant silence filled the room. The more the hunters thought about it, the less they were able to accept this supposed reality.

After all, believing that Zhang Lie and the mysterious hunter were one and the same meant that they also had to accept the fact that Zhang Lie was the one who had stolen the superior-grade venombane scorpion from under their nose. It also meant that they had to accept the fact that they had all been dancing on Zhang Lie's palms that night.

"Are you really the mysterious hunter who sold us information about the foundational breakthrough?" Yun Bing asked for confirmation.

"Indeed!" Zhang Lie smiled again, responding in the affirmative.

Yun Bing very much wanted to tear that smile off his face but her formal upbringing wouldn't allow that. In the end, she barely suppressed that thought and gave herself a small, mirthless chuckle.

"To think that I, the top hunter on the gene leaderboard, would be manipulated by you, who were once at the very bottom... Laughable, how very laughable. Why reveal your identity now? Are you deliberately trying to humiliate us?"

Yun Bing's mind was a mess of complicated emotion, and Chu Feng felt much the same way. "Are you certain you can pay the price for this deception?" he added.

Zhang Lie seemed unperturbed by the accusations thrown his way. "Let me emphasize that I've never had any intention of playing around with either of you. Do you feel like you've been toyed with?"

"Blame your conceit, your overwhelming self-esteem, your condescension of those beneath you. You asked me if I was willing to accept the consequences of my deception. Of course I am. Would I have appeared in front of you like this otherwise?"

Zhang Lie's frankness was something they, who had been pandered to all their lives, had little experience with.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng couldn't help but think of the Qin, Wang, and Li clans. The last two clans that had gone against Zhang Lie had suffered devastating losses as a result, and the anger stewing in their minds was instantly snuffed out by an icy breeze.

This "king of the dumps", who had been mocked by just about every hunter in the Blacksteel settlement, suddenly seemed to have become a mysterious entity of overwhelming strength. His words were logical: given that he was revealing his identity to them now, he was certainly prepared for any retribution on their part, and not only themselves as hunters, but also their clan.

One thought snaked through Yun Bing and Chu Feng's minds: Zhang Lie was a dangerous fellow indeed. Regardless of whether or not the acquisition of the white-grub cores would be successful, they were sure to warn their clans to stay well away from this frightening hunter.

Of course, just because they thought that way didn't mean that their siblings would, too.

Chu Xun and Yun Meng were both shocked by the sudden revelation, but unlike their older siblings, they were fascinated by Zhang Lie's secret persona and fearless attitude.

"How cool!" Yun Meng murmured subconsciously, giving Yun Bing and Chu Feng both a start.

Before Yun Bing could correct her thinking, beside her, Chu Xun piped up with stars in her eyes, "Just one hunter alone, bringing down the Qin, Wang, and Li clans... amazing!"

"From today onwards, you're my idol, Zhang Lie!"

"I'm going to be your top fan!"

Yun Bing and Chu Feng were speechless at their siblings' attitudes.

What sort of situation was this? They barely avoided becoming enemies, but their younger siblings were siding with the opposition? What were they to do?

"Don't be ridiculous," Zhang Lie chided Yun Meng and Chu Xun gently, then turned to their older counterparts. "As for the two of you, are you ready to negotiate now? You've come looking for me because of my stockpile of white-grub cores, haven't you? I'll let you in on a secret: I have another breakthrough that I'm prepared to share with the two of you if the price is right."

Chu Feng and Yun Bing gaped. Another discovery like the breakthrough in the foundational framework? They had to acquire the information at all costs!

Chu Feng certainly couldn't resist the temptation. He had no choice but to humbly apologize to Zhang Lie. "In front of you, I truly have no right to be prideful. But don't worry, I promise this won't happen again. Now, can you tell us about this new breakthrough you have?"

Chapter 72: Common Welfare

"One thing at a time, surely. We'd better start off with the negotiations for the white-grub cores first," Zhang Lie proposed.

He couldn't help smirking at Chu Feng's sudden change in attitude; he certainly wasn't going to give his secrets away all at once.

Seeing the smirk on Zhang Lie's face, Chu Feng and Yun Bing blushed in embarrassment, but their discomfort only deepened Zhang Lie's smile.

"Have a seat." Zhang Lie motioned to the table in the living room. Yun Bing and Chu Feng would be his future collaborators, and he didn't want to alienate their relationship. He assuaged their embarrassment and redirected their attention to the deal, then headed for the table without turning back around.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing followed behind him.

As they sat, Zhang Lie cut to the heart of the matter. "How many cores do you want to buy, and at what cost?"

"You'll set the price, of course. As for the quantity, I'm intending to purchase ten thousand cores!" Chu Feng exclaimed

"And you aren't afraid I'll try to rip you off?"

Chu Feng and Yun Bing both shook their heads. How much could the cores of what was essentially the lowest-grade lifeform in the dimensional world cost?

"Good, very good. I like working with the two of you, so for our first transaction, I'll give you a 50% discount: 10,000 points per core."

What?! 10,000 points per core, and this was a 50% discount? Who would buy these cores at such an insane price? Ten thousand cores would cost a hundred million points!

The Yun and Chu clans were quite wealthy, but even Yun Bing and Chu Feng couldn't help quailing at this price.

"You're charging such an exorbitant price?!" Chu Feng shouted.

"If you're interested, we can carry out the transaction right away." Zhang Lie's expression made it seem as though they ought to be grateful for his discount, making Yun Bing and Chu Feng want to tug out their hair and scream.

Given such an exorbitant price, they wouldn't be able to make a decision on behalf of their clan. They had expected to be able to buy the white-grub cores for a rate no steeper than a thousand points per pound. A thousand points wasn't much to scoff at—that was ten thousand dollars! Were they too naive, or was Zhang Lie simply too greedy?

Even established clans like the Chu and Yun clans didn't make all that many points a year. Neither of them had the authority to handle a hundred-million point transaction, but they had already pledged to buy that many cores!

"...in that case, can I just buy a hundred cores for now?" Chu Feng gave up on his pride entirely. He didn't want to go back to his clan empty-handed, so what else could he do?

Honestly, he didn't want to make any transactions with Zhang Lie at all—no, he didn't want to meet, encounter, or interact with him in any shape or form. Zhang Lie was a human-skinned demon, he was sure of it!

Zhang Lie nodded sagely. "That's right, you should only buy what you can afford. As for you, Miss Yun Bing? How many would you like to buy?"

Zhang Lie turned to Yun Bing, who was glancing at him rather thoughtfully. In the end, she smiled wryly. "At this price, I can also only afford a hundred."

They thought they were well-prepared for this transaction, but in the end, all they could afford were a hundred cores each.

Zhang Lie's smile was still plastered on his face. "I know you both think that this price is exorbitant, but neither of you have felt the increase in your strength after this breakthrough, and neither of you know that these white grubs are about to be hunted to extinction. To tell you the truth, I'm intending on announcing the news about a foundational breakthrough in public."

"What?" Both Chu Feng and Yun Bing jumped in shock.

Was Zhang Lie going to announce a secret of this magnitude in public? Wouldn't it be normal to try to keep it a secret that only those in the clan would know about? Why would he publicize it? Surely he wasn't so benevolent as to do it for nothing?

This one meeting had given both Chu Feng and Yun Bing a year's worth of shocks.

"Is it that unusual? Of course the public has to know about such a big boon! I'm not like you clans, trying to secure every advantage and keeping it hidden from everyone else. For humanity to grow, we need to be working together, but all you're thinking about is inter-clan politics!" [1]

Neither of them knew what to say to Zhang Lie any longer.

That being said, if Zhang Lie did go through with his plan, then the price of these white-grub cores would surely go through the roof, wouldn't they?

After extensive testing, both clans had realized that kelpfish roe and bluewater frog meat were both useless for the breakthrough, and was simply a smokescreen that Zhang Lie had devised to prevent them from realizing the truth sooner.

White-grub cores were the key ingredient for the foundational breakthrough, but this key ingredient was wholly under Zhang Lie's control. Based on their estimates, Zhang Lie had over a hundred thousand white-grub cores, a veritable fortune, especially if the news were to be publicly released.

The two of them felt a brief moment of regret that they hadn't hunted these white-grub cores themselves.

Zhang Lie, who had been the laughingstock of the entire settlement for several months, had completely changed Yun Bing and Chu Feng's perception of him. Both of them feared and respected the mysterious hunter in front of them; after all, be it in the short- or long-term, his plans far exceeded their expectations.

"Will you allow us to discuss the purchase of these cores with our elders?" Yun Bing suddenly asked, disregarding her pride. "We aren't authorized to handle transactions of such large magnitude."

Zhang Lie naturally agreed.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng both left hurriedly after their hundred-core transactions to deliberate with their respective clans, the shock from the information presented to them that day evident on their faces.

Amidst this torrent of information, they had completely forgotten about Zhang Lie's mention of another breakthrough.

Chapter 73: The Zenith Dojo

Zhang Lie didn't mind delaying that other business prospect of his a little while longer. After all, such information was more precious the longer he waited to announce it.

After seeing the other hunters off, Zhang Lie left his suite and prepared to return to the real world. The hunters of Team Zenith were about to make their way over, and he had to prepare himself for their encounter.

He immediately contacted the lawyer whose services he had made use of when purchasing his house from Wang Jianxin. Lawyers of this time and age were well-versed in anything that dealt with contracts and the law, and Zhang Lie's purpose was to purchase another plot of land.

The lawyer he had worked with in the past, Zhang Hong, had handled the contract deftly, and he intended on working with her again.

"It's good to hear from you, Mr. Zhang. Will you require my services urgently, given that you're making such a late call?"

Zhang Hong's hologram gave Zhang Lie a businesslike smile, etiquette that wasn't reflected on Zhang Lie's part: he was smoking a cigarette and lounging back on a recliner, one foot propped up on the knee of the other.

"To say it's urgent would be an overkill, but to say it's not urgent would be an understatement."

Zhang Hong raised her eyebrows. "Mr. Zhang, it's already quite late at night, and these aren't my regular work hours. If there's something urgent, I will be happy to help. Otherwise, if you don't mind, I'm about to rest, and I'm sure the same applies to you."

Zhang Lie's nonsense would have caused any other lawyer to hang up by now, and Zhang Hong's restrained chiding was better than he had expected. "Lawyer Zhang, I admire your professionalism. In that case, I'd like to leave this task in your capable hands. Put simply, I want to purchase the land rights for all the land within a kilometer of my house."

Zhang Lie's words shocked Lawyer Zhang into stunned silence. All the land within a kilometer of his house? It was true that Zhang Lie lived in the slums, and that the price of land here was far cheaper than it would otherwise be, but this was all relative.

The investment needed to buy up so much land would be a massive sum no matter where the land was. And if he wanted the land rights, he would have to buy up the houses in the area too. A conservative estimate for so much land would be at least hundreds of millions of dollars.

Zhang Lie's current residence was a recent purchase, and hadn't he spent one or two million dollars on it? What was he thinking now, trying to purchase the entire neighborhood?

If she remembered correctly, he lived alone with his sister, so where would he even get so much money? Surely he was drunk!

Despite the thoughts flitting through her brain, Zhang Hong's smile remained as placid and professional as ever. "Mr. Zhang, have you been drinking? I'm afraid you may be a little muddleheaded at the moment. Thank you for keeping me in mind, but I'm sorry, I'm about to rest, and I still have to work tomorrow."

Zhang Lie thought that Zhang Hong was really quite patient to have lasted so long into his charade. Before she could leave, he slid a gold-rimmed black card out of his back pocket and waved it at her. "Lawyer Zhang, I'm not kidding. I'm a hunter in the dimensional world, after all."

Zhang Hong's eyes bulged, and her professional smile vanished in the blink of an eye.

"My goodness, Mr. Zhang, I—I do profusely apologize! I failed to recognize just how qualified you were to make such a purchase."

Those gold-rimmed black cards were only given to clients with a credit limit of millions of points, so Zhang Lie himself surely had assets totaling at least a hundred million. He hadn't been drunk at all! This man before her, though only in his early twenties, had the funds to back up his words!

It seemed as though he had chanced upon a stroke of fortune in the dimensional world.

"I don't mind. Shall we discuss the matter further?" He smiled, dismissing their earlier conversation.

Zhang Hong, faced with the prospect of such a lucrative request, immediately perked up. Although she had been feeling somewhat tired, her desire to sleep had vaporized. "Mr. Zhang, your request involves such a large sum of money that I would feel far more comfortable with a face-to-face conversation. Would you mind giving me a few minutes to get ready and head over?"

"Sure. It isn't too late yet, so I'm happy to host you for a while."

"Very good, Mr. Zhang. I'll be at your estate in about fifteen minutes." Zhang Hong terminated the call, then beamed in excitement. This would be the largest transaction that she had handled in her career, and she would regret it for the rest of her life if she failed to secure it now.

As for Zhang Lie, he took a quick shower before Zhang Hong arrived.

The rest was simple. Zhang Lie informed her of his demands, and they quickly reached an agreement. Zhang Lie planned to have Zhang Hong handle everything on his behalf, and he would give her ten days to do so. Within ten days, he wanted to see the land rights for the land within a kilometer of his house.

Given the amount of money he was investing into the land, Zhang Hong easily agreed. He was willing to purchase the nearby properties for one and a half times their standard value, as well as grease the wheels a little to make the acquisition proceed more rapidly.

The residents of the slums were in luck: this much money would allow them to buy up houses outside the slums, giving them better living conditions for essentially no cost at all. Who would refuse such an offer?

Time seemed to pass quickly, but it took two hours before Zhang Hong and Zhang Lie worked out the details of the contract. Upon seeing Zhang Lie sign his name, Zhang Hong breathed out a sigh of relief, followed by a surge of excitement that filled her entire body. This was the biggest deal of her career!

"Thank you for your trust in me, Mr. Zhang. I, Zhang Hong, will do my best to guarantee a speedy acquisition!"

Zhang Lie nodded. "If you handle this matter well, I'll preferentially consider your services in the future. I hope you won't give me any reason to doubt my trust in you. Please acquire the land rights as quickly as you can."

Zhang Hong nodded, then asked offhandedly, "Might I ask what you plan on using the land for?"

"I intend on building a dojo right here."

A dojo for hunters of the dimensional world? Zhang Hong was taken aback once more. A dojo right here in the slums, with no nearby facilities to support it?

She blinked a few times. Who would want to train in a dojo under such circumstances and in such conditions?

Chapter 74: Congregation

Of course, whether or not there would be any disciples willing to train with Zhang Lie wasn't something that she, Zhang Hong, had to concern herself with. After the customary farewell, Zhang Hong left with her briefcase.

Zhang Lie, who had worked hard the entire day, slumped into bed and immediately fell asleep.

The next morning, just as the first rays of dawn shone through the window, as Zhang Lie lay drooling in bed, dreaming sweet dreams, the doorbell rang.

"Master, Master, you have a guest!" The robotic housekeeper slid toward Zhang Lie's bed and began trying to wake him up.

Zhang Lie groaned. "Who is it? Who's here so early in the day? Go open the door."

As he blearily rubbed his eyes and stretched, Zhang Lie began the arduous process of waking up. The moment he pushed his blankets away and walked out of his bedroom, a young woman rushed up to him.

"Surprise!"

It was the first of the hunters from Team Zenith. Zhang Lie expected that the first hunter to get to his house would be Yang Ze, but it turned out to be Sun Mengmeng.

She flitted around the house in a pale blue dress, looking quite a bit more relaxed than she did as a hunter in the dimensional world. She seemed to have deliberately put on makeup to leave a good first impression on everyone in Team Zenith, and it was certainly paying off.

"Welcome to my place, Mengmeng. Have a seat—I just woke up, so I'm going to go wash up."

Despite this being their first encounter in real life, Zhang Lie seemed to be as casual with Sun Mengmeng as they were in the dimensional world. It gave Sun Mengmeng the impression that they were already rather familiar with each other, because Zhang Lie behaved much the same way in the Blacksteel settlement.

She smiled. "Captain, did you just wake up? And here I thought all the top hunters preferred to practice at a dojo in the morning!"

Zhang Lie couldn't respond, because he was currently brushing his teeth.

After he gurgled, he countered, "Training at a dojo? Is that useful? Why not kill a few lifeforms in the dimensional world instead?"

There was some argument for Zhang Lie's proposition. Quite a few teenagers had trained in a dojo since their childhood, but quailed the moment they entered the dimensional world and saw a ferocious lifeform for the first time. What good would their trained constitution do for them then?

"Both in moderation, surely," Sun Mengmeng replied. "Since I'm here early, would you like me to make some breakfast?" After all, she was largely responsible for food preparation in the team, and cooking was second nature to her by now.

"That'd be great!" Zhang Lie called back from the bathroom. He had just been wondering what to do for breakfast. By the time he finished washing up, there were already three dishes set on the dining table: coddled eggs, slices of ham, and fresh soy milk.

Having passed through Sun Mengmeng's hands, the three rather simple dishes were elevated to sophistication. Zhang Lie was full of praise for the food.

After breakfast, they sat together in the living room waiting for the other hunters from Team Zenith to show up. Within half an hour, the next hunter, Li Feng, was here. The rest of the team trickled in over the next hour or so: Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, and Zhou Ying.

However, Yang Ze, who had demonstrated the most eagerness to come, had yet to arrive.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but start to worry. Of them all, Yang Ze had the most illustrious background. Could his clan have forbidden his sudden move?

"Fang Yi, Yang Ze was originally one of your teammates. How much do you know about his family situation? Could he have been waylaid by members of his clan?"

Another hour had passed without his appearance.

Fang Yi thought about it for a moment, but shook his head. "No, Captain, that wouldn't happen. Yang Ze's basically been exiled from his clan, and the rest of his clan would gladly chase him away given the opportunity. But since he's all the way over on Mars, he likely woke up late and missed the scheduled teleportation. I'll message him and see if he's about to arrive."

Just as Fang Yi tapped out a message, Yang Ze's voice could be heard from outside. "I'm here, everyone! Fang Yi, you must have missed me if you're sending me such an urgent message!"

He appeared in the doorway with a few suitcases trailing behind him.

"Sorry, sorry, Captain, I had a hard time finding my way around the slums."

Finally, all the members of Team Zenith were gathered. Zhang Lie's small living room was packed to the brim with luggage and people.

"Be more punctual next time, you hear?" Zhang Lie clicked his tongue.

Yang Ze gave him a mock salute. "Yes, Captain!"

"Alright, now that everyone's here, have a seat and I'll discuss the next stage of my plan. First, welcome to Ning, and welcome to my house. I've called you all over for two reasons: first, to have you help me set up a dojo, and second, to have you purge yourselves of your genetic techniques and begin anew, so as to gain access to what I've been calling limit fragments."

Both of these were topics that Zhang Lie had yet to broach with any of the members of Team Zenith, and they were both of significant importance.

Each was like a jolt to their heart.

The first issue was the dojo. Dojos had sprung up shortly after the discovery of the dimensional world, and they had developed into a professional enterprise. At present, one would need to be at least a superior-grade hunter to meet the required qualifications.

Although their captain had quite a lot of points, he was still a mortal lifeform, and he had yet to advance into the second realm of the dimensional world. Compared to most other dojo leaders, he would be underqualified.

The second issue, of purging their techniques and starting from scratch, was much more significant and personal.

Although they had been quite curious about how Zhang Lie had managed to dominate Li Hong despite having about the same number of stats, their genetic techniques were such an important part of their strength that they would certainly hesitate before giving them up.

After all, how were they to fight in the dimensional world without their techniques?

Sensing the hunters' hesitation, Zhang Lie smiled. "It looks like all of you need some time to think about this, so let's deal with lodgings for the moment. My place is so small that you certainly won't all be able to stay here, so we'll need to find you places to live first. Once we've gotten that sorted out, we can discuss what I've brought up today."

They rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

Chapter 75: Ultimatum

Finding a place to live wasn't a problem for the other hunters. Given their newfound wealth, they were easily able to find a few places for rent just a kilometer or so away from Zhang Lie's house.

By the time they made all their preparations and gathered again, they had decided to purge their genetic techniques and start anew, as Zhang Lie had suggested. The reason they had all come to Ning was all because of Zhang Lie, so why hesitate now?

Zhang Lie's generosity was evident from the way he handled the superior-grade soulshards he had obtained as loot from Li Hong. If Zhang Lie really wanted to hurt them, he could have done so within the dimensional world, and there was no need for him to gather them here.

"I'm glad you're all willing to trust me. I promise you'll not regret the decision you've made today! Both stages of my plan can be carried out simultaneously. I've already started acquiring the land rights to construct a dojo right here. You're all my teammates as well as my first disciples, so you'd better not lose me face, you hear?"

"Yes, Captain!" the hunters chorused.

"In that case, let's start with the reason for purging your genetic techniques, which I'm sure you're all quite curious about." As the hunters nodded, Zhang Lie continued, "It's very simple: your foundational framework can be advanced past the tenth stage!"

"What? Doesn't the foundational framework only have ten stages? What's this final stage you're talking about?!" Flabbergasted, Yang Ze interrupted Zhang Lie before he could continue.

"The first ten stages are common knowledge, yes, but not this final stage. After breaking through the bottleneck at the tenth stage of your foundational framework and reaching what I've termed the final stage, you'll be able to increase your basic gene capacity by ten. It's for these ten basic gene fragments that I'm having all of you purge your genetic techniques and start anew."

"Basic gene capacity? You mean... it can exceed a hundred?! But are ten basic gene fragments really all that important? It certainly doesn't seem as though it would provide a large boost to our constitution. Is it really worth purging our techniques for just ten basic gene fragments?" Fang Yi asked.

Zhang Lie responded patiently, "Of course it's worth it. These are limit fragments, and they provide much more significant a boost than standard gene fragments. Put simply, these ten basic gene

fragments would provide even more of a boost than ten standard mutated gene fragments. Do you understand?"

The shock on the gathered hunters' faces was evident.

Ten mutated gene fragments did provide a significant increase to a hunter's strength, and this wasn't a gap that could be simply closed.

In truth, they weren't particularly advanced with their genetic techniques yet, and purging them and starting anew wouldn't be too much of a sacrifice. However, for the short term, they would be unable to fight at anything close to their original strength.

"Captain, I trust you. What's there to hesitate about? I'm going to purge my techniques right now!" Having made up her mind, Sun Mengmeng closed her eyes, expelling the engravings on her genetic core. The turbulent genetic energy that was generated as a result caused fresh blood to trickle out of her lips, but she didn't care.

The other hunters followed suit.

"We'll have to carry out the breakthrough in the dimensional world. I'll need to give you a few things, and then you'll have to undergo a trial. Whether you can succeed on your first attempt will depend on your perseverance," Zhang Lie continued, once they had all finished. Truthfully, he had anticipated some more resistance to his suggestion, and was gratified that they had so much trust in him.

Back in the dimensional world, they headed to the training ground that the Yun and Chu clans had set up in the Forest of Blue Maples.

When Zhang Lie brought his teammates, who had just stuffed their faces with white-grub cores, to the site, he found Chu Feng and Yun Bing with a hundred-hunter team right outside. This wasn't a coincidence; Zhang Lie had noticed the Yun and Chu hunters gathering within the Blacksteel settlement, and he had timed his movements so that his team would arrive at the training ground exactly as the Yun and Chu parties did.

"May I help you?"

As the two parties met, the members of Team Zenith were quite surprised by how polite Chu Feng and Yun Bing were. After all, they were the two strongest hunters of the Blacksteel settlement!

What sort of hunter could merit such respect from them? Just who was their captain? Didn't he live in the slums? Why did it seem as though Yun Bing and Chu Feng were deferring to him?

From Chu Feng and Yun Bing's perspective, they had already witnessed the horrifying strength of the hunter in front of them. Even if he weren't strong, the warehouse of white-grub cores that he controlled was reason enough to be polite. As a result, it was only natural that Chu Feng would greet him with a smile on his face, his tone an equal mix of excitement and anxiety, giving the rest of Team Zenith a big shock.

"What else could I be here for? These teammates of mine need to participate in the trial, so I'm here asking for a favor."

Yun Bing and Chu Feng turned to the hunters of Team Zenith, carefully inspecting them. Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and Yang Ze responded well to the scrutiny, but the other three hunters couldn't help retreating from the attention.

Such behavior disappointed Yun Bing and Chu Feng. After all, given how mysterious and strong Zhang Lie was, they held everything around him to equally high standards, but the hunters behind him were only decent, at best.

Chu Feng cocked an eyebrow. "Your teammates aren't bad! Of course I'll do you a favor. Let them enter with everyone else!"

Zhang Lie nodded, turning to Fang Yi and the others. "Don't worry and head in with Young Master Chu and the others. But you'd better succeed, or I'm kicking you out of the team!"

The slight disdain in Chu Feng's tone didn't go unnoticed, either by Zhang Lie or by the rest of his team. He gave them an ultimatum in order to pressure them more at this critical moment, hoping to increase their chances of success.

In truth, a breakthrough of this nature couldn't be guaranteed at all, and Zhang Lie certainly didn't intend on expelling any hunters from his team, but Chu Feng, Yun Bing, and even his teammates understood his words differently.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing frowned as they tried to analyze the implications of what he had said. Had Zhang Lie found a method to guarantee a breakthrough? Was that why he had given them that ultimatum in plain sight?

As for his teammates, they felt as though Zhang Lie was insulted by Chu Feng's disdain for them, and whether or not they succeeded would directly impact Zhang Lie's reputation. As such, no matter what trials they would have to face, they had to give it their all so as to not let their captain lose face!

Chapter 76: Potion #1

Team Zenith joined the Chu and Yun parties entering the training ground. Meanwhile, Zhang Lie, Yun Bing, and Chu Feng headed to a pavilion that had been constructed right outside.

"Zhang Lie, it looks as though you're quite confident in your subordinates' strength!"

The moment they sat down, Chu Feng tried to pry some information from him, but Zhang Lie only gave him a placid smile. "I said what I did solely to stress them and increase the chances of a breakthrough."

Neither Chu Feng nor Yun Bing believed him. They glanced at each other, both coming to the conclusion that Zhang Lie was trying to hoodwink them again.

After a brief pause, Chu Feng spoke up again, sincerely, "Zhang Lie, if you have some method for a guaranteed breakthrough, please make sure to sell it to us first! After all, we've worked together for quite a while already, and we'll certainly give you a price that will make you happy."

"There's no such thing. If it really existed, I would certainly have told you two about it already—who wouldn't want more points? I promise that there wasn't any deeper meaning behind those words."

Given the firm negation, Chu Feng and Yun Bing certainly couldn't press the matter further, and they had to change the topic.

"We've reported the matter about the white-grub cores to our clans, and we'd like to purchase five thousand cores each. Would you be willing to give a further discount given our bulk purchase?" Chu Feng tried to negotiate with Zhang Lie.

"No, I won't. 10,000 points per core is already a huge discount, and I assure you, I'll have no shortage of buyers at this price." Zhang Lie held a monopoly on the white-grub cores, and he certainly didn't need to give a further discount.

"Ah, well, in that case, I'll thank you for the sale." What else could Chu Feng do? It wasn't as though he had any bargaining chips handy. They might have tried to threaten some other hunter, but certainly not Zhang Lie.

Both Yun Bing and Chu Feng had strongly recommended to their clans that they maintain a cordial relationship with Zhang Lie and not alienate him. He was simply too threatening as an enemy.

At some point, they had begun to think of Zhang Lie as superior to even themselves.

Chu Feng didn't want to thank Zhang Lie for his 'generosity'; after all, from his perspective, Zhang Lie seemed to be selling what was supposed to be a low-grade resource for an insane price, but he had no choice but to put aside his pride and thank him just for the opportunity to purchase it!

Chu Feng changed the topic again. "Zhang Lie, you mentioned another breakthrough the last time we talked. Would you be willing to let our clans participate?"

Zhang Lie laughed. "Given the authority your clans possess, I'm certainly happy to share the information with you, but there's nothing to participate in. Just like before, it'll be another sale."

"A sale? What do you mean?" It was Yun Bing's turn to speak up. From his tone, it seemed as though Zhang Lie had monopolized yet another breakthrough.

"I won't beat around the bush any longer. This second breakthrough is actually a potion that I concocted unintentionally, which I'm calling Potion #1. Consuming it will allow you to increase your basic gene capacity once more!"

The two hunters gaped again.

'Unintentionally' concocting a potion that would allow a hunter to exceed their basic gene capacity again? What sort of devil was this hunter, to be able to devise such breakthroughs out of nowhere?

And since he was calling it Potion #1, surely that meant that there would be a Potion #2, and then a Potion #3, and then... Just how much information and knowledge did he possess?! If this potion really were to exist, then that meant that they could have more than even a hundred and ten basic gene fragments...

Chu Feng and Yun Bing's worldview seemed to have shattered.

They felt as though they were enmeshed in one of Zhang Lie's traps, and weren't sure whether to continue listening to his words or to leave before he could convince them to spend their hard-earned points on something fraudulent.

"Ah, Zhang Lie, how much of a boost will this supposed potion give?" In the end, Chu Feng couldn't resist the temptation to learn more about this potion.

"It'll increase your basic gene capacity by fifty gene fragments!"

"Fifty?! You're not joking around, are you?" Chu Feng cried out in shock, and even Yun Bing seemed quite flustered.

Zhang Lie continued to smile. "Yes, fifty fragments. Is it all that shocking?"

Chu Feng and Yun Bing were speechless, but as scions of two of the most influential clans of the Blacksteel settlement, they quickly recovered.

Chu Feng's voice had raised an octave in anticipation. "Zhang Lie, will you be selling this potion? Will you be selling its recipe, too?"

It was a rather silly question. Zhang Lie had emphasized that he was approaching them with a sale. Would he sell the potion recipe and give away his monopoly on Potion #1? Of course not!

Zhang Lie pretended he hadn't asked anything.

Yun Bing thumped Chu Feng, beside her, on the back. "Are you an idiot? What would you do in his position? The recipe would be priceless!"

Chu Feng quickly recovered from his momentary lapse in judgment.

Even if Zhang Lie were to sell such a priceless treasure, the entire accumulated wealth of the Chu clan wouldn't be sufficient to purchase it.

"I'm sorry, Zhang Lie, that was a stupid question. Can I ask just how many of these potions you have, and how much you intend on selling them for?" Chu Feng didn't want to work with Zhang Lie any longer, but his wares were simply too enticing. What a ridiculous boost—an increase of fifty basic gene fragments!

And because these were gene fragments beyond the usual capacity, they would be even more impactful than fifty standard mutated gene fragments. Such a boost would generate a gap that couldn't be overcome.

Honestly, Chu Feng couldn't believe that such a ridiculous potion actually existed! After imbibing the potion, he would naturally be stronger than any other hunter.

Despite his current strength, Chu Feng couldn't take this potion lightly. Indeed, in order to maintain and advance his strength, he would have to purchase this potion at any cost.

Yun Bing felt the same way. They had both gotten closer to Zhang Lie subconsciously, and were staring expectantly at him.

"The potion requires quite a few ingredients, and I don't have much supply. All in all, I only have ten potions, and I intend on auctioning them off in the real world. You understand the problem that would pose to a lone hunter like me, don't you?"

An auction? It was clear that Zhang Lie intended to milk this discovery for all it was worth!

Chapter 77: Teamwide Success

An auction—especially one on Earth—meant that they would have even more competitors for these rare potions. In fact, if information about such potions were to be distributed widely, even hunters from the higher realms of the dimensional world might show up. As a result, the organizers of the auction would have to be able to handle the pressure from these far stronger hunters.

"Zhang Lie, are you... requesting that our clans organize the auction?"

Given how strong the potion was purported to be, Chu Feng was perfectly willing to sacrifice his pride to get a chance to acquire it.

However, Zhang Lie already had other plans in mind. "Do you think your clans would be able to handle this? They might have some strength in the first realm of the dimensional world, but would they be able to handle hunters from the higher realms?"

Zhang Lie's words jolted Chu Feng out of his reverie. Zhang Lie was right: the Chu clan might be one of the largest clans within the Blacksteel settlement, but that was nothing compared to some of these hunters who might show up for the auction.

The elders of the clan might have some influence over matters of the second realm, but what about the third and fourth realms? The Yun and Chu clans could hardly hope to stand against the monstrous geniuses who had made it that far.

"Zhang Lie, you're absolutely right. We likely won't have the qualifications to participate in the auction, so would you be willing to sell us two of the potions beforehand?" Yun Bing couldn't resist asking Zhang Lie for a favor, given how incredible the potions' effects were.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Well, working with the two of you has been rather pleasant, so I don't mind leaving two potions for you. In that case, I'll sell them to you at the lowest price that they go for during the auction."

Chu Feng and Yun Bing's eyes widened, and they even began to breathe more heavily.

"Do you mean this? Zhang Lie, I will hold you to your word."

"Don't worry. Have I ever lied to you?"

Yun Bing's face was flushed red with excitement, a surprising contrast from her usual cool and collected demeanor. When she looked toward Zhang Lie, her gaze seemed to be filled with an emotion she couldn't place.

At this moment, Zhang Lie seemed to be exuding some intangible charm, and her heart began to thump loudly. She couldn't help but think to herself, Is he treating me so well because he's interested in me?

She was only in her early twenties, but her strength, as well as the pride that derived from that strength, was a significant barrier deterring would-be suitors. No other hunter had managed to move her heart, but Zhang Lie, who had seemed to appear out of nowhere, satisfied essentially all her requirements: he was mysterious, strong, domineering, and yet gave her preferential treatment.

Even Yun Bing wasn't immune to flights of fancy, after all.

"Thank you, Zhang Lie. No matter what happens in the future, I will remember your goodwill."

By her side, Chu Feng, who knew Yun Bing well, was very surprised by the depth of emotion she was displaying.

"It's not a problem. The fact that we're active in the same settlement in the first realm at the same time is a form of fate, and both of you show promise to be strong hunters in the future. Consider this an investment on my part. Furthermore, you should realize that even the lowest selling price for these potions will still be an astounding sum, and you had better start gathering funds now.

Zhang Lie's words seemed quite logical, but Yun Bing and Chu Feng were still very touched. No matter what, it was a huge favor for him to be willing to remove two potions from auction and to sell it to them at the lowest selling price. They immediately professed their gratitude.

"Zhang Lie, I apologize for having investigated your background, but it doesn't seem like you have a backer at all. Would you be willing to tell us whom you plan on having host this auction?"

Chu Feng and Yun Bing had naturally investigated Zhang Lie before purchasing white-grub cores from him, but all their investigations suggested that he was nothing more than a poverty-stricken resident of the slums on Earth.

He had no family background to speak of, nor a backer, and he even had to take care of his paralyzed sister.

Under such conditions, how was it that Zhang Lie had been able to become as strong as he was today? They certainly wouldn't have been able to get that far starting with so little.

However, before Zhang Lie could answer them, the gates to the training ground opened, and the participants within began to walk out.

"You'll see!" Zhang Lie hastily replied before heading to the gates, eager to know how his teammates had performed.

Quickly, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Sun Xiaowu, Li Feng, and Zhou Ying gathered in a line before Zhang Lie. They were each relaxed, as though they had all met Zhang Lie's expectations, and Zhang Lie could hardly believe the implication.

"Well? Did you all advance?"

"Yes, Captain!" they chorused, shocking the other hunters nearby.

If they didn't succeed, they would be expelled from the team! Of course they didn't dare fail. None of them realized just how shocking it was for them all to pass on the first attempt.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing, who were observing Zhang Lie's team from a distance, were both rather shocked. Had they really all succeeded? Surely they weren't that lucky. Did Zhang Lie really not have some sort of secret technique?

Before their conversation, both Chu Feng and Yun Bing would have suspected that he did, but after the conversation, with their improved understanding of Zhang Lie, they didn't think he would lie.

This meant that those hunters they had disdained earlier had likely succeeded in the trial with their own strength. They took note of those hunters who had defied their expectations.

Zhang Lie didn't care what Chu Feng and Yun Bing thought; he was overjoyed that the hunters of Team Zenith had all succeeded. He knew full well that there was no secret technique for inducing a breakthrough.

There were two reasons for their success: first, the training ground that Chu Feng and Yun Bing had constructed was effective; and second, that Zhang Lie—or rather his teammates—were quite lucky today.

There could be no other explanation.

"Very good. In that case, let's proceed to the next stage of the plan!"

Now that they had all broken through, they would have to replenish their supply of basic gene fragments, and then choose new genetic techniques to study.

Basic gene fragments would be straightforward for any of the present hunters to acquire, even without genetic techniques. As hunters who possessed superior gene fragments, would they be stymied by hunting down regular-grade lifeforms? Of course not!

However, Zhang Lie would have to be more particular with helping them choose their new genetic techniques. After all, as members of his team, they certainly deserved high-quality techniques that fit with their frameworks.

Recalling the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion, Zhang Lie decided to return to the settlement and enlist their services. He bade farewell to Yun Bing and Chu Feng, then made to return. However, Yun Bing and Chu Feng indicated that they would be returning to the settlement as well. They were both very pleased with the large number of successes in that day's trials.

The three of them still had a transaction to carry out, after all, so Zhang Lie didn't mind them tagging along. After a moment's wait, he returned to the Blacksteel settlement with his team, Chu Feng, and Yun Bing.

Chapter 78: A Lucrative Deal

Back in the settlement, Zhang Lie quickly concluded the transaction with Chu Feng and Yun Bing. They each wanted 5,000 cores, for a total of a hundred million points between the two clans.

The members of Team Zenith were astounded by the magnitude of the transaction. A hundred million points was worth a billion dollars! A dollar wasn't worth all that much in this day and age, but Zhang Lie had gotten all that money just for ten thousand cores!

And they had seen just how large Zhang Lie's stockpile of these white-grub cores were. To have a few warehouses full of cores that cost a hundred thousand dollars each... just how much wealth did Zhang Lie have?!

They thought that Zhang Lie was being generous when he handed some points to their team leaders, Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng, but after learning about the extent of his wealth, they finally understood how he could be so generous.

Zhang Lie dismissed them so that they could hunt down the ten basic gene fragments they needed to saturate their new capacity, then entered the Blacksteel Inn alone.

His goal was to purchase a sufficient number of genetic techniques for his team. He had spent quite some time pondering the techniques that would be most suited to everyone.

First was Fang Yi. His original framework was water-attuned, which meant that he could learn all the techniques that Zhang Lie was currently using: [Three-Wave Crescendo], [Rippling Walk], [Calm Waters], [Fists of the Silent Sea], [The Boundless Blade], and even Zhang Lie's prized [Ninecarp Transformation].

There would be no need for any further preparation with regards to his techniques.

Sun Mengmeng's situation wasn't very different from Fang Yi's. Her framework was fire-attuned, just like Zhang Lie's in his past life. In that case, he wouldn't have to prepare any of her techniques either. [The Burning Pyres], [Soulfire Blade], [Scorching Fist], [Flameburst Step], [Embersteel Cuirass], and [Baptism of Hellfire] were genetic techniques that Zhang Lie had used and studied all throughout his past life. Except for [Ninecarp Transformation], they weren't inferior to any of his current water-attuned genetic techniques at all.

However, Sun Mengmeng favored long-ranged archery techniques, so Zhang Lie decided to buy her something suitable for that purpose as well.

The other hunters' techniques would be trickier. Yang Ze's framework was earth-attuned, and Sun Xiaowu's was gold-attuned. Li Feng's framework was earth-attuned, like Yang Ze, whereas Zhou Ying's framework was wood-attuned. To further complicate matters, the four of them each preferred a different fighting style.

Given that Zhang Lie was preparing to build a dojo, he would certainly need a repertoire of genetic techniques, even beyond what his teammates needed.

In his suite, he immediately accessed the trading post and contacted the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion. His status as a million-class customer meant that he received preferential service for all his requests. Not two minutes after he sent a message, Daffodil, who had already handled two of Zhang Lie's requests, contacted him.

"Mr. Peppercorn, thank you for your patronage at the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion. What may I do for you today?"

"I need genetic frameworks and techniques, high-grade and above, in all nine primary elements: gold, wood, water, fire, earth, wind, thunder, light, and darkness. Send me a list of all such techniques you have for me to look over.

To be honest, I'm currently preparing to construct a dojo, and I'll be needing a large supply of techniques. However, you have to ensure that these techniques were obtained reputably, and I can't have any trouble associated with using them. Do you understand?"

Daffodil was momentarily stumped by the enormity of Zhang Lie's request, but she quickly replied, "Yes, Mr. Peppercorn, I understand! However, I don't have the required authority to process this on my own. Please give me a moment while I report this to headquarters and ask for assistance!"

"Go ahead. I'll be here waiting for your response."

Zhang Lie closed the connection and poured himself a glass of red wine, turning on the holographic television as he waited for a response. Fortunately, given his status, the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion didn't dare to keep him waiting. In just five minutes, he received another call.

Two figures appeared on the holographic screen, Daffodil and a middle-aged man.

"Thank you for your patience, Mr. Peppercorn. I'm Fang Yuze, the manager in charge of the branch of the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion in the first realm of the dimensional world, and I'm honored to be serving you today."

"I'm sure Miss Daffodil has already explained my circumstances to you, so there's no need for any pleasantries now, please," Zhang Lie cut directly to the heart of the matter. "How many framework and technique manuals do you have?"

Fang Yuze bowed his head respectfully.

"As you wish, sir. We have 165 manuals that meet your requirements. Of these 165, 23 are gold-attuned, 14 wood, 24 water, 17 fire, 22 earth, 19 wind, 13 thunder, 21 light, and 12 darkness. The lowest is high-grade, and the highest is mythic-grade. Please, feel free to take your pick. As a million-class customer, you'll receive a 12% discount on any purchase you make at the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion," Fang Yuze explained patiently, going so far as to offer Zhang Lie a bulk discount.

After all, customers who made such large purchases were rare, and if he were able to secure a deal now, he would surely gain prestige and reputation within the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion, and be promoted into a managerial position after his advancement into a higher realm.

Zhang Lie smiled. "I intend on purchasing more than fifty manuals, a large purchase even among large purchases. Why don't you give me a 30% discount? If so, we can continue negotiations; if not, I'll find some other trading house to give my business to."

Despite his smile, it was apparent that he had no intention of giving in.

Fang Yuze hesitated, not expecting the 'generous customer' that Daffodil had mentioned to pull a trick like this. He glared at her before turning back to Zhang Lie, schooling his features into a pleasant mask. "Of course, sir. Given the magnitude of your purchase, I can offer you a 30% discount, but I must insist that you purchase at least fifty manuals for the discount to take effect."

"That's not a problem. Fifty manuals is a baseline, and I'm sure to exceed that."

Fang Yuze heaved a sigh of relief, then gave Zhang Lie a wide smile. "In that case, sir, let me thank you again for your patronage. I'll leave Daffodil here to work with you in selecting the manuals you'd like to purchase. If there's anything with her service that you're unhappy about, please contact me directly.

"Here is my contact information. I'm currently located in the Maple settlement, and someone will respond to any request from you at all hours. Please let me know if there's anything you need!"

As a manager, Fang Yuze couldn't afford to spend too much time on any single customer, and after leaving his contact information behind, he handed the rest to Daffodil.

Chapter 79: Inheritance

The remainder of the deal was straightforward. Daffodil and Zhang Lie settled on a set pricing for manuals based on their grade:

6,000 points for high-grade techniques and frameworks,

200,000 points for pinnacle-grade,

2,500,000 points for legendary-grade, and finally,

30,000,000 points for mythic-grade.

With the price settled, Zhang Lie proceeded to sift through the manuals for the ones that he wanted to purchase.

Given his personality, he was naturally going to start from the highest-grade manuals. There were only two mythic-grade manuals, both frameworks: [Rondo of Wind and Storm] and [Arclight Dragon's Imprint].

[Rondo of Wind and Storm] was an unusual dual-attunement framework.

In the short recording that introduced the framework, a female hunter was dancing to the accompaniment of wind and storm, wreathed in gusts of billowing wind, lightning arcing around her body. At times, her genetic energy evoked refreshing gusts of wind; at others, the wrath of lightning.

The flexibility of a dual-attunement framework could be a significant boon in a fight. However, choosing such a framework would require an extremely strong foundation of gene fragments, as well as a large number of auxiliary genetic techniques of both elements.

It was certainly a framework that would require heavy investment. However, Zhang Lie was still interested, and he immediately motioned for the manual. After all, it was a pinnacle-grade framework, and thirty million points for it was a bargain.

Honestly, Zhang Lie was very curious just where the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion was acquiring these mythic-grade frameworks. In the past, the emergence of a mythic-grade framework in the first realm of the dimensional world would always be accompanied by a great hubbub, but this Thousand-Treasure Pavilion had offered two of them up for sale, just like that!

Had he simply been too constrained by his lack of wealth in his past life?

Regardless, given his current wealth, he'd take as many mythic-grade manuals as the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion had to offer.

After watching the recording in full, Zhang Lie motioned that he would purchase [Rondo of Wind and Storm]. Daffodil was elated: Zhang Lie's first purchase was for thirty million points!

The payment was quickly processed, and an elaborate, exquisite manual sent over to Zhang Lie's suite. Instead of inspecting it closely, Zhang Lie moved to the other mythic-grade framework, [Arclight Dragon's Imprint]. This was a relatively rare light-attuned framework, and seemed to invoke a full-body technique.

In the recording, a middle-aged male hunter circulated his genetic energy, causing dense silver scales to emerge over his skin. The silver scales encased him like a suit of draconian armor. A simple punch from the hunter was sufficient to make the earth tremble and the heavens shake, and it clearly endowed him with frightening strength.

However, it was also evident that this framework would require a dense reservoir of light-attuned genetic energy: manifesting enough silver scales to cover a hunter's entire body wasn't a trivial task at all.

Despite this shortcoming, it was still a mythic-grade framework, and Zhang Lie bought it without a second thought.

Daffodil's face broke into a huge smile.

He surveyed the legendary- and pinnacle-grade frameworks and techniques in much the same way, buying all that caught his eye. As he had promised, he would buy no fewer than fifty manuals; in the end, he went away with fifty-four.

Of the nine primary elements, he had at least four or five of each type, and he had spent almost a hundred million points.

This was Daffodil's first time seeing someone purchase so many and such varied manuals in bulk. Of course, from her perspective, the more he bought, the larger the bonus she would receive, so her smile had been widening the entire afternoon.

After Zhang Lie finished inspecting the last manual, Daffodil beamed at him. "Mr. Peppercorn, all your desired manuals have been sent to you. On behalf of the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion, thank you for your patronage, and I must personally thank you for supporting me as well! If you're ever by Ursa Major, please let me know, and I'd be delighted to show you around. Here's my contact information."

Before Zhang Lie could say a single thing, she had already sent her contact information over. She was clearly delighted by the humongous purchase Zhang Lie had made.

"I'll take your word for it."

"Of course, Mr. Peppercorn! It would be my honor to meet you in person. May the opening of your dojo be a wonderful success! In addition, from today onward, you'll be a ten-million-class customer of the Thousand-Treasure Pavilion— no, more accurately, you're our first customer to be close to the hundred-million class, and my team will be your dedicated service staff. If you have any requests or problems related to trade and business, my team and I will offer you our utmost support."

Daffodil was certainly very skilled as a sales representative, and she knew just how to keep a customer like Zhang Lie relaxed and happy.

"I do have a question. I asked something similar last time, but I wasn't too satisfied with your answer. This time, I'd like to hear something less evasive."

Daffodil could guess what the question would be. "May I ask if you're inquiring about the origin of these manuals?"

Zhang Lie nodded.

"Most of these manuals were part of the legacies of strong hunters who have perished," Daffodil explained.

Zhang Lie blinked, his mind suddenly filling with possibilities. He had overlooked critical information that he possessed—the locations of burial mounds for several hunters of legend, where their legacy and inheritance could be obtained! One of them was even right on Earth. How could he have forgotten such valuable information?

If Daffodil hadn't brought it up, he wouldn't have considered this avenue of wealth.

The dimensional world had been discovered for less than a century, but within this period of time, there were quite a few rising stars of humanity that had emerged. Some of them were still trying to access higher and higher realms, but others had perished unexpectedly.

At the dawn of this century, there had been a series of serious conflicts between humankind and a class of insectoid lifeforms known as the Kez.

Hunters from that era tended to leave behind a legacy in hopes that there would be hunters to inherit the path of cultivation that they had pioneered and take up their mantles in the war against the Kez. Most such legacies included frameworks, techniques, and all sorts of treasures that they had obtained during their journeys.

Zhang Lie's excitement showed on his face. "Thank you for the information. If I'm ever by Ursa Major, I'll treat you to a meal!"

Daffodil was unaware of the source of Zhang Lie's excitement, but she smiled at the sudden interest that he demonstrated. "I look forward to it, Mr. Peppercorn. If there's nothing else, I'll have to report the outcome of this sale now."

"Farewell!" Zhang Lie's excitement grew more intense once the connection was closed. He was rapidly assembling a plan to take advantage of his knowledge.

Chapter 80: A Pleasant Chat

Zhang Lie stored the manuals he had just recently purchased and left the inn. Uncloaked, he made his way to the settlement gates to wait for Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others.

"Oh, who's this? If it isn't the king of the dumps himself?"

"What? Where? Hasn't the Qin clan dealt with him yet?"

"The Qin clan? Hah! Given their current state, what can they even do?"

Zhang Lie was surprised to see that he was still quite a notorious figure in the settlement. He was instantly recognized the moment he appeared, then publicly mocked again.

Of course, these hunters were nothing more than annoying flies to him. If he didn't strike at them, they would keep on buzzing; if he did, he'd dirty his hand with a splat of blood. He preferred to just ignore them; after all, while they were all within the settlement, no one would dare resort to violence.

"What about the Qin clan? They were once one of the six major clans in the Blacksteel settlement; even in a weakened state, don't you think they'd be able to take care of a hunter like him?"

"If you ask me, he's just cursed with bad luck! Look at what happened to the Wang and Qin clans!"

"Bad luck? The two clans destroyed each other, but this fellow's still hale and hearty over here. How could this be anything but good luck? If I were him, I'd sell all my possessions and bet on a few lottery tickets!"

"Hey, you can hear us, can't you? Why don't you tell us how you managed to survive a pincer attack from the Qin and Wang clans?" asked a dark-faced hunter, who was walking up to Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "As your companion over there mentioned, the two clans were far more concerned with each other than a weakling like me."

"A weakling? If you're a weakling, Zhang Lie, then are there any strong hunters within this settlement?! Stop feigning weakness, Zhang Lie. I know all your tricks now!" A familiar voice came from a cloaked man standing not too far from him.

Zhang Lie recognized him almost instantly. "Indeed, there's no need for me to pretend any longer. As for you, have you resolved your feud with the Zhou clan?"

Zhang Lie's sudden smile made the man take a step back. "Zhang Lie, just you wait! I'll claim your life once the Void Cup is over!"

"Oh? Is that so, Qin Xiao? Not to look down on the Qin clan, but you're grossly mistaken if you think you can claim my life!"

Zhang Lie's relationship with the Qin clan had completely soured, and there was no reason for him to hide his distaste now.

However, the conversation between Zhang Lie and Qin Xiao shocked the gathered crowd.

What sort of situation was this? That cloaked hunter was Qin Xiao? Zhang Lie, the king of the dumps, was facing off against Qin Xiao, third on the gene leaderboard?

And he claimed that even the entire Qin clan wouldn't be able to do anything about him? Was this hunter going mad, or had they missed something?

"I knew there was something wrong with you, but no matter what, you're still just a poverty-stricken hunter from the slums! Do you really think you'll be able to get away with offending me, Qin Xiao? With offending the Qin clan?" Despite his expulsion from the Qin clan, Qin Xiao was still as arrogant as ever.

"And if I say he will, what will you do then, Young Master Qin?" Just then, a female voice cut across the chatter from the shocked crowd, instantly attracting everyone's attention.

The onlookers' eyes bulged: the speaker was Yun Bing, the top-ranked hunter in the Blacksteel settlement! She had just entered the settlement with Chu Feng and a few unknown hunters, but what the onlookers focused on wasn't her retinue, but instead her tone. It was clear that she sided with Zhang Lie.

Why was the top-ranked hunter of the Blacksteel settlement protecting this so-called king of the dumps? Was there some secret between them? Were they... intimately related? Surely not.

None of the bystanders knew what was going on, but they were certain of one thing: there was more to Zhang Lie than met the eye at first glance.

Yun Bing's sudden interruption left Qin Xiao a little bewildered.

"That's right! I, Chu Feng, also think that Zhang Lie will be able to get away with this. What do you think, Young Master Qin?" Chu Feng agreed with Yun Bing.

"Yun Bing, Chu Feng, you—"

"Listen up: I consider Zhang Lie a brother of mine, and if you have a score to settle with him, then you have a score to settle with me. You don't need me to remind you just how dire the Qin clan's straits are, do you? Don't do something you'll regret."

Before Qin Xiao could speak, Chu Feng had already threatened him into silence. After all, Zhang Lie was essentially a benefactor to both Yun Bing and Chu Feng, and he had Potion #1, which they direly needed, in his possession.

They certainly didn't want to lose their chance at obtaining such a rare boon. To Chu Feng and Yun Bing, their strength as a hunter was far more important than any wealth or material possession, and they naturally had to stand up to Qin Xiao.

Qin Xiao was flabbergasted by their behavior. Were they mad, to call a trashy hunter like that their sworn brother?

Worst of all, he didn't even dare to rebuke them! In the past, the Qin clan would have been able to handle either the Yun or Chu clans individually, but now, if they decided to focus their efforts on ruining the Qin clan, they would likely succeed.

He was confident in being able to handle Zhang Lie, but he didn't dare touch Yun Bing or Chu Feng at all. He snorted lightly, then scurried away.

After Qin Xiao vanished within the crowd, Yun Bing and Chu Feng walked up to Zhang Lie.

"Actually, the two of you didn't have to do this. Someone like Qin Xiao wouldn't be able to do anything to me," Zhang Lie said, smiling. His words again sent ripples of shock through the gathered crowd.

Chu Feng smirked. "Perhaps I just pity Qin Xiao. After all, Yun Bing and I know just how devious you are."

The three of them chatted as they headed into the settlement. Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others followed behind them like obedient children.

"Well, if he tries to seek me out, it'll be to his own detriment."

Zhang Lie didn't care about Qin Xiao at all. Now that he had grown so significantly in strength, someone like Qin Xiao—or even the entire Qin clan—was no threat to him. If Qin Xiao forced himself upon him, Zhang Lie would retaliate at full strength.

They left a gaggle of shocked hunters behind them as they walked away.