

U. Warlord 81

Chapter 81: A Choice of Manuals

What sort of situation was this? It was ridiculous enough that Zhang Lie was being protected by both Yun Bing and Chu Feng, but given their conversation, it seemed as though they even believed that Zhang Lie had the strength to overthrow the entire Qin clan.

In a matter of hours, the conversation at the gates of the Blacksteel settlement had spread to all the hunters in the vicinity, and Zhang Lie's reputation as the king of the dumps seemed about to be overthrown.

Zhang Lie brought the rest of Team Zenith back to the Blacksteel Inn, but instead of renting a suite, he rented time in a specialized training room instead. It was a space specifically designed for hunters to practice and train with genetic techniques.

As an underground chamber, it was extremely spacious, with individual training rooms, environmental adaptation chambers, a dedicated research lab, and all sorts of other amenities. Compared to the training room that came with a standard suite, this specialized version was far more comprehensive.

With the extent of Zhang Lie's wealth revealed, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others were gradually growing used to his extravagance.

As he brought his teammates inside, Zhang Lie asked, "Well, have you all reached your new basic gene capacity?"

They nodded.

"Very good. In that case, we'll proceed to the next step of the training: acquiring new genetic techniques. I've prepared a fair selection for all of you, so take a look at the various recordings. After you're done, tell me which techniques you're going to learn, as well as the reason why."

The construction of his dojo was progressing at a rapid pace in the real world, and he didn't want his repertoire of manuals or his disciples to fall behind.

A list of over fifty recordings was displayed in front of the hunters' faces. The dazzling variety of techniques, as well as their average grade, left once again stunned the gathered hunters.

"Captain, a-are you letting us choose from any of these genetic techniques?" Fang Yi asked, stammering in his astonishment.

Soulshards were an addition to a hunter's repertoire, but a framework and its associated techniques were a hunter's foundation. The stronger the foundation, the farther the hunter would be able to go.

If they really were able to take their pick among these frameworks and techniques, they wouldn't have to worry about their foundation at all. After all, the lowest-grade manual here was high-grade, and the majority were pinnacle-, legendary-, or even mythic-grade.

Such manuals were all quite rare, and yet their captain had brought out over fifty of them like it was a trivial affair!

Even Yang Ze, who came from an affluent clan, couldn't help but be amazed at the sight. After all, he had expended almost all his resources within his clan just to obtain a pinnacle-grade framework, but the framework that he had painstakingly acquired wasn't worth a mention compared to the resources arrayed in front of him.

At this moment, Yang Ze was incomparably glad that he had chosen to follow Zhang Lie, that he had become Zhang Lie's first disciple, that he hadn't backed down at a critical juncture, and that he had chosen to purge his techniques and start over.

He and the other hunters began poring through the recordings, searching for a suitable framework and accompanying techniques.

Zhang Lie headed outside to train his [Fists of the Silent Sea]. He was quite surprised at just how long the hunters were taking to choose suitable techniques: even after practicing for an hour, none of them had come up to him with choices in mind.

Had he given them an overwhelming number of options? Just as he was about to return to the recording room to see what they were up to, Sun Mengmeng walked toward him.

Zhang Lie stopped practicing his technique and turned to her with some curiosity. When he had purchased these manuals, he had some idea as to which hunter would pick which techniques, and he was curious as to how accurate his prediction would be.

"Captain, I'm ready!" Sun Mengmeng was direct and deliberate.

"Which manuals have you chosen, and why?"

"For my framework, I've chosen [Black Sun], a legendary-grade fire-attuned framework whose strength lies in the intense dark flames it generates. As auxiliary techniques, I intend on studying [Baptism of Hellfire], a legendary-grade sword-based technique particularly compatible with my chosen framework, as well as the one fire-attuned archery technique available, [Lunarflame Shot]. If I'm not mistaken, Captain, you must have picked this technique specifically for me!"

Zhang Lie nodded. "You have a very clear sense of your strengths and the role you want to play in combat. These three manuals are all excellent fits for you, but as a long-ranged attacker, you have to be able to deal with your opponents' gap closers.

"Not only must you possess some amount of close-ranged combat ability, you must also have a dexterity-focused footwork technique, as well as explosive speed. Fire-attuned footwork techniques are relatively rare, and I also don't have a large selection on hand. For now, you had better learn [Flameburst Step] as well—it might only be a high-grade technique, but it's simple and effective, giving you a quick burst of speed when you most need it."

"Yes, Captain!" Sun Mengmeng immediately nodded.

Zhang Lie handed her four manuals.

"Here are the techniques. Start studying them immediately. If you have any questions regarding your framework or auxiliary techniques, feel free to ask me for help," Zhang Lie instructed.

Sun Mengmeng glanced at the four manuals in her hand, still somewhat disbelieving of this new reality. After all, three of the four manuals were legendary-grade—how could she not be excited?

Without Zhang Lie's assistance, she certainly wouldn't have been able to obtain a legendary-grade framework or technique at this stage, so her excitement was only normal.

Only after a while did she come to her senses, stumbling in her rush toward one of the training rooms.

After Sun Mengmeng made her decision, the others quickly followed suit. Zhang Lie's next interruption was from two hunters, not just one. Yang Ze and Li Feng approached him together, which surprised Zhang Lie quite a bit.

Yang Ze belonged to an affluent clan and was from a privileged background, whereas Li Feng came from the slums, just like him. How had they gotten so close? He supposed it was just a fluke of human nature: after the two teams had merged into one, Yang Ze and Li Feng had become closer together than any other pair of hunters.

He smiled at them. "Are you both ready?"

They nodded.

"In that case, which manuals have you picked out? Yang Ze, you go first. I'm curious about the perspective of someone from an established clan."

Zhang Lie was interested in knowing which techniques he would pick, given that his framework was originally water-attuned.

Chapter 82: Unexpected

Yang Ze pursed his lips, then began seriously, "As my framework, I've chosen [Ripples of Shattered Glass], because it's most compatible with me, and it's also legendary-grade. For my sword technique, [The Boundless Blade]; for my fist technique, [Fists of the Silent Sea]. I was deeply impressed by your recording of both techniques, and I plan on learning them both. As for a footwork technique, I'm interested in the pinnacle-grade [Mirrored Refraction]. What do you think?"

"Not bad, not bad at all," Zhang Lie praised. "Your selections were essentially as I predicted. In that case, you can get started right away. Take these manuals and head into one of the unoccupied training rooms."

Zhang Lie handed over the four manuals, causing Yang Ze to still for a moment as he felt their heft in his hands. He glanced up at Zhang Lie, nodded firmly, and headed toward a training room.

After Yang Ze was Li Feng. "Alright, what do you have for me?"

Because he had predicted the manuals Yang Ze had chosen, he was quite confident that he could do the same with Li Feng, but Li Feng's response was completely beyond his expectations.

"Captain, I would like to learn [Arclight Dragon's Imprint]!"

Li Feng's words stunned Zhang Lie. After all, his framework was previously earth-attuned, and although he still wasn't very advanced with it, he had at least gotten a grounding in earth-attuned techniques.

Was he intending to take an entirely different path? Zhang Lie smiled at his audacity.

"Explain your decision. Your previous framework was earth-attuned, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Captain, but not by choice." Li Feng grew visibly deflated as he responded.

He didn't have a choice. Coming from the slums, it took him a whole year of scraping by in the dimensional world to obtain that one high-grade framework, [Earthen Pulse]. Now, however, he wasn't restricted by a paucity of choices, and it was only natural that he would want to pick out the best technique he could.

If Zhang Lie had acquired a mythic-grade earth-attuned framework, he would undoubtedly have chosen that, but of the available earth-attuned manuals, the highest was only legendary-grade.

This prompted Li Feng to look outside his comfort zone and to choose a framework with a different elemental attunement. His background made him well aware that this could be the most important opportunity of his entire life. The framework he chose now would affect his future, and would represent a turning point in his career as a hunter.

As such, he would naturally aim for the very best!

"Your body's already familiarized itself with earth-attune techniques," Zhang Lie warned. "If you study an earth-attuned framework now, you'll be able to advance much more rapidly than if you chose a different elemental attunement. After all, you don't have any experience with light-attuned techniques.

"If you want to cultivate the [Arclight Dragon's Imprint], you'll need to overcome your body's natural aversion to a different elemental attunement, and this could well affect your speed of advancement. For at least a few months, it'll be akin to putting in double the effort for half the gain. Even so, will you take on [Arclight Dragon's Imprint]?"

Zhang Lie didn't forbid Li Feng from making such a decision, but he was very frank about the challenges that Li Feng would have to overcome for success.

He left the choice to Li Feng himself. Upon hearing Zhang Lie's words, hesitation flashed through his eyes, but it vanished in the next instant. Taking a deep breath, he repeated, "Captain, I would like to cultivate [Arclight Dragon's Imprint]."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, Captain!" Li Feng replied instantaneously.

"Good, I can sense your conviction! In that case, you'll learn [Arclight Dragon's Imprint]. What auxiliary techniques have you chosen?"

Li Feng couldn't help but be surprised by Zhang Lie's cool acceptance of his decision.

He was prepared to receive a harsh lecture from him, and even to be rejected, but his captain seemed to be fully supportive of his decision. He had agreed, just like that!

Li Feng felt as if he were dreaming, to have been granted access to a mythic-grade framework so easily. He pinched himself on the leg until he was gasping in pain. No, it wasn't a dream! After a moment of stunned silence, he began to laugh.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but smile at Li Feng's antics. Li Feng was overthinking things; Zhang Lie was naturally gratified to see his teammates' willingness to improve themselves, to grow stronger. They were his disciples, but they were also hunters in their own right, and Zhang Lie was glad to see them chart out their futures for themselves.

"I intend on taking [Dragon's Triumph] and [Light's Bulwark] as my sword and fist techniques respectively, and [Daybreak] as my footwork technique."

All the manuals he had chosen were pinnacle-grade and higher, with [Daybreak] and [Dragon's Triumph] both being legendary-grade. A mythic-grade framework, along with two legendary-grade and a pinnacle-grade technique... it looked as though he would be spending quite a fair amount of time training from now on.

Zhang Lie raised an eyebrow, but he didn't object. As he handed him the four manuals, he said, "Don't disappoint me, Li Feng."

His hands trembling, Li Feng took the four manuals that Zhang Lie proffered. "Of course. I'll make you proud, Captain!"

No one knew just how much Zhang Lie's gift meant to him. From then on, Zhang Lie would be a figure he viewed on equal footing as his birth parents. Without him, Li Feng would never have been able to touch a mythic-grade manual his entire life, let alone study one. But now, he had a mythic-grade, two legendary-grade, and one pinnacle-grade manual in his hands.

Li Feng felt as though what he was holding weren't just the manuals, but also his fate.

He had to achieve success, and he had to make his captain proud. This was all Li Feng could think about. Bowing deeply in gratitude, he ran off to a training room with the manuals in hand.

After Li Feng left, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, and Zhou Ying all finished making their selections and walked up to Zhang Lie together.

"Are you all ready?"

"Yes, Captain!"

"Good. Step forward!" Zhang Lie began with Fang Yi. "Explain what techniques you've chosen, Fang Yi."

Chapter 83: Emergence

Fang Yi hesitated for a moment. "For my framework, I'd like to choose [Rondo of Wind and Storm]!"

"What?!" You want to cultivate [Rondo of Wind and Storm]?"

Zhang Lie was surprised that Li Feng would choose [Arclight Dragon's Imprint], but even that paled in comparison to Fang Yi's choice of framework. After all, in his past life, Fang Yi had achieved great success with his water-attuned framework.

Was the temptation of a mythic-grade framework so large that he would give up all the progress he had made, so large that even Fang Yi, who had been a famous hunter in the past, was tempted?

"Is that unacceptable?" Fang Yi asked, sensing Zhang Lie's unusual response.

"No, but you have to explain your reasoning. After all, your old framework was water-attuned, and you made more progress with it than anyone else on the team with theirs. Why do you suddenly want to switch to [Rondo of Wind and Storm]? You don't seem like a hunter who only cares about their framework's rarity," Zhang Lie explained his concerns.

Fang Yi was rather touched by Zhang Lie's attention and desire to help him. He had a reason for choosing [Rondo of Wind and Storm], and it wasn't because it was a mythic-grade framework.

"Will you trust me, Captain?"

However, he didn't reveal that reason.

"Of course. If not, you wouldn't be here! There's some secret you're keeping to yourself, isn't there?"

Zhang Lie smirked when he saw Fang Yi fidget. Everyone had a secret or two of their own, and he was just testing Fang Yi to see what he would reveal.

Subject to Zhang Lie's scrutiny, Fang Yi quickly promised, "Don't worry, Captain, no matter how many secrets I have, I swear it won't endanger you or our team. However, I'm still a little shocked by what's going on myself, so is it fine if I report back after a few days?"

"Honestly, I'm surprised by just how far off some of my predictions have been, but if you're interested in this framework, then feel free to study it. What about your other techniques? Which ones have you chosen?"

Fang Yi didn't expect Zhang Lie would agree so easily, but he quickly replied, "[Heaven's Judgment], a spear technique; [Wind's Spirit], a fist technique; and [Floating Clouds], a footwork technique."

Zhang Lie was, once again, surprised by Fang Yi's choices.

[Heaven's Judgment] was a legendary-grade lightning-attuned spear technique, and would be an attack of unparalleled might when developed to its fullest.

[Wind's Spirit] was a legendary-grade wind-attuned fist technique, with attacks of dizzying speed and variety,

[Floating Clouds] was a legendary-grade wind-attuned footwork technique, a rare technique that boasted both extreme speed and difficulty.

The three manuals were difficult enough to master on an individual basis, but when combined, and with a mythic-grade framework to boot... it seemed as though Fang Yi really was set on becoming strong, no matter how hard he would have to work.

"I imagine you understand the difficulty of these techniques, but if you're picking them anyway, you must have a reason as to why. In that case, take these manuals and head to a training room." Zhang Lie intended to leave Fang Yi to his own devices but to keep a close eye on his progress.

Only Sun Xiaowu and Zhou Ying were left. Neither deviated from Zhang Lie's expectations, and continued studying techniques corresponding to their original elemental attunement.

Sun Xiaowu's framework would be the legendary-grade [Adamantine Aegis], with auxiliary pinnacle-grade sword technique [Golden Divide], the legendary-grade fist technique [Goldenscale Palm], and footwork technique [Blinding Flash].

Zhou Ying had chosen the legendary-grade framework [Avatar of the Fae], with spear technique [Storm of Leaves] and fist technique [Willow's Caress].

Sun Xiaowu's choices were within reason, but Zhang Lie was a little excited to see that Zhou Ying, just like Li Feng, had chosen a framework that focused on strengthening one's own body.

After giving them both a few pointers, he handed them their respective manuals and had them head into one of the training rooms as well. The entirety of Team Zenith had gone into seclusion.

They spent a whole month of the dimensional world in those rooms, and Zhang Lie was the first to leave: his newly learned [Mirrored Refraction] had just reached intermediate-stage, and he had also advanced considerably with [Fists of the Silent Sea] and [The Boundless Blade]. He had worked particularly diligently on [Fists of the Silent Sea], and had reached a significant level of accomplishment with it.

Of course, an important part of training was using those techniques in battle against opponents.

Zhang Lie informed the rest of the team that he was going to head out and fight against a few superior-grade lifeforms; after all, he was still somewhat far from reaching the superior gene capacity.

The Void Cup was imminent, and he would easily be able to dominate against his competitors once he capped his superior gene fragments.

Upon seeing Zhang Lie emerge from the Blacksteel Inn, many hunters shot him looks of respect and fear. After all, ever since he defended himself against Qin Xiao at the settlement gates, and after being heralded by Chu Feng and Yun Bing, rumors of Zhang Lie had spread far and wide throughout the entire settlement, most even more outlandish than what Zhang Lie himself could have come up with, but these rumors all shared one similarity: for one reason or another, Zhang Lie had managed to get himself noticed by Yun Bing and Chu Feng, and he was now an Important Figure.

A word or errant comment from him could easily ostracize any of them from the rest of the Blacksteel settlement, so most ordinary hunters would naturally fear him.

Of course, there were also some who would be envious or jealous of the circumstances that had led to his sudden rise in status. Those who were smart about it would bury it deep in their hearts, but those who weren't were easily taken advantage of by others: for instance, the hunter who was #43 on the gene leaderboard, Wu Kedi.

Wu Kedi was from the Wu clan in the city of Liao. He was tall, handsome, and prideful, and everything in life had gone smoothly for him—until he encountered who he considered to be the love of his life, Yun Bing.

He was so charmed by her that he swore he would acquire her at any costs, and he tried all manner of tactics to get close to her and to woo her. Unfortunately for him, Yun Bing didn't care for his advances, and hadn't even looked him in the eye once.

Wu Kedi originally thought that her disdain was because of his lack of strength, so he had been furiously training and hunting in order to advance on the gene leaderboard. Within a short period of time, he had advanced from position #111 to #43.

Within three months, he planned to reach the coveted top position on the gene leaderboard, crushing Yun Bing's pride and forcing her to look him in the eye, to become besotted with him.

Unfortunately for him, his vivid imagination wouldn't become a reality. He had only gotten to #43 when a devious hunter told him that Yun Bing had found a boyfriend, and this boyfriend was someone who had been ridiculed by the entire settlement for quite a few months, a dastardly, weak, useless, and ugly fellow.

How could someone like Wu Kedi bear such humiliation? He swore that he would kill this boyfriend of hers, no matter whether what he had heard were rumors or the truth.

Chapter 84: The Impending Void Cup

After disappearing into the Blacksteel Inn, Zhang Lie hadn't been seen for an entire month.

However, just then, one of Wu Kedi's subordinates informed him that Zhang Lie had left the inn. Wu Kedi had no intention of letting him go. With a few trusted subordinates, he headed right outside the settlement gates, where he would lie in wait for Zhang Lie.

As for Zhang Lie, he didn't fear anything or anyone in the settlement after having consumed Potion #2 and reached his improved mutated gene capacity.

There was no reason to hide his identity any longer, so he had been going around uncloaked in the settlement. He had wondered whether or not there would be any hunters trying to target him, but he didn't expect it to be someone unfamiliar.

At the very least, Zhang Lie was quite certain he hadn't seen this particular hunter before. He had no recollection of ever interacting with him.

"Zhang Lie, your death is nigh!" Wu Kedi shouted, his voice full of confidence, as though he grasped his opponent's life wholly in his hands.

Zhang Lie responded in a surprisingly friendly manner. "I have no idea who you are. Leave now, and I'll spare your life."

"You think you can handle me, you gigolo?! How could Yun Bing have been attracted to someone as weak as you? Go, castrate him!" He motioned to his lackeys, giving them a cruel order.

In the blink of an eye, his five subordinates dashed toward Zhang Lie, surrounding him from five different directions. They would first subdue him, using no weapons beyond their hands and legs, and then castrate him once he was completely secured.

Unfortunately for them, Zhang Lie's white-grub armor was more than sufficient to bear the brunt of their attacks. By the time the attackers realized that their attacks were having no effect, it was already too late.

Zhang Lie moved so quickly that all they saw was a blur. They felt a pain in their abdomen, and only then noticed that they had been knocked up into the air.

Wu Kedi's lackeys had intended on subduing Zhang Lie with a numerical advantage, but they were far too weak for such an attempt to succeed. Even all five of them working together would be hard-pressed to block a single blow from Zhang Lie.

After all, they didn't realize just how strong Zhang Lie had grown.

A burst of genetic energy from Zhang Lie was all it took to knock them all onto the ground, and whether or not they would be able to keep their lives would be up to him.

"You damned useless pieces of trash! Can't you do anything on your own?!" Wu Kedi yelled. He materialized a pair of sharp claws, then stared furiously at Zhang Lie.

"Look, don't waste your time trying to attack me. If you apologize now, I might consider letting you walk away, but otherwise—"

Before Zhang Lie could finish talking, Wu Kedi was already rushing toward him. After all, from his perspective, Zhang Lie was just a weakling that wouldn't be able to stand up to him. Zhang Lie's aura might have fooled others, but certainly not someone as discerning as Wu Kedi himself!

Envy and jealousy had destroyed any semblance of logic in Wu Kedi's mind.

"[Talon Strike]!" Following Wu Kedi's howl, a violent gust of wind-attuned genetic energy took on the shape of a giant eagle and rushed toward Zhang Lie.

Nearby hunters, who had gathered because of the commotion, could feel the wind scouring their faces.

"Is this the strength of a top fifty hunter? It truly is remarkable!"

"If only I could have such strength!"

Despite the recent rumors circulating about the Blacksteel settlement, none of the onlookers looked favorably on him. After all, Zhang Lie was none other than the king of the dumps. Although his reputation seemed to be improving recently, he was thought to be a lackey of the Yun and Chu clans.

After all, who would believe that Zhang Lie could have grown so strong in just a few months?

Zhang Lie ignored the assault of wind rushing in his direction.

"Do you really have nothing better to do? I'm just trying to hunt."

He raised an arm and casually triggered [Fists of the Silent Sea]. With his current strength, he could defeat someone like Wu Kedi without even pulling out his sword.

On the other hand, Wu Kedi thought that Zhang Lie was a fool for trying to counter his attack head-on. As the king of the dumps, how could he imagine that he would be able to defend against a direct attack from him? Did Zhang Lie think he was all that just because he had defeated some of Wu Kedi's subordinates?

"Zhang Lie, prepare to die!" Wu Kedi clawed at Zhang Lie's armor, but he wasn't even able to pierce his first layer of protection.

At the same time, Zhang Lie's fist, seemingly without any force behind it, struck Wu Kedi's chest. The two of them struck each other with their attacks, then continued moving forward in opposite directions. Zhang Lie walked forward, not sparing his opponent a single glance.

"You think you can turn your back on me? Come ba—"

Wu Kedi was in the middle of turning around when he suddenly spat out a mouthful of blood and flesh, then crumpled senselessly onto the ground. Amidst shocked cries from the onlookers, Wu Kedi closed his eyes for the last time.

"What happened?! Did Zhang Lie make a move?"

"I don't know! I didn't see anything! Could Zhang Lie be so strong that he's able to launch an intangible attack?"

Zhang Lie couldn't care less about the onlookers' comments. The Void Cup was less than a month away, and he would have to spend the remaining time dedicated to hunting superior-grade lifeforms, so as to ensure that he and his team would be well prepared for the Cup.

Given the past Zhang Lie's experience with the dimensional world, along with the notes that Fang Yi and the others had collated, it wouldn't be too difficult to find and hunt down these superior-grade lifeforms.

He intended on hunting down as many of the superior-grade lifeforms on the booklet as he could within this time.

As he was preparing for his hunt, the rest of Team Zenith was still furiously training away in their underground training rooms. Zhang Lie's trust in them motivated them to work as hard as they could. They couldn't let down their captain, they simply couldn't!

The month passed in the blink of an eye.

Those hunters who intended on participating in the Void Cup made their way back to the Blacksteel Settlement, waiting for the Cup to officially begin. Quite a few of them tried to relieve the stress of their preparations in the pubs in the area, such as the one owned by the Yun clan.

Amidst the crowds of people and almost tangible boom of music, a cloaked hunter sat by a corner of the pub, savoring the newest available brew. After having slaughtered superior-grade lifeforms for almost an entire month, Zhang Lie also needed to relax a little.

However, before he could finish his flask of wine, Yun Bing appeared in front of him.

"You were gone for a whole month! And even when you finally show up here, you refrain from informing me. Do you disdain me, Zhang Lie?" Yun Bing's somewhat coy tone almost made Zhang Lie spit out the mouthful of wine he had just consumed.

"Ah, ahem! I'm just here to sample the pub's newest offerings after having been gone for so long. I didn't plan on staying very long, so—farewell!"

Sensing an unusual mood, Zhang Lie immediately put down his cup of wine and made to leave. He had yet to deal with his relationships from his past life, and before he did so, he didn't want to attract any undue attention.

Chapter 85: Exceeds Expectations

As Zhang Lie left the bar, the will of the world announced in his mind, [The Void Cup begins in a week. You may register starting today.]

Everyone in the dimensional world had received this announcement.

"It's about to begin!"

"I'm going to win this Void Cup!"

"It's time to head back to the settlement and prepare!"

Hunters from each and every settlement were excited upon hearing the news, regardless of whether or not they intended to participate: it only happened once every few years, after all, and was essentially the equivalent of a major sporting event. Those hunters who were participating were naturally eager to get started, and those who were spectating wanted to place their bets.

The corporations of each settlement began setting up bets the moment they heard the news. Although the Void Cup was sponsored by the world government, these bets were all hosted by private corporations, and the government didn't have the means to police or prevent them.

Although there were nominally only five great clans left in the Blacksteel settlement, and the Zhou corporation had incurred significant losses after the night at the venombane glade, none of this seemed to have affected the betting at all.

What the bets would entail would be determined by the information that the three corporations managed to acquire.

Of course, none of this had much to do with Zhang Lie, who was rushing back to the Blacksteel Inn. Since the message had gone out to every hunter in the dimensional world, Fang Yi and the others would likely be heading out of seclusion right about now. They would surely have achieved some success with their new techniques.

However, by the time Zhang Lie returned to the underground training chamber, which he had gotten very familiar with after a month, he saw no one around.

What's going on? Are they still training?? Just as Zhang Lie was preparing to enter their individual training rooms to hunt them down, he sensed a fire arrow being launched nearby.

The attack was extremely rapid, but the moment it was launched, Zhang Lie could sense the fire-attuned genetic energy in the air. After all, having used a fire-attuned framework for years, how could he be unfamiliar with the sensation of fire-attuned genetic energy?

The arrow that Sun Mengmeng thought would surely hit him was neatly sliced in half with a flash of violet light.

"Captain, it looks like you've grown even stronger!"

"You're not bad yourself," Zhang Lie replied.

As she spoke, Sun Mengmeng dashed forward with [Flameburst Step]. A dark red sword struck toward Zhang Lie, but before the blow could land, Zhang Lie vanished like a bubble being popped.

"Captain, don't you think I know how to deal with your stealth by now?"

She gracefully converted her attack into a defense, sketching out a circular arc with her longsword and blocking herself off from Zhang Lie's counterattacks. At the same time, she surrounded the floor around her with dark red flames.

"Not bad, but this doesn't mean much to me."

"What?!" As Sun Mengmeng recoiled in shock, Venombane struck past the flames, the sheathed blade inches from her neck.

The longsword in her hands clattered against the ground, and the dark red flames surrounding her vanished with Zhang Lie's appearance.

"Not bad, but you need to keep working hard."

"Yes, Captain!" Sun Mengmeng headed to one side of the chamber to rest, whereas Zhang Lie stared warily around him. Although his teammates didn't have too many limit fragments and had just purged their techniques, they were quite adept at laying traps.

If he weren't careful and fell into one of their traps, he'd certainly lose face as a leader. These hunters were clearly trying to test out the results of their training on him, exactly what Zhang Lie wanted. This was the best way for him to see just how much they had grown during this period of time.

He was very curious about the fruits of their high-intensity training. Of course, he was most curious about Fang Yi and Li Feng's progress, because they were starting from scratch.

However, the next hunter that approached him wasn't either of them, but instead Zhou Ying.

"Captain, the four of them are waiting for you in the large training chamber. They claim that the common area is too small for the attack they want to launch, so..."

Zhang Lie smirked. They seemed to be quite confident in their own abilities.

"And you?"

Zhou Ying pursed her lips. "Well, if you insist."

A mutated-grade soulshard appeared in her hands. Zhou Ying favored an indirect style of attack. The moment Zhang Lie took a step forward, he became trapped in the illusion of a bamboo forest. She was a relatively shy girl, and this was reflected in her style as a hunter: she wasn't one to charge at someone head-on.

Zhang Lie glanced all around him, clearly impressed by her efforts.

"Captain, it's not a good habit to take your eyes off your opponents!" Zhou Ying warned, then thumped the flat end of her spear against the ground.

Beams of green light shot toward Zhang Lie from all angles.

Zhang Lie had spent the entire month hunting down superior-grade lifeforms, and while his abilities still weren't as strong as they had been at the peak of his past life, an attack of this magnitude wouldn't be able to touch him at all.

Contorting his body, he narrowly avoided a few of the green beams, then darted away.

However, just as he left the bamboo forest, countless bamboo 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 bamboo leaves, they rebounded into the air, but precisely at that moment, a green needle shot toward Zhang Lie, camouflaged by the bamboo leaves that obstructed his vision.

Zhang Lie blocked it with just one finger and forcefully stripped it of its illusion: the needle was the spear that Zhou Ying had been using.

"With just one finger! Captain, you're—"

"Excellent performance, Zhou Ying. Your fighting style is very mature, and you've surpassed my expectations!"

Zhou Ying was quite disappointed that Zhang Lie had blocked her attack so easily, but before she could convey her disappointment, it vanished after hearing Zhang Lie's praise.

"Do you mean that, Captain? You're not just trying to console me, are you?"

She was naturally overjoyed to receive such high praise from him, but she wasn't confident enough in her abilities to take his word for it immediately.

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

"Thank you for your affirmation, Captain! I'll make sure to keep working hard, and I won't let you down!"

Zhou Ying was quite touched by Zhang Lie's praise.

Zhang Lie eagerly anticipated what he would face next. Zhou Ying's performance had been surprising enough, so what about the four hunters waiting for him in the large training room?

Chapter 86: Results of the Training

However, before he entered the training room, there was one important task he had for Sun Mengmeng and Zhou Ying. He had quite a number of superior-grade carcasses in his potbellied-toad pouch, obtained from his month of hunting.

While the hunters hadn't participated in the hunt and thus wouldn't be able to obtain any superior gene fragments from those carcasses, it would still provide them with nourishment. During this month of seclusion, all they had eaten were meals from the inn, so this would be a sumptuous feast in comparison.

"Will you prepare some of these superior-grade carcasses while I take on Fang Yi and the others?"

He left the carcasses on the table as he entered the training room, while Zhou Ying and Sun Mengmeng nodded and prepared to cook.

Fang Yi, Yang Ze, Li Feng, and Sun Xiaowu were all standing straight and facing the door, as if waiting for his arrival.

"Oh? It looks like you're all quite prepared."

The prospect of a challenge enthused Zhang Lie.

"Of course, Captain! We've been in seclusion for over a month!"

"Well, what are you waiting for? Show me what you've accomplished with all that time!"

"Charge!" Fang Yi yelled, dashing toward Zhang Lie with his spear in hand. Surprisingly, none of the other three hunters seemed about to make a move.

Hurled forward by wind and storm, the spear seemed nigh unstoppable. As it struck, it left a dozen afterimages in its wake, surrounding Zhang Lie's body.

"Not bad, not bad!" As Zhang Lie nodded, he countered the fearsome attack with Venombane.

The clash of metal filled the room. Fang Yi waved his spear with lethal speed and precision, but Zhang Lie seemed to be able to block all his attacks with careless sweeps of his arm.

As Fang Yi attacked, Zhang Lie's body was buffeted by billowing winds and a gathering storm.

"[Tiger's Howl, Dragon's Bellow]!" Fang Yi's spear took on the aspect of a dragon of the winds and a storm tiger as he charged forward.

"A fine attack, but too easily disrupted!" Zhang Lie shifted aside with [Mirrored Refraction], evading the attack.

Zhang Lie deflected the spear with the edge of his blade, then stepped forward into close range while Fang Yi's guard was down. He directed one palm casually toward Fang Yi.

Fang Yi's innate reflexes and awareness had made him a strong hunter in Zhang Lie's past life, and the present Fang Yi had retained those same qualities. At this critical juncture, he made the optimal decision: stepping out of range and avoiding Zhang Lie's attack.

He was certain that he would lose in a contest of brute strength. Other hunters might be unaware of just how fearsome their captain was, but the members of Team Zenith certainly did. Even before he embarked on a month of hunting, Zhang Lie had had over fifty superior gene fragments, and he could well be at the superior gene capacity now.

Fang Yi's deflected attack made him unwilling to strike directly at Zhang Lie, but Zhang Lie naturally understood what he was trying to do. In this sort of situation, Fang Yi would have no choice but to strike from the back.

He shifted his body, clenched his palm into a fist, turned around, and attacked. Zhang Lie's punches landed squarely on Fang Yi's body. As if he had been struck by lightning, Fang Yi stumbled back.

"Stop, stop, I can't handle it anymore! Captain, you're crazy! You overwhelm me in every aspect, so how am I supposed to fight against you?"

"What? I've just warmed up! Are you really going to give up so easily?"

"No, Captain, stop! I admit defeat! Don't just look at me—how about the three of them? They haven't shown you the fruits of their labor yet!"

Fang Yi darted behind Yang Ze and the others.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "It's not as though I'd really harm you. You've made good progress with [Rondo of Wind and Storm], but your attack's too direct. Your interpretation of [Tiger's Howl,

Dragon's Bellow] isn't as flexible as it could be, and you need to be able to deal with situations like the deflection I used on you."

After giving Fang Yi a few pointers, Zhang Lie turned to the other three hunters. In truth, he was quite pleased with Fang Yi's progress, especially considering the difficulty of the path he had chosen.

He was even more curious as to what Li Feng, who was also starting from scratch, had managed to accomplish. However, his next opponent wasn't Li Feng, but instead Yang Ze, who had inherited several of his water-attuned techniques.

"Captain, have a taste of my [The Boundless Blade]!" Yang Ze's body vanished as though it was a mirage. Under the effects of [Mirrored Refraction], he seemed to phase in and out of existence.

"I'm right here, Captain!"

He launched [Fists of the Silent Sea] in Zhang Lie's direction.

Zhang Lie had to admit that Yang Ze had a very interesting interpretation of [Mirrored Refraction]. It was the same footwork technique he had learned, but whereas Zhang Lie's version of the technique was ethereal, Yang Ze's was phantasmagorical. He would likely be able to surprise a less experienced hunter, but certainly not someone like Zhang Lie.

The moment Yang Ze struck with [Fists of the Silent Sea], Zhang Lie retaliated with the same technique.

The two fists met head-on. An explosion of water filled the training room. Yang Ze was thrown back by the force of the attack, but he was unharmed save for a throbbing arm. It was obvious that Zhang Lie had gone easy on him, because he still wanted to see what other tricks Yang Ze had up his sleeve.

The saturated water vapor in the air led to extremely favorable conditions for Yang Ze, whose version of [Mirrored Refraction] was well-suited to illusion and disguise. Of course, since Zhang Lie's framework was also water-attuned, he too had an advantage under such circumstances.

Zhang Lie gathered his genetic energy. With another application of [Fists of the Silent Sea], the mist in the air surged into three giant waves, spreading out all around him and blocking off any means of attack from Yang Ze.

Yang Ze had intended on using the mist surrounding the battlefield as a means of shrouding himself, but he hadn't expected Zhang Lie would take advantage of the water-saturated environment to launch an enhanced attack instead.

"Well, Captain, you haven't left me any other choice. Have a taste of my blade!"

"Bring it on!"

The two of them retreated to opposite sides of the room, each with a sword in their hand. Whereas Zhang Lie's Venombane was a shortsword, Yang Ze's soulshard armament was a greatsword.

Water-attuned genetic energy gathered around the two combatants. Although their swords were different, their auras were the same. The spectators suddenly found it hard to breathe, as though they were submerged in a boundless ocean.

Behind their backs, Zhang Lie and Yang Ze's genetic cores took form.

Chapter 87: Goldenscale Palm

A black serpent uncoiled from behind Zhang Lie's back. As it raised its head, waves of dark energy flooded the room. The serpent hissed and black ripples spread out from its body, corroding everything they touched.

Behind Yang Ze emerged a giant shark, opening its maw wide so everyone could see its rows upon rows of sharp teeth.

"Captain, here I come!" Yang Ze swung down with his greatsword, and the giant shark flicked its tail and launched itself toward Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie didn't seem very concerned. He raised an arm and held Venombane horizontally in front of his chest. The serpent behind him coiled around his body.

As the giant shark struck the serpent, its body dissolved into water-attuned genetic energy. [The Boundless Blade] was a mythic-grade technique, and it was impressive enough that Yang Ze had managed such a blow, even if Zhang Lie's defense was more than capable of nullifying it.

Thus ended the fight.

"Your [Mirrored Refraction] and [The Boundless Blade] are uniquely yours, and I'm impressed by how much individualism you've put into both techniques. That you were able to do so much in so little time is an impressive feat," Zhang Lie praised.

"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."

Zhang Lie stepped forward and patted his shoulder. "Not yet, but we'll see about the future, won't we?"

Yang Ze beamed as he walked toward Fang Yi.

"I've already tested both of them, so which of you is up next?"

"Li Feng's our last hope, so let me go first!"

Sun Xiaowu dashed forward. Whereas Fang Yi had focused on speed and strength, and Yang Ze on charging up for a single, devastating blow, Sun Xiaowu had honed his sharpness.

The two hunters that Zhang Lie had faced had both made massive gains within the last month, and Zhang Lie was very pleased with their efforts. 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. Despite their month of effort, their captain hadn't slacked off, either. He raised a hand, his polearm gleaming with resplendent light.

"Captain, face my [Golden Divide]!" The beam shot straight toward Zhang Lie.

"Not bad, not bad! You've made excellent progress with that technique." Zhang Lie stepped to one side, easily avoiding the blow. Sun Xiaowu's strength had increased by far more than he had expected, surely a result of an endless amount of hard work.

"What else do you have? Come at me!" Zhang Lie triggered [Mirrored Refraction] and appeared silently behind Sun Xiaowu. "Take this: [Fists of the Silent Sea]!"

"I'm ready, Captain! [Adamantine Aegis]!" A layer of golden runes covered his skin, absorbing Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea] for a single moment before dissolving immediately afterward.

"[Blinding Flash]!" The next moment, Sun Xiaowu's body divided into a dozen illusions.

Zhang Lie smiled as he took a few steps back. Against an opponent of equal strength, this would have been a devastating skill. It would be extremely difficult to distinguish the real body from the fakes, allowing Sun Xiaowu to sneak up and attack his opponent.

The advanced form of this technique would be able to generate hundreds of such illusions, almost guaranteeing a direct hit for Sun Xiaowu.

"You're still not too adept at controlling and manufacturing these illusions of yours yet, and it's too easy to identify your actual body." Zhang Lie easily found the true Sun Xiaowu.

Feeling a premonition of danger, Sun Xiaowu hurriedly retreated.

Zhang Lie was just about to step forward when he sensed a fluctuation of genetic energy coming from behind.

Hmm? Interesting. If he weren't mistaken, Sun Xiaowu was behind him, and what he had thought to be the real Sun Xiaowu was nothing more than a meticulous fake.

Indeed, this was the truth.

"Captain, I'm behind you!" Sun Xiaowu called out in delight, thinking that his deception had succeeded.

Very soon, however, he was unable to smile. Having deduced that Sun Xiaowu was behind him, Zhang Lie turned around and blasted him back with a humongous wave of genetic energy.

"Captain, can't you give me a chance?! I trained hard for a whole month, but the difference in our strength is only growing!"

What Sun Xiaowu thought to be the perfect decoy was nevertheless seen through, and his attack was so easily dispelled with a [Three-Wave Crescendo]! Sun Xiaowu wasn't wrong: Zhang Lie's strength had grown by leaps and bounds in the last month. However, he had also been stronger than the six of them from the beginning.

Sun Xiaowu and the others had gotten a month of intensive training, but they still needed to practice their techniques on live opponents. Fighting with others was the fastest and most impactful means of improvement, and Sun Xiaowu and the others would need opponents of similar caliber.

"You've already done very well. There's no need to rush things—be patient and you'll surely see more and more improvement," Zhang Lie consoled him.

[Blinding Flash] had significant potential for confusing his opponents, as long as he was able to use it well. It could prove crucial for escaping or for giving an opponent a lethal blow.

Unfortunately, there weren't many chances to use the technique in this fashion, and Zhang Lie would have to give him a few pointers before they departed for the Void Cup.

He wasn't done with Sun Xiaowu just yet, however. "How about your legendary-grade [Goldenscale Palm]? Show me that!"

Sun Xiaowu's eyes brightened. "Take this, Captain!"

His right arm glowed with resplendent light. It suddenly bulked up, and a layer of dense golden scales emerged over his skin. An aura of 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.

"Very good!" Zhang Lie praised again. Except for him, no hunter present would be able to take this blow without suffering some degree of injury. To have trained a legendary-grade technique to this extent in such a short period of time, Sun Xiaowu must have given it his all.

He allowed the punch to get within a palm's length of his body to sense its strength before countering with a blow of his own. "Let's end it here!"

Sun Xiaowu felt a tremor in his right arm as the genetic energy from his technique receded, then stumbled back from the force of Zhang Lie's punch. It took him ten steps before he could regain his footing.

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

"Your [Goldenscale Palm]'s a very domineering technique, and hardly anyone at the same level will be able to suffer the attack unharmed," Zhang Lie evaluated. He was very pleased with Sun Xiaowu's progress.

Chapter 88: Exploration in the Night

The final combatant was Li Feng. He was essentially starting from scratch, having switched his elemental attunement to study [Arclight Dragon's Imprint].

Zhang Lie hadn't expected much from him, but given the fact that the other three hunters had let him go last, Zhang Lie thought that there might be a surprise or two in store for him.

Zhang Lie looked toward Li Feng, and Li Feng looked back at Zhang Lie.

"Captain, it's my turn!"

"Alright, let me see your [Arclight Dragon's Imprint]!"

As Li Feng thrust his sword toward Zhang Lie, a silver dragon surged toward Zhang Lie. It was far stronger an attack than Zhang Lie had anticipated. Allowing Li Feng to study [Arclight Dragon's Imprint] was the correct decision, and his hard work didn't disappoint Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie became a little more serious. With ripples underneath his feet, Zhang Lie darted toward Li Feng's back.

"[Daybreak]!" The moment Zhang Lie made his move, so did Li Feng. As a light-attuned hunter, Li Feng naturally had an advantage in speed, and was fast enough that he could even surpass Zhang Lie.

Of course, this was predicated on Zhang Lie artificially restricting his abilities. After all, given how many more superior gene fragments Zhang Lie had, it was almost impossible for any of them to win against him without doing so.

With a dull thump, the image of the silver dragon dissolved, and Li Feng stumbled back.

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

"[Light Dragon's Remnants]!" Li Feng wasn't deflated despite his attack failing. Instead, he marshalled his genetic energy into the form of a few white dragons, which he shot toward Zhang Lie.

"Is that your variant on [Light's Bulwark]? Not bad!" Zhang Lie praised, preparing to deflect the attack with [Fists of the Silent Sea].

The white dragons crashed against the ripples that surrounded Zhang Lie's fist, unable to penetrate his defenses.

The seemingly weak ripples were somehow as strong and sturdy as a steel wall, and no matter how concerted the dragons' attack, Li Feng was unable to make Zhang Lie budge at all. Instead, as Li Feng summoned more and more dragons, he rapidly drained his reservoir of genetic energy.

No longer held back by the white dragons, the ripples from Zhang Lie's fist knocked Li Feng further back.

"Captain, your usage of [Fists of the Silent Sea] is simply too ridiculous!" Li Feng muttered, as he tried to gather more genetic energy.

"You've only had a month to work with [Light's Bulwark], so even this is already quite impressive. Shall we stop now?"

"No, wait, I still have my finishing blow!"

"Oh? Let's see it, then!"

"Yes, Captain!" As Li Feng yelled out, his body began glowing with white light, forming a suit of dragon armor around him. Li Feng's vitality and energy reached its peak.

"Captain, take this! [Arclight Descension]!"

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.

"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 claw whole, instantly dispelling the attack. Li Feng clutched his palm in pain, sucking in air as he dealt with the backlash from the blow.

"Sorry, are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine, Captain, it just hurts a little!"

Zhang Lie had held back at the very end, or Li Feng would have suffered far more grievous injuries.

"Good! Alright, everyone, gather around!"

Zhang Lie had important news to share.

"First, I want to congratulate all of you on a job well done. In this last month and a half, you've all taken great strides forward, and you've exceeded my expectations!"

The hunters let out relieved smiles. Zhang Lie's praise validated their long hours of hard work, and his approval meant the world to them.

"Right, after we have dinner, pack up. We're heading back to the real world overnight!"

However, before they could express their joy and relief, Zhang Lie's next command shocked them all. Return to the real world? Why?

Wouldn't it make more sense for them to hunt down as many superior-grade lifeforms as they could before the Void Cup started? After all, they were still far from their own gene capacities.

"Why, Captain?" Li Feng asked. "Won't we be wasting valuable time if we head back now?"

The gathered hunters all looked toward Zhang Lie, but he only smiled. "Don't worry, it won't take long." This sort of response was even more mystifying, but none of them pressed the issue.

They teleported to the city of Liao, by the Tailin mountain range.

Glancing all around at the forest all around them, Fang Yi couldn't help but ask, "Captain, what exactly are we doing here?"

They had wandered around for half the night, seemingly searching for something. There had just been a drizzle, and the air was damp and wet. A thin film of water covered their clothes.

Just as Fang Yi asked his question, Zhang Lie finally stopped moving. "I've found it. It's right here!"

Everyone gathered around Zhang Lie, but all they saw was an ancient wooden stump.

A wooden stump? What was so special about it?

Li Feng glanced closely at the stump. After inspecting it carefully and not finding anything amiss, he cocked his head at Zhang Lie. "Captain, is there anything unusual about this stump?"

No one knew what was going on.

Zhang Lie smiled mysteriously, motioning for everyone to step back. "Oh, you'll see!"

He slammed his foot down on the stump. With a sharp whistling noise that hurt their ears, Zhang Lie seemed to turn blurry—no, it wasn't Zhang Lie who was turning blurry, but rather the space all around him.

As their vision blurred further, the hunters felt as though they were glancing into a kaleidoscope.

"Ha, as expected!" Despite their surprise, Zhang Lie remained a beacon of calm. "Don't panic. Wait for my command!"

He had memorized the method of breaking through this particular array. He took three steps to the left, four right, nine back, then five forward. Stopping for a moment, he then took seven steps forward, six left, three back, and one right. Finally, he punched at what seemed to be empty air before him.

With a crack, Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea] seemed to break something in the kaleidoscopic space, which shattered like a mirror.

Chapter 89: Piercing Beam

After the kaleidoscopic space vanished, a weathered runic teleportation array appeared before the hunters' eyes.

"Captain, is this... a teleportation array?" Yang Ze, who was the most worldly among the members of Team Zenith, asked what the other hunters were thinking.

"Yes, it is!"

"Where does it lead?" Sun Mengmeng asked.

"To a great hunter's inheritance," Zhang Lie elaborated. He walked toward the heart of the array.

The other hunters were still in shock. A hunter's inheritance?

The only one who understood what it signified was Yang Ze alone. How had Zhang Lie known that he would be able to access it from this location? It was something every hunter from an established clan dreamt to find, but which few ever did!

"Don't just stand there, get over here!" Before Yang Ze could ponder matters further, Zhang Lie urged them forward, and the hunters stepped into the heart of the array with questions peppering their heads.

Once everyone was in position, Zhang Lie released a burst of genetic energy, activating the array. The hunters' vision turned dark. By the time they could see again, they had entered a completely mysterious space.

Before them lay an ancient castle.

"Captain, this..."

"A castle... just whose inheritance is this?!"

The hunters were stupefied. Mottled copper gates, golden-red glazed roof tiles, stone lamps shining with light—the architecture hearkened back to ancient China. How much wealth would this have taken to maintain—and in an extradimensional space, too?

"Well? Isn't it grand?" Zhang Lie stepped up to the mottled copper gates in front of the palace.

"It's ridiculous! Captain, just who are you, and how did you learn about this place?" The hunters chatted among themselves, trying to uncover the mysteries behind this place and how Zhang Lie had found it.

"No, no, the most important question is: whose inheritance is this? Captain, won't you tell us? You've whetted our appetites enough!" Yang Ze asked amidst the hubbub.

Zhang Lie nodded sagely. "I didn't intend on hiding it from you. This castle was once the property of the Eclipse Sage, and once we open these gates and pass the trials of the castle, everything here will become ours!"

The Eclipse Sage!

A martial sage?! Such a designation was only given to those hunters who had reached the apex of the third realm, having acquired all the gene fragments accessible to them.

Such hunters had to have spent hundreds of years in the dimensional world alone. [1] In that case, there would surely be quite a few rare treasures hidden within. How had Zhang Lie managed to find a place like this?

The members of Team Zenith stared at Zhang Lie as though they were looking at a deity.

Only Sun Mengmeng seemed to react upon hearing about the castle's original owner. "The Eclipse Sage? Captain, isn't that the hunter who possessed the eclipse domain..."

"Oh, not bad! Mengmeng, you've read about him?" Zhang Lie affirmed Sun Mengmeng's conjecture.

"It's really him?!" Who is it?! Tell us, Sun Mengmeng!"

Despite Zhang Lie's confirmation, Sun Mengmeng still found it hard to believe the truth. Beside them, Fang Yi pressed her to get her to reveal what she knew.

Sun Mengmeng glanced at Zhang Lie's approving face, then began to speak. "The Eclipse Sage was known to be the strongest fire-attuned hunter in the third realm of the dimensional world.

"His signature technique, [Eclipse], was a mythic-grade technique with no elemental attunement that he devised himself. He stood at the top of all leaderboards in the third realm for more than thirty years, and was widely considered the strongest among all the hunters there. As far as I'm aware, he last appeared about thirty years ago, and I can't believe that we've found his inheritance!"

Sun Mengmeng's explanation left them all dumbstruck. The top hunter for over thirty years?!

"Captain, let's enter immediately!" Fang Yi couldn't wait to see just what sort of treasures lay in wait for him.

What self-respecting hunter wouldn't get agitated upon learning of this fact? This was the inheritance left behind by a sage, a sage!

"We will enter, but before that, all of you have to promise to listen to my every command. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Captain!"

Zhang Lie motioned for all of them to step back as he placed both palms on the mottled copper gates. He sucked in a deep breath, then began circulating genetic energy throughout his body, swiftly generating a cloud of black mist around him.

Within the mist, a black serpent circled Zhang Lie, so vivid it almost seemed to be alive. Zhang Lie seemed like a miniature black hole, sucking up all the energy around him.

Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the others, just from standing by his side, started to find it hard to breathe, and the genetic energy in their bodies began to dissipate. Just as they stepped further back, the gates that Zhang Lie was trying to push open at his full strength creaked, and a slit of light shone through.

However, that was as far as Zhang Lie seemed to be able to get. His face was flushed red with exertion, and the veins were clearly visible on his palms. Despite all his efforts, the copper gates refused to budge any further.

The rest of Team Zenith was about to help him when Zhang Lie shouted, "Don't come over, there's no point!"

At the same time, he activated the superior-grade blood ant soulshard in his soul space.

"Open!" Zhang Lie shouted, his body seeming to bulk up. With all his genetic energy, with all his strength, the gates finally began to creak open, revealing the interior of the palace.

As they did so, a white light shot out of the tallest peak of the castle. Such was the intensity of the light that the dark skies seemed to whirl around it. The beam of light pierced the skies—as well as the extradimensional space itself.

Back on Earth, a dazzling beam of light shone out of the Tailin mountain range, with such brightness that it turned night to day within dozens of kilometers of the beam.

Such an unusual phenomenon was easily noticed by nearby residents, and news of the event quickly spread throughout the city of Liao, then all of China, then the rest of the world, and even the solar system. After all, if such a phenomenon wasn't manmade, then it surely heralded the discovery of a ruin.

Scouts from each of the major clans were immediately dispatched to the scene.

Chapter 90: Appetizer

The Chu clan convened an urgent meeting. Chu Feng, along with the other high-ranking members of the Chu clan, were all in attendance. They were glancing at a recording of the white beam that had pierced the heavens, discussing what had happened with each other as they did so, and surreptitiously casting glances toward the doorway, as if waiting for something.

Two Chu scouts quickly entered the room.

All conversations paused as the hunters of the Chu clan turned to the scouts. Chu Feng shouted, "Quick, tell us what's going on!"

"Young Master, given the reaction of the clans in Liao, we believe that a hunter's inheritance has been uncovered!"

"A hunter from Liao? Do you know who it could be?"

The two scouts shook their heads. "We don't, Young Master!"

"How have the clans in Liao responded?" Chu Feng pressed.

"They immediately sent out scouting parties toward the light, and they're likely at the scene by now!"

"Is that so? It looks like there must be something to this particular ruin, then," Chu Feng murmured to himself. "Both of you, stand back and await further orders."

"Yes, Captain!" The two scouts bowed, then left the meeting room.

"Father, what do you think?" Chu Feng turned to Chu Lin, who was seated beside him.

"There were quite a few strong hunters that came from Liao—Eclipse, Devil's Eye, Graylight—all of whom have been confirmed to have perished. The Eclipse Sage's namesake technique was even recorded in the Xumi Tome. If the ruin belongs to any of the three of them, the clans of Liao would surely be going crazy about it now.

"The largest clans in China and the clans of Liao will surely rush to the scene. How could we, the Chu clan, miss such an important event?"

Chu Lin's conclusion mirrored Chu Feng's own.

Of course, the Chu clan wasn't the only clan intending to rush to the scene. A very similar conversation had taken place in the capital, in the Yun clan's conference room. After all, Liao wasn't too far from the capital, and they could get there quickly via a short-ranged teleportation apparatus. The rest of the clans in the capital would follow the Yun clan's lead.

The instigators of this hubbub, Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith, were unaware of just what they had stirred up. In fact, they were preparing to undergo the first trial of the castle of the Eclipse Sage.

Behind the copper gates of the castle was a long corridor, with two rows of robotic terracotta soldiers arrayed by either side.

"Captain, these soldiers aren't our first trial, are they?" Yang Ze couldn't help asking. After all, no matter how imposing they seemed, it was clear that the technology seemed outdated and inferior.

Zhang Lie smirked. "You don't think highly of these old antiques, do you? In that case, why don't you try fighting one?"

Yang Ze frowned, turning to the robotic soldiers. "I shall! I don't believe these rusty pieces of metal can best me!"

Yang Ze stepped into the corridor.

"Warning! An intruder has been detected. Begin expulsion procedure!"

"Warning! An intruder has been detected. Begin..."

The eyes of the two closest soldiers to Yang Ze began to glint with red light. Their swords blazed with red flame as they rushed toward Yang Ze.

Of course, Yang Ze couldn't back down now, not after he had claimed he would make it past these robots. A mutated-grade longsword appeared in his hands, blocking the robots' attack.

However, the robots' surprising strength nevertheless forced him to stumble back all the way outside the corridor.

The hunters gaped. From their perspective, Yang Ze had been expelled from the corridor almost right after he had stepped inside.

"Why are these robots so strong?" Fang Yi asked doubtfully.

Zhang Lie laughed. "They might look like antiques from the outside, but their interior programming and skeleton were likely enhanced by the Eclipse Sage himself."

While Yang Ze had been a little overconfident, he was still able to assess the robots' strength after the short clash. However, his pride couldn't suffer the fact that he had lost in a single blow. With a wave of his sword, he prepared to dash into the corridor again.

"Wait! Yang Ze, with your current strength, it'll be quite difficult to break through their formation. Trying to beat the trial by rushing through it will likely lead to injury, so just you stand back and watch!"

Zhang Lie pulled Yang Ze back, then materialized Venombane in his hand. He shot into the corridor like a bolt of purple lightning.

"Warning! An intruder has been detected. Begin expulsion procedure!"

"Warning! An intruder has been detected. Begin expulsion procedure!"

"Warning! An intruder..."

"Warning..."

Zhang Lie moved so rapidly that, by the time the first robot reacted, he had already reached the middle of the corridor. Dozens of robots' weapons burst into flames as they rushed toward the intruder.

Some ran toward him, others glided, and a select few even started to fly. They formed a huge web of steel all around him, blocking off his movement from all directions.

Zhang Lie only smiled. The reason he had dashed forward so rapidly was so he could hit them all with a multi-target technique. After all, he too wanted the mythic-grade [Eclipse] for himself.

"[The Boundless Blade: Downpour]!"

Genetic energy exploded from Zhang Lie's body, and drops of purple rain began to fall all around him. A huge explosion rocked the corridor.

Dozens of burning robots crashed onto the floor the moment they tried to close in on Zhang Lie. The downed robots all had one similarity: a small purplish-black hole in their forehead.

Zhang Lie's huge reservoir of genetic energy, incredible sword technique, and the lifeless robots scattered all over the corridor spoke to the gap between Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith.

"Zhou Ying, if I'm not mistaken, you have some expertise in robotics, don't you? I'll leave you in charge of the scene: the cores of these robots are likely quite valuable!" Zhang Lie instructed.

"Yes, Captain!"

The hunters of Team Zenith got to work. The flames on the robots' weapons had been doused, and their terracotta exterior sloughed off to reveal a silver, metallic skeleton.

With Zhou Ying's guidance, the other hunters learned how to extract the robots' cores from their chest, and quickly finished scouring the battlefield for spoils. These robots were nothing but an appetizer for what was to follow.

After passing through the corridor, they reached a small plaza. At its center was a statue of a man with a greatsword on his shoulder, glancing coldly in a certain direction.

The man was likely none other than the Eclipse Sage himself.

Beneath the statue and all around the plaza, untrimmed grass grew rampant, in counterpoint to the marble perfection of the statue.