

Ultrogene Warlord

#Chapter 1: White Grubs - Read Ultrogene Warlord

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"1023, no, 1025—!"

Light flashed within the damp cave, and a silvery arc parted the jelly-like flesh of a white grub in half. The flesh evaporated into the air in a white mist.

The youth picked up the white half-orb that remained, wiped it off on his grubby hemp tunic, popped it straight into his mouth, chewed slightly, then swallowed woodenly.

[You successfully killed a white grub, but did not obtain a soulshard. For consuming the flesh of a white grub, you received no basic gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. 10

Genes: Basic, 20

Soulshards: None

Have I consumed too much white-grub flesh??Zhang Lie wondered to himself.

In truth, it had been three months since Zhang Lie was last able to obtain gene fragments from white-grub flesh. Considering his current growth, white-grub flesh was nothing more than ordinary food, providing only basic energy and nutrients.

White grubs were the most basic of bug-type lifeforms. In fact, they were much like what the online games of the past would call 'slimes'. A single grub consisted of a soft core the color and consistency of white jade, surrounded by a layer of jelly-like flesh.

After three months of relentless slaughter, Zhang Lie was so familiar with their body structure that he could kill them with a careless wave of his sword.

As he glanced at the white grubs that filled the entire cave, Zhang Lie let out a huge sigh. "It's been three months since I reincarnated, but I still haven't managed a breakthrough with my foundation. And where am I supposed to find the superior-grade white grub that's rumored to be around here somewhere?"

Zhang Lie couldn't help but feel a little deflated as he inspected the warped blade of his sword. It was little more than a piece of scrap metal now. He'd swung it around thousands of times a day, so it was natural that it would warp—but, more importantly, the sword had been the cheapest one he could afford at the time.

It was nearing nighttime, and Zhang Lie had no choice but to return to the nearby settlement. The dimensional world was particularly dangerous at night.

At the start of the last century, the Milky Way had been beset by war and strife. Alien races had forced mankind into more and more hostile locales, but, just as all hope was lost, a series of mysterious portals was discovered within ancient ruins. Humans who passed through these portals would be transported into what would become known as the dimensional world.

Curiously, no electronics were usable in the dimensional world. Firearms, missiles, and even nuclear weapons simply stopped functioning. Amidst a bevy of lifeforms that had reached the peak of evolution and genetic enhancement, mankind became the lowest level on the food chain.

It was only when a lone hunter fortuitously slew a relatively weak beast that the secret of the dimensional world was revealed: as the will of the world was transmitted into his mind, his body underwent an earth-shattering change.

Humans quickly realized that, as they gathered more genetic fragments, their lifespan would increase. Thus began a new era, one dominated by genetic enhancement.

The Blacksteel settlement was a small-scale human settlement within the dimensional world, only a ten-minute walk from the white-grub cave. The imposing steel gates were criss-crossed with scars, a reminder of the strife and struggle that had been overcome since the settlement's founding.

As Zhang Lie stepped through the gates, he was immediately recognized by one of the teams of hunters resting near it and quickly welcomed with a bout of mocking laughter.

"Look who's here, the king of the dumps!"

"When I first entered the dimensional world, he was already at the bottom of the gene leaderboard—and he's been there all this time!"

"If I were him, I wouldn't be so thick-skinned as to remain here."

"There's trash everywhere you go, isn't there? Maybe he'll still be at the bottom even when I'm fifty!"

"Fifty? Even if you lived to two hundred, nothing would change about this fellow's ranking!"

A skinny hunter turned to an attractive girl beside him. "Wang Xiaohua, I heard that you were childhood friends with this guy?"

Wang Xiaohua had lowered her head upon seeing him, her face flushed red with shame. Her teammate's callous remark instantly caused her to yell out, "Childhood friends? How could someone like me, Wang Xiaohua, ever favor such a trashy fellow?! It was just that my dad pitied them and was generous enough to let them stay in one of our lodgings—nothing to do with me, you hear?"

Zhang Lie scoffed to himself as he passed by, not saying a word in retaliation. There was no need for him to interact with fools. If a dog were to bite him, was he to bite back? Zhang Lie would probably work himself to death if he actually followed such a policy—after all, there were too many wild dogs roaming around the dimensional world.

He raised his head to the electronic screen set up in the middle of the settlement, the so-called "gene leaderboard" that the hunters had been discussing.

#1: Yun Bing, 12000 strength

#2: Chu Feng, 11950 strength

#3: Qin Xiao, 11900 strength

Hunters were ranked on the gene leaderboard based on the number of gene fragments and soulshards they possessed, which were directly correlated with their attack power.

At present, Zhang Lie might be the lowest of the low, but an ugly duckling would eventually undergo a metamorphosis. He didn't care about idle gossip; after all, as a reincarnator, he had a decisive advantage over any other hunter. His genetic enhancement plan had been perfectly optimized, and he was now only waiting for the chance opportunity that would be his first step to advancement.

He approached the point-conversion counter situated near the middle of the settlement and placed half the white-grub cores that he had gathered over the last three months within the metal box displayed prominently on it.

As the lid shut automatically, words appeared on the electronic screen before him. [For donating a thousand basic gene fragments, you received a thousand points.]

The settlement was constructed of a unique material that restored electronic functionality within the settlement, but fighting was strictly prohibited. Any offenders would be swiftly punished by the robotic guards hosted within the settlement.

Zhang Lie stored his remaining half of the white-grub cores in the settlement storehouse, an integral part of his future plan. "Craft me a C-grade steel blade, then convert the remaining points into money."

[A C-grade steel blade will cost 800 points. The remaining points will be converted into 20,000 dollars.] As the synthetic voice spoke, the lid of the box slid open once more, revealing a sword and a stack of red dollar notes.

Subsequently, he passed through the teleportation device and returned to the slums of the city of Ning. Technology had advanced to the point that each household would own a teleportation device, just as they would a television. At only a few hundred dollars each, they were relatively cheap.

Zhang Lie walked out to see a girl of flawless beauty quietly reading in a wheelchair. She evoked grace and purity with every action, as though she were a flower carefully cultivated by the heavens themselves.

As she heard the teleportation device activate, she raised her head and smiled beatifically. "Welcome home, Brother!"

Zhang Lie, usually cold and aloof, mirrored her smile. "How've you been?"

"Well, of course."

He caressed his sister's pale cheeks, and she nuzzled back like a small kitten.

Zhang Hanxiang was Zhang Lie's sister. Ever since their parents had gone missing, she and Zhang Lie had had to survive on their own. Her legs had been paralyzed from birth, but she was otherwise hale.

"Brother, let me warm you a meal."

"There's no need—it'd be inconvenient for you. I've already eaten in the dimensional world. Do you remember how long I've been gone?"

Time flowed about ten times faster in the dimensional world.

"You've been gone for ten days, Brother."

"Where's Madam Zhao?"

"She's long since left. It's quite late at night, after all."

Zhang Lie nodded, then handed her a bundle of money. "Here's 8,000 dollars for this month's living expenses. Please pass it to Madam Zhao on my behalf."

Because it was inconvenient for his sister to move around, and because Zhang Lie had to hunt in the dimensional world for a living, he needed to find some sort of caretaker for his sister. He had reached out to his neighbor, Madam Zhao, for help: in this case, nothing more than bringing her food on a daily basis.

"It'll be your birthday in another six months or so. Is there anything you'd like as a present?"

"I don't need anything, Brother, except to remain at your side." She clasped her brother's palms within her own.

Even though the traces of a smile still hung on Zhang Lie's face, worry had crept into his eyes.

His sister would be turning 18 soon. By law, upon adulthood—upon reaching 18 years of age—she would have to enter the dimensional world. The dimensional world was filled with strife and death, and it wasn't something his pure, sheltered sister could get accustomed to, not to mention her inability to walk.

In his previous life, he hadn't managed to protect his sister, and had been forced to watch her tragic death. In this life, he swore he wouldn't repeat the same mistakes.

Of course, there were ways of bypassing the laws. Certain special-class citizens had the authority to prevent one of their direct relatives from having to hunt in the dimensional world. When he grew into his power, when he had enough authority to shield his sister from any harm that could befall her—only then could he bear the thought of his sister entering that cruel world.

At the dawn of the last century, the united world federation began segregating citizens based on the number of gene fragments they possessed. Those who had reached their basic gene capacity were standard citizens, with the benefits afforded to those of their rank; those who had reached their mutated gene capacity were first-class citizens; and those who had reached their superior gene capacity were special-class citizens.

Zhang Lie's gaze landed on the books stacked beside his sister's wheelchair. She was very fond of reading, and intended on becoming a researcher or author in the future. Their parents had only been standard citizens; in order for her to attend the best high schools, he would have to become a first-class citizen.

He had wasted too much time since his rebirth. When he entered the dimensional world tomorrow, if he remained unable to find the rumored superior-grade white grub within the damp cave, he would have no choice but to give up on his plan. Nothing was more important to him than his sister, after all.

Suddenly, a few knocks sounded from outside. Zhang Lie opened the door and found, to his surprise, Wang Xiaohua. Frowning, he asked, "Why are you here?"

In disgust, Wang Xiaohua replied, "Do you think I would come to a ramshackle place like this of my own volition?"

His sister pushed her wheelchair to Zhang Lie's side. "Long time no see, Sister Xiaohua."

Wang Xiaohua's gaze landed on Zhang Hanxiang's paralyzed legs, making no effort to hide her disdain. Her lips twisted in a mocking smile.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. He didn't care what others thought of him, but he couldn't stand their contempt toward his sister. If not for their childhood friendship, Zhang Lie would already have made a move.

Wang Xiaohua harrumphed coldly. She pushed Zhang Lie aside and strode into the house, announcing scornfully, "What sort of unkempt mess is this? It's almost as bad as a pigsty! But of course I couldn't have expected any better from you, Zhang Lie."

Zhang Lie's features resolved into calm hostility. "If you're here only to mock our living conditions, then you're not welcome. Please leave immediately."

"As I've said, would I drag myself here without any reason? I'm here to reclaim this property."

Zhang Lie and Zhang Hanxiang both recoiled in shock.

Wang Xiaohua retrieved a sheaf of papers from her handbag. "I found a rental contract at home—and, guess what? It turns out that your rental period is almost up."

Zhang Lie took the proffered contract and scanned it, a frown gradually marring his face.

Wang Xiaohua smirked. "According to the contract, this property was leased to your family for eighteen years. Now that the eighteen years are up, it's time for you to vacate these premises."

1. Wang Xiaohua (王小花) is the type of name you'd find for a female character in a grade schooler's essay, so you can clearly tell that she's doomed.

2. Think Nunnally from Code Geass.

Chapter 2: Housing Crisis

Zhang Lie did know about the rental contract, but he had been so focused on his personal advancement plan that he hadn't realized Wang Xiaohua would come for him so quickly.

Zhang Lie and Wang Xiaohua's fathers were very close friends, and Zhang Lie's father had apparently saved Wang Xiaohua's father's life before. The two families had always been friendly, and Zhang Lie and Wang Xiaohua had indeed been childhood friends.

In his past life, they had even been in an ill-fated relationship—one that ended when Wang Xiaohua had become besotted with the younger cousin of Qin Xiao, a notable fighter near the top of the gene leaderboard, and had run off with him.

After his rebirth, Zhang Lie had spent all his time cooped up in the damp white-grub cave, and the fledgling relationship between him and Wang Xiaohua had naturally never developed.

Life was hard, and living a good life was even harder. It was natural for Wang Xiaohua to want to seek a better life by giving up on Zhang Lie, but he couldn't tolerate her trying to evict him and his sister and leaving them homeless.

"And if we were to pay to continue renting this place?"

"Ha! In that case, you'd need my permission."

Behind Zhang Lie, Zhang Hanxiang begged, "Sister Xiaohua, please don't kick us out. Where would we live?"

"Oh, the streets? An underground park? I'm sure you'd be able to find a place."

Zhang Lie sucked in a deep breath, repressing his instinctive desire to hit her. "Fine, Wang Xiaohua, what do you want?"

"Leave the Blacksteel settlement—I never want to see you again! Do you know how revolted I feel every time I look at you? How ashamed I am that I know someone like you?"

To leave the Blacksteel settlement would ruin Zhang Lie's plans completely. His living expenses were obtained by killing lifeforms surrounding the Blacksteel settlement. If he were to leave, he wouldn't be able to get any money for rent, and he would never be able to improve his fortunes.

"If I did so, we wouldn't have enough money to feed ourselves."

"Oh? You're tall and strong, aren't you? As long as you're not a cripple like your sister, you'll be able to get by with manual labor, surely. I'm doing this for your own good. Given how low you are on the gene leaderboard anyway, do you really think you'll be able to make a name for yourself? Really, take a look in the mirror! I'm saving you, you hear? What if you were to die in the dimensional world? No one would bring your corpse back!"

"My survival is none of your business."

"Ah? Why are you being so stubborn? Hanxiang, has he not told you anything? Your brother's at the very bottom of the gene leaderboard! Won't you persuade him to face

reality? Not everyone's well equipped to deal with such a cutthroat world, after all." Seeing Zhang Lie's stubborn stance, Wang Xiaohua switched targets to Zhang Hanxiang.

Before his sister could reply, however, Zhang Lie stepped in front of her, blocking her from Wang Xiaohua's view. "Wang Xiaohua, I'm warning you, don't make matters worse."

Wang Xiaohua put her hands on her hips. "And so what if I do? Do you want to be evicted?"

Zhang Hanxiang tugged on the hem of Wang Xiaohua's blouse. "Sister Xiaohua, please, let us stay here for just a while longer."

With a nauseated expression on her face, Wang Xiaohua kicked at her wheelchair. "Scram! Don't touch me, you invalid! Do you think you can afford to pay for my blouse if you damage it? You're a cripple, your brother's nothing but trash—both of you are failures as human beings!"

A crisp smack reverberated around the room. Blinded by rage, Zhang Lie had slapped Wang Xiaohua on the face before consciously realizing what he was doing.

Wang Xiaohua clutched her swollen face in shock as she screamed, "Zhang Lie! How dare you hit me?!"

Despite the fact that she had more gene fragments than Zhang Lie, the killing intent in his eyes was such that she didn't dare to retaliate.

Zhang Lie sucked in another deep breath, attempting to quell his anger.

On the other hand, Wang Xiaohua returned to her most practiced fighting style: words. "Zhang Lie, I offered you clemency—I told you that, if you left the Blacksteel settlement, I'd let you two parasites continue to stay in this place. It's not any better than a pigsty, after all, and no one would want it even if I were to give it to them for free—but after that slap, you're not getting anything out of me."

"Will you accept an apology?" For his sister, for his future plan, Zhang Lie was willing to give up his pride.

"Ha! It's far too late! If you want to apologize, then kneel to me in front of the gates of the Blacksteel settlement."

Zhang Lie's eyes turned cold once more. "Do you think I'll do that?"

"I have this contract in my hands, and this is my house, after all. You're both just squatters, and it's perfectly within reason for me to summon guards to chase both of you out."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "You'd be wrong. Look at the contract again: the house doesn't belong to you just yet."

"It's my house!"

It was Zhang Lie's turn to scoff. "According to the contract, we have until the end of the month before you can evict us. There's still two weeks to go, and even if you're the landowner, you can't break the contract."

Wang Xiaohua scanned the contract again to verify Zhang Lie's assertions, but she didn't change her stance. "Is there a difference? It's only a matter of time before I kick the two of you out."

"At the very least, we're legally entitled to this property at the moment. You're the one trespassing on our property, and I'm the one who can summon the guards to kick you out. Well? Are you going to wait for them to show up, or will you leave on your own?"

"Zhang Lie, just you wait! I'll be back at the end of the month!" Knowing that he wouldn't give in, Wang Xiaohua had no choice but to turn around and leave, pointing a warning finger at him all the while.

After finally chasing the hateful Wang Xiaohua away, Zhang Lie leaned down and inspected his sister's wheelchair for any signs of damage. She hugged him tightly, as though only with such an action could she recover a hint of warmth.

"Brother, what will we do? What if Mom and Dad come back and can't find us? Without this house, where will they stay? Where would we go?" The house was filled with memories of family, with proof that the Zhang siblings' parents had once existed.

Upon seeing his sister's tears, Zhang Lie immediately consoled her, "Don't worry, I'll fix everything. If Wang Xiaohua forbids us from renting this place, I'll buy it outright from Uncle Wang, with a price he won't be able to reject."

"And how much would that cost?"

"A million? Ten million? It doesn't matter, it's just money—I'll be able to make it all back."

"But we don't have time, do we?"

Zhang Lie rubbed his sister's head. "Don't worry, Hanxiang. Trust me."

Zhang Hanxiang lowered her head gently onto her brother's chest. With him around, it seemed as though she had nothing to fear.

After calming his sister down, Zhang Lie rested for five hours before returning to the dimensional world. Before setting off once more, he hid a large portion of his remaining money underneath his sister's bed, in case of emergency.

As though sensing Zhang Lie's imminent departure, Zhang Hanxiang opened her eyes. "Brother, are you leaving again?"

"Sorry for waking you, Hanxiang. I'm leaving the rest of my money here. Use it for emergencies."

"Won't you rest a little longer?"

"There's no time."

"Please, be safe. Don't do anything dangerous just because of me. After all, you're the only family I have left, Brother." Zhang Hanxiang tugged on her brother's sleeve, tears glimmering on her pearlescent eyes.

Zhang Lie lowered his head and kissed his sister on the forehead. "I promise you everything will be alright." He passed through the teleportation device into the dimensional world once more, his reappearance immediately prompting a bout of mocking laughter from the crowds in the settlement.

Zhang Lie ignored them all and headed back to the white-grub cave, continuing to slaughter them wholesale.

In the blink of an eye, three days had passed.

Zhang Lie had only rested for between two to five hours each day, having spent the remainder of his time ceaselessly killing the white grubs. However, the rumored superior-grade white grub never appeared. How could this be? Could there have been a mistake in the past?

Chapter 3: Superior Gene Fragments

"No, no, that's impossible. In the past, that rumor had eventually been verified by multiple sources, so there has to be something to it."

According to the lucky fellow who had found the superior white grub, it had simply appeared as he was killing regular white grubs. However, Zhang Lie hadn't even seen a hint of this purported superior-grade lifeform despite having been in the cave for three months straight.

And not only that—he was even having trouble with his foundation.

Extensive research in the past had confirmed that the soft cores of these white grubs were particularly good catalysts for a breakthrough in one's foundation, and prices for these cores were sure to soar in the future. Indeed, they had been in such high demand that the white grubs in the first realm of the dimensional world had been hunted to extinction, so Zhang Lie made sure to store at least half the cores every time he returned to the settlement.

But even after having consumed countless such cores, Zhang Lie had yet to experience a breakthrough.

His annoyance flared. The plans that he had worked out for himself rested on two critical components: a breakthrough in his foundation, and the soulshard obtained from the superior-grade white grub. Would his work over the past three months be for naught?

Just because he knew the future didn't mean that he couldn't be stymied by unexpected variables, after all.

Should I revise my plans?? Three whole months of effort, down the drain... the moment he thought of Wang Xiaohua's arrogant expression and his sister's tears, Zhang Lie's anger rose to a crescendo, and he pounded on the cave wall beside him.

Kraak! The sound reverberated around the cave, and small cracks radiated outward from the point of impact. Fresh blood seeped down Zhang Lie's clenched fist.

With a long sigh, Zhang Lie made to leave the cave. The incident with Wang Xiaohua meant that he was even more pressed for time than before, and he would have no choice but to change his plans. Even if it would be less advantageous for his future development, his sister was far more important.

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Suddenly, the part of the cave that he had hit began to crumble, revealing a hole large enough to pass through.

What?? This cave had essentially been his second home for three months. He knew the entire region like the back of his hand, and this was an area he'd never seen before.

"Could it be... well, I've already wasted three months, after all, what's a little more time?"

With rekindled hope, Zhang Lie scrambled into the newly revealed tunnel. As the tunnel expanded, he found himself in a gigantic area the size of an exhibition hall. An enormous silvery-white grub sat in its center, glowing with white light.

"I've finally found you!"

Zhang Lie instantly realized that this was the superior-grade lifeform that he had been hunting. In truth, this tunnel had only been discovered in the past as a result of a long string of coincidences. Zhang Lie didn't know about the specifics of the discovery; all he had heard were rumors, so he'd never been successful.

And yet his hard work had eventually paid off.

The first realm of the dimensional world could generate regular-, mutated-, and superior-grade lifeforms. In other words, superior-grade lifeforms were at the apex of the realm.

The enormous silvery-white grub in front of him was such an existence: the weakest superior-grade creature, but one whose soul shard was inordinately useful, and who would provide as many superior gene fragments as any other superior-grade lifeform.

"You'll be my first step to advancement!" After having slaughtered three months' worth of white grubs, Zhang Lie had developed an intimate understanding of their anatomy. With a precise, efficient stroke, he thrust his blade toward its core.

He had initially expected to be able to kill it with one attack, but even the weakest superior-grade creature was still stronger than he had anticipated. The blade could only penetrate a little of its flesh, no matter how much strength Zhang Lie used.

His attack naturally enraged the silver grub, whose core suddenly turned blood-red and shot out toward him like a football.

As a reincarnator, Zhang Lie was easily able to avoid the telegraphed attack.

White grubs had essentially no offensive capabilities, and even this silver grub wouldn't have any particularly destructive or complicated attacks. Apart from its size and resilience, it was really no different from a regular white grub. Its attack pattern was more straightforward than that of just about any other lifeform.

As he dodged to one side, Zhang Lie nicked the silver grub's flesh with a flurry of slices.

In pain, the grub recoiled before suddenly expanding its body and bouncing up into the air, intending to squash Zhang Lie into meat paste.

Unfortunately, Zhang Lie was simply too agile for it, and was able to dodge its attacks with ease. At the same time, he continued whittling away at the grub's flesh.

The jelly-like fragments that he sliced off melted as soon as it hit the ground. Every time the grub bounced toward him, Zhang Lie would wave the sword in his hand and slice off another piece of its body.

It chased him all around the cave, even as Zhang Lie kept dodging and slashing. After all, it was a superior-grade lifeform, and despite Zhang Lie's relentless attacks, it was able to continuously regrow its flesh.

The fight dragged out into a stalemate.

Eventually, the efficiency and persistence of Zhang Lie's swordplay, honed by months of fighting these grubs, paid off. The silver grub had shrunk to a third of its original size, and Zhang Lie was certain that he would be able to whittle it down before long.

Before he could do so, however, Zhang Lie's stamina was sure to give out. After all, his foundation hadn't yet broken through, and he had only filled a fifth of his basic gene capacity. With only twenty basic gene fragments, his constitution was simply too poor for a drawn-out fight.

Skill and technique were meaningless if his body couldn't keep up, and he was quickly running out of stamina.

After another ten minutes, Zhang Lie could feel his body at its breaking point. Sweat drenched his body, his muscles quivered, he panted in huge, gasping breaths, and he was only keeping himself upright by willpower alone.

Would this be it for him? To be killed by the superior-grade creature he had worked so hard to find, before even taking the first step toward success?

As the silver grub bounced toward him once more, Zhang Lie yelled out in frustration, stepping aside and forcing his arm to strike again at its flesh, at least once more. As he looked death in the eye, the tip of his sword suddenly radiated light; the moment it struck the grub's flesh, Zhang Lie felt as though a dam had broken within his body, flooding him with strength.

Finally, a breakthrough!

Clad in shining light, his sword was faster, more flexible, and easily able to penetrate into the silver grub's core.

Upon reflection, perhaps this was something Zhang Lie could have anticipated. Without any fear of death, without pushing himself to his limits, how could he have hoped to advance? He had used his experience and knowledge from his past life to work out the safest route to ascension, but it was exactly this safety that had caused him to stagnate in his foundation.

Despite his earlier exhaustion, Zhang Lie now felt relaxed all over, as though his body had been reforged, refuelled, and revitalized. He immediately reached into his soul-space and retrieved the soulshard of a regular white grub, smashing it to pieces.

An astounding discovery from his past life was that, within ten seconds of killing a lifeform, destroying a soulshard would increase the chances of a soulshard condensing from the recently deceased lifeform. If the destroyed soulshard belonged to the same species, a soulshard would be guaranteed.

This phenomenon had been heavily studied, and the conclusion was that, because a soulshard was composed of spiritual matter, destroying a soulshard would temporarily increase the spirit density in the air. The dead lifeform would then absorb this spiritual matter to condense a soulshard with a probability increasing with the spirit density.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade white grub and obtained its soulshard.]

Zhang Lie beamed in delight, then hurriedly brought out the silvery-white soulshard from his soul space. Activating it by will, he transformed the soulshard in his palm into a gigantic water balloon, one the size of a human. It gave off a silver glow, and its center was a soft core.

[Soulshard designation: weapon-type.]

Even though the will of the world had classified it as a weapon-type soulshard, the hunters of the dimensional world instead categorized it as a rare transformation-type soulshard instead.

A moment's thought was sufficient to transform the water balloon into a silvery-white translucent overcoat. Its color was relatively appealing, but because Zhang Lie wasn't yet accustomed to manipulating the soulshard, the structure of the coat was lumpy and misshapen.

After significant effort, Zhang Lie finally transformed it once more into a suit of silver armor. A pale pink pearl was embedded into the breastplate, the core of the soulshard. As long as it wasn't destroyed, the armor would be able to repair and even regenerate itself. The superior-grade white grub soulshard was infinitely flexible, able to be used as standalone armor or in addition to other armor-type soulshards.

In Zhang Lie's past life, the hunter who had obtained the superior-grade white grub soulshard had gained such proficiency with it that he ultimately became known as the 'Monarch of a Hundred Transformations'.

At present, Zhang Lie could only generate at most one or two extra arms, and he would require significant practice to draw out the soulshard's true utility. There was also one caveat to the transformations: the amorphous material, by nature, was unable to reproduce anything sharp.

Of course, it was already more than sufficient for most purposes, and it wasn't as though this flaw couldn't be fixed. In the third realm of the dimensional world, there was

a curious item known as Pandora's box. It was a consumable item that could fuse multiple superior- and higher-grade soulshards to enhance them.

This was the primary reason that Zhang Lie had valued this soulshard so highly. It met the necessary requirements for fusion, so it had limitless growth potential. As long as Zhang Lie was willing to spend an exorbitant amount of resources to do so, it could grow to a disaster-grade, or even a monarch-grade, soulshard.

More importantly, because of the fact that white grubs were one of the weakest lifeforms in the dimensional world, superior-grade white grubs were the rarest of the rare, and there had only been one recorded appearance in the past.

As a result, this superior-grade soulshard that Zhang Lie now possessed might well be unique. Three months of effort for such a valuable and customizable soulshard was a bargain. But, even more importantly, this particular soulshard was necessary for the next step in his plan.

Chapter 4: Rage and Humiliation

After having condensed the soulshard of the superior-grade white grub, Zhang Lie then began to consume its inner core. The consistency and taste were surprisingly decent, reminding Zhang Lie of a lychee-flavored gummy.

After consuming the last remnant of its core, the will of the world announced, [For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade white grub, you received ten superior gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX

Genes: Basic, 20; Mutated, 0; Superior, 10

Soulshards: White Grub (superior, weapon-type)

Because the silver grub was a superior-grade lifeform, every part of its carcass was valuable. There were cellars and large freezers designated specifically for the meat and bones of such lifeforms in the Blacksteel settlement, so Zhang Lie stored what he could and headed back.

Of course, as soon as he entered the settlement, he was again greeted by a chorus of mocking laughter.

"Is the king of the dumps back already?"

"Is he doing it just because everyone else is? Surely that white grub flesh isn't worth a hundred points every month. What's he even trying to do?"

"If he weren't addled in the head, he wouldn't be at the bottom of the leaderboard."

As usual, Zhang Lie ignored them. Even though it did cost a hundred points per month to use the settlement's cellar, all the white grub cores that he'd stored up would be a veritable fortune once it was discovered that they could catalyze a hunter's foundational breakthrough. He was even considering whether or not to disseminate that particular piece of information himself.

After all, now that he had broken through, he had no intention of returning to the white-grub cave to collect more cores. Selling this information and then making a huge profit off the cores that he'd stockpiled sounded like the best strategy.

However, given his current level of strength and connections, he certainly couldn't spread the word directly, or it would only invite unnecessary trouble for himself. He would have to consider his approach more carefully.

After storing the valuable cores in the cellar, Zhang Lie then rented the cheapest room he could possibly find in the settlement. Because it was so cheap, it barely had any amenities—it was essentially a prison cell with an attached bathroom.

Zhang Lie sat cross-legged in bed. Given his recent breakthrough, he was now able to develop a genetic framework which would form the basis of his future development, and he had long since prepared a suitable framework for himself.

The framework had been described in a manual that Zhang Lie had found within some ruins in the third realm of the dimensional world, which he had only acquired at considerable expense, effort, and danger.

Despite all that, the ironic thing was that it was a framework that the past Zhang Lie simply could not use: its first stage was water-attuned. The past Zhang Lie's repertoire had been predominantly fire-attuned, and the water-attuned framework would be in direct elemental opposition with his favored techniques.

He had even seriously considered destroying his foundation and starting from scratch, and it was only when he found out that even that might be insufficient for him to learn the technique that he gave up trying.

Not having encountered this framework earlier had been a lifelong regret for Zhang Lie. By a stroke of fortune, however, he was now able to learn it after his reincarnation.

Despite the fact that it wasn't a high-ranking framework, it was invaluable because of its ability to evolve.

The first level of the framework was equivalent to a mortal-rank framework, which were so common in the dimensional world that just about any hunter could afford it. But upon reaching the second level, the framework would become low-rank; upon the third level, medium-rank; and so on and so forth...

Upon reaching the ninth and final level of the framework, all nine levels could theoretically consolidate into a framework beyond even god-rank, representing a metamorphosis from the carp motif of the first level to the dragon motif of the ninth, hence its name: [Ninecarp Transformation].

Of course, the requirements for advancement in this framework would only grow more and more stringent.

Regardless, the value of an evolving framework was immeasurable, and Zhang Lie immediately began to study the framework following the manual that had been ingrained in his memories after his past life's relentless study.

The main purpose of the original foundational framework was to accumulate genetic energy within one's body. After Zhang Lie's breakthrough, that energy had become more refined and concentrated.

Presently, Zhang Lie was circulating that energy through his body following the pathways required by the new genetic framework, cleansing his body as the energy became imprinted on and attuned to it. After a few cycles, a sea-blue genetic core began condensing where his dantian was located.

This core was about the size of a rosary bead, so large that Zhang Lie couldn't help but smile. Most hunters started out with a genetic core the size of a green bean. Naturally, Zhang Lie's exceptionally large core was, naturally, due to the breakthrough in his foundation. The initial size of hunters' cores greatly influenced their strength and resonance with genetic energy, so this was a clear benefit.

Learning a new technique required engraving it on one's genetic core. Because the first level of [Ninecarp Transformation] corresponded to a framework of the lowest possible rank, mortal-rank, it could only accommodate five techniques.

Luckily, its water attunement was extremely compatible with Zhang Lie's superior-grade white grub soulshard, and would be able to enhance its effects up to fivefold.

The first level of the [Ninecarp Transformation]—the carp—conferred two fundamental abilities.

The first, aquatic assimilation, would allow for underwater breathing and enhanced aquatic mobility. Most water-attuned frameworks would provide such a benefit, but some to a greater extent than others. The second, flame retardant, granted partial immunity against—and eventually absorption of—fire-based attacks.

As a reincarnator, Zhang Lie was extremely familiar with the process of engraving a framework and its associated techniques on his genetic core, and it was only a matter of moments before a pale pink carp appeared within it.

With the first level of the [Ninecarp Transformation] handled, the next step would be to assimilate compatible techniques into his framework. A water-attuned framework naturally required water-attuned techniques.

Because Zhang Lie had used fire-attuned techniques in the past, his techniques would be incompatible with his current framework—but that didn't mean that they would go to waste.

An electronic trading post had been set up within the settlement by which hunters could exchange techniques for points or for other techniques. In general, the first option was disfavored; most people would only accept an equitable exchange of techniques.

And even the cheap room that he had rented had an Internet connection.

In the past, Zhang Lie's techniques had consisted of [The Burning Pyres], [Soulfire Blade], [Scorching Fist], [Flameburst Step], and the two high-grade techniques that he had obtained within the third realm, [Embersteel Cuirass] and [Baptism of Hellfire].

All in all, they represented a full suite of techniques for attack, defense, evasion, and movement. He had no qualms about trading the first four away, but the last two would require more thought. [Embersteel Cuirass] was the signature technique of a famous dojo, and it would cause unnecessary trouble for him if he were to put it up for trade now.

On the other hand, [Baptism of Hellfire] was the technique that Zhang Lie most favored, as well as his most valuable. Because the last few levels of the [Ninecarp Transformation] would likely be fire-attuned, Zhang Lie didn't want to trade this technique away unless he had no other choice.

As he browsed the trading post, Zhang Lie paid particular attention to those requests for a fire-attuned technique in exchange for a water-attuned one.

[Calm Waters] was one such technique, a defensive-type technique that its owner wanted to swap for a fire-type sword technique. Zhang Lie quickly uploaded a copy of his [Soulfire Blade], which was scanned and verified by the system and subsequently accepted in trade.

Though he continued looking for suitable techniques, his search was fruitless. Instead, Zhang Lie left a request on the trading post with his three fire-attuned techniques enclosed.

All that he needed to do now was wait. Even though the room he had rented wasn't particularly large, there was sufficient space for him to assimilate his newly acquired [Calm Waters].

It was a rather difficult technique to practice, and required incorporating the flexible and supple nature of water into one's movements. Given his past experience, however, Zhang Lie was able to familiarize himself with the technique in just half a day or so.

With his new framework and techniques, Zhang Lie intended to leave the settlement and hunt down some lifeforms to quickly bring his gene fragments to their maximum capacity. However, the moment he left the settlement, he encountered a nuisance.

"Zhang Lie! I've been waiting out here for you!" The person whom Zhang Lie encountered by the gates was none other than his childhood friend Wang Xiaohua, jumping up and down in impatience.

"...are you in such a hurry that you can't wait until the end of the month?"

Wang Xiaohua glared evilly at Zhang Lie. "The house is one matter, but your slapping me is another entirely. Don't think I'll forgive you so easily—unless you kneel down here and beg for my forgiveness, I won't let you leave!"

The commotion was already gathering a crowd of hunters eager to watch the altercation.

Zhang Lie shouted back, "Scram! I don't have time to play games with you."

"Do you think you scare me? You're at the bottom of the gene leaderboard! I have twenty mutated gene fragments now, and I'll be able to beat you with just my little finger!"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes, unable to deal with Wang Xiaohua's nonsense any longer. He slapped her face again, leaving her to stagger aside in mute surprise as he turned to leave.

So what if she had twenty mutated gene fragments? Zhang Lie had ten superior gene fragments—even if no one in the crowd knew it.

His actions shocked the hunters who had gathered around to watch the show.

"Gods above, he really dared to fight back, huh?"

"Wang Xiaohua's going to kill him!"

When Wang Xiaohua recovered from the shock, she snarled and pounced on him like a vicious bulldog. "Zhang Lie! How dare you hit me again?! I'll rip your face to pieces!"

Zhang Lie's lips quirked into a smile. How convenient that Wang Xiaohua was coming at him now! He hadn't had a chance to test out [Calm Waters] on an actual foe yet.

As Wang Xiaohua approached, his hands bore the brunt of the impact, absorbing, redirecting, and multiplying the force of her approach.

Thud! Zhang Lie flipped Wang Xiaohua's body over his head, and she landed head over heels on the ground. He wiped his hands off, turned to look at Wang Xiaohua's fallen form, then walked off whistling a jaunty tune.

This time, it took Wang Xiaohua far longer to come to her senses. Somewhat woodenly, she dragged herself up from the ground. Her mouth filled with mud, she simply couldn't believe that the useless hunter that she had been mocking day in and day out actually possessed a strength that eclipsed her own.

Chapter 5: Galewolf Soulshard

Why? How could Zhang Lie be so much stronger than she was? It was true that she didn't have any actual combat experience, and that she mostly leeches off her teammates, but she should have had many more gene fragments than he did, surely? And those gene fragments were directly correlated with her constitution, with how much genetic energy she had!

How could he have flipped her head over heels with just a single blow?

Just how many gene fragments did Zhang Lie possess?

In truth, Zhang Lie still had no mutated gene fragments, but his ten superior gene fragments represented a strength roughly equal to that of a hundred mutated gene fragments. With his extensive combat experience on top, Wang Xiaohua never stood a chance. No one would be able to beat Zhang Lie in terms of constitution if they didn't have superior gene fragments themselves.

It wasn't just Wang Xiaohua who was stupefied by the outcome of the fight, but all the onlookers as well.

"When did the king of the dumps become so strong?"

"Well, are you sure he's the one who became strong? Maybe it's Wang Xiaohua who's always been this weak!"

"If I were her, I'd go crawl into a hole and die. Honestly, how could she lose to someone like him with a single blow?"

No one believed that Zhang Lie, who had resisted any attempt to be dislodged from his position at the bottom of the gene leaderboard, could have suddenly grown so strong.

The natural conclusion could only have been that Wang Xiaohua was unexpectedly weak.

Of course, there were bystanders who noticed something amiss.

"Are they all fools? Wang Xiaohua has twenty mutated gene fragments, so how weak could she really be? No: the conclusion must be that Zhang Lie's far stronger than he's letting on!"

Upon hearing this, Wang Xiaohua yowled as though she were a cat whose tail had been stepped on. "That's nonsense! How could trash like him be strong? I was just careless! If I had prepared in advance, I would have pummeled him into the ground!"

The remaining onlookers quickly backed off upon seeing Wang Xiaohua's somewhat crazed expression. She twisted her head and glanced toward the direction in which Zhang Lie had vanished, her eyes narrowing into thin slits. "Zhang Lie, just you wait. I'm not done with you yet!"

Not far outside the settlement, Zhang Lie ducked behind a tree, activated his white-grub soulshard, and encased himself in translucent white armor. His target for today would be a galewolf, a wolf-type lifeform that lived in the Valley of Winds.

Zhang Lie had long since mapped out the dimensional world, and he headed straight for the valley without needing to check his map.

In terms of outer appearance, galewolves were quite similar to regular gray wolves, though they were significantly larger. With all four limbs on the ground, their backs would be at eye level. Despite their intimidating size, however, they were just regular lifeforms.

Zhang Lie didn't need any preparation to handle such prey; the moment he found a pack of galewolves, he rushed straight at them.

The other hunters in the valley all thought that Zhang Lie was going crazy. Usually, to hunt a pack of galewolves, most people would lure them into a narrow pass and kill them one at a time there.

Zhang Lie could only be so daring because of the white-grub soulshard and the superior gene fragments he had obtained. At this stage, he didn't have to fear most regular lifeforms at all.

Despite the wolves' desperate attempt to bite and scratch him, they weren't able to claw away his armor. On the other hand, Zhang Lie was able to wave his sword with abandon, beheading a galewolf with every strike. His immaculate footwork and lethal technique made fighting the pack of galewolves seem like child's play.

In a matter of moments, carcasses were strewn all around him.

A team of hunters, who had witnessed the sight from afar, could only stare at him in shock.

Of course, such a massacre would have produced regular soulshards, but Zhang Lie only clucked his tongue as he picked one up.

Given his recent acquisition of a superior-grade soulshard, these regular-grade soulshards seemed useless in comparison. Only a mutated-grade soulshard, at the very least, could capture his attention.

He raced through the valley, killing every pack of galewolves he came across. After hundreds of kills, he finally heard a deep howl from the distance. As Zhang Lie looked toward the source of the noise, he saw a truck-sized galewolf emerging from afar.

"A mutated-grade lifeform! Haha, it finally appeared!"

Licking his lips, Zhang Lie rushed forward fearlessly.

The regular galewolves quickly moved out of the way of the impending confrontation.

Clang! Zhang Lie's sword struck the wolf's claws.

With a howl, the mutated-grade galewolf repeatedly swiped at Zhang Lie, but he didn't even flinch. The protection of the white-grub armor was such that he only had to focus on attacking, and attack he did, his sword gleaming as he thrust it toward the wolf's underside.

In a matter of moments, the two of them exchanged hundreds of blows, but the mutated galewolf's claws found no purchase on Zhang Lie's armor. However, Zhang Lie's sword also couldn't penetrate the wolf's dense layer of fur and muscle, and the resistance even caused the blade to snap in half.

"You bastard—that sword cost me 800 points!"

Zhang Lie had overlooked the fact that he was still using the cheapest blade he could afford; it was sharp and strong enough against regular lifeforms, but for a mutated-grade galewolf...

The galewolf almost seemed to cackle as it opened its jaws wide, intending to finish Zhang Lie off with one bite.

"Just because I'm weaponless doesn't mean I can't kill you, you know."

As the galewolf bit down, Zhang Lie's amorphous armor suddenly flowed into the wolf's mouth and began to balloon. In a matter of moments, the galewolf's eyes bulged as its throat swelled.

Pop! After a discomfoting stasis, the galewolf's throat finally exploded, separating its head from its body and showering Zhang Lie in blood.

As Zhang Lie crushed the soulshard of a regular galewolf, the will of the world spoke into his mind. [You successfully killed a mutated-grade galewolf and received its soulshard. Soulshard designation: augmentation-type.]

A mutated galewolf's soulshard was particularly useful in the dimensional world. As an augmentation-type soulshard, it was able to increase one's speed without inducing any additional energy consumption. Upon its activation, he would be able to move as fast as lightning for a short period of time.

Zhang Lie had gone to the Valley of Winds to hunt for both gene fragments and this particular soulshard. He hadn't expected that he would be so lucky as to encounter a mutated-grade galewolf so quickly, however.

After its death, the surrounding galewolves all covered and fled, leaving the carcasses of their mutated- and countless regular-grade comrades behind.

Zhang Lie took out a gigantic pot and a variety of spices and seasoning, then began butchering the carcasses, stripping away their fur and bones. He threw the meat into the pot, added the spices, and poured in a generous quantity of white wine. After letting it stew for three hours, the wolf-meat broth was ready to be consumed.

[For consuming the meat of a galewolf, you received 1 basic gene fragment.]

[For consuming the meat of a mutated-grade galewolf, you received 1 mutated gene fragment.]

...

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

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

Genes: Basic, 40; Mutated, 10; Superior, 10

Soulshards: White Grub (superior); Galewolf (mutated)

The mutated galewolf had provided him with ten mutated gene fragments. Although there was still a large quantity of galewolf meat left, hunters could only ever get twenty

gene fragments of each type from any particular species, so Zhang Lie packed up the rest of the meat and got ready to leave.

He also brought the backbone of the mutated-grade galewolf back with him. Bones from mutated-grade lifeforms made for good crafting materials for weapons, and Zhang Lie was in need of a new one.

When the hunters saw Zhang Lie returning so soon with a huge sack of items, they all began to gossip.

"Oh? The king of the dumps is returning with a big haul, I wonder what it is?"

"White grubs, of course."

The other hunters couldn't help but snicker. "Is he still hunting those stupid grubs?"

"Really, how long is he going to keep doing that? He seemed to have become a little stronger judging by the results of that fight, but he's still repeatedly doing the same things!"

"I heard Wang Xiaohua's going to face him with her whole team next time."

"Well, he asked for it."

"Isn't Wang Xiaohua pretty trashy, though? Does she need her whole team to beat a weakling like him?"

As usual, Zhang Lie ignored the crowd. He placed the sack of galewolf meat on the point-conversion counter and found that it was worth 500 points. He couldn't help but sigh in anticipation: his hardest days were over.

He had previously amassed 1000 points only with three grueling months of work, but now—just one day had netted him 500 points.

With all his preparations in order, it was time for the next step.

1. These hunters really have nothing better to do, do they?