

Ultragene Warlord

#Chapter 11: Another Confrontation - Read Ultragene Warlord Chapter 11: Another Confrontation

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Wang Jianxin understood that Zhang Lie fully intended to sever the relationship between them, and that objecting would only repulse him further.

"Zhang Lie, this is my fault, so if you insist on buying the property, something like five hundred thousand will be more than sufficient. I know how difficult it is for you to make money, and Hanxiang will have quite a few expenses ahead, so consider the rest a sponsorship on my behalf."

"Thank you, Uncle Wang, but I still can't accept your generosity. I'll figure out a way to eke out a living for both me and Hanxiang. Please, sign!" Zhang Lie once again rebuffed Uncle Wang's offer and handed him the contract and black card.

Wang Jianxin frowned, criticized Wang Xiaohua, and "reluctantly" accepted the card and signed the contract. With this new contract in place, the old rental agreement was naturally invalidated.

Zhang Lie's part in the matter would be finished as soon as he handed over the contract to his lawyer. And from then on, that rundown property in the slums would belong entirely to the two of them.

Of course, this was only the beginning. Given Zhang Lie's abilities and growth potential, he swore he would bring his sister into the special-class—or even royal-class—residential areas. They would have more and more properties, and even a dojo of their own.

When the contract was finally signed, Zhang Lie huffed a sigh of relief. "Uncle Wang, regardless of your actual intentions, thank you." He bowed respectfully, then briskly turned to leave. From start to finish, he never looked at Wang Xiaohua again.

Only when Zhang Lie had vanished around the corner did Wang Jianxin pull Wang Xiaohua back into the manor. "Xiaohua, you were far too impulsive—now look at what you've done!"

Wang Xiaohua still looked a little aggrieved. "And yet you still hit me twice, Dad, just to put on a show for that piece of trash! ?I really don't understand why you're so polite to an idiot with a ?crippled sister. Why?!"

Wang Jianxin folded his arms in front of his chest. "You don't understand how wily their father is. Given how much treasure he amassed before going missing, it's quite possible that he left something for his children. What's more, haven't you always claimed that Zhang Lie was at the bottom of the gene leaderboard, that he's nothing but a weakling? In that case, where did he get all this money?"

Wang Jianxin held the black card up in front of his daughter.

Wang Xiaohua was equally flummoxed. Given Zhang Lie's appearance and living conditions, he certainly didn't look like the type of person who would be able to pull out two million dollars on a whim.

"I'm surprised too, Dad. He spent three months only killing white grubs, so how did he get so much money in a matter of days? But don't worry, as long as he's still in the Blacksteel settlement, I'll have an answer for you quickly enough."

Wang Xiaohua's eyes glinted. In her mind, Zhang Lie was like a stinkbug that she could crush with her shoe.

Wang Jianxin advised her, "Don't do anything to him—he doesn't look as easy to handle as you think."

"Don't worry, Dad! No matter how tricky he is, he's a total weakling." Wang Xiaohua grabbed the black card from her father, smiling. "I'm going shopping!"

"Newsflash! At 10 AM today, another monarch-class hunter has risen from the ranks of humanity. Congratulations to Yan Tianjun, the ninth monarch-class hunter of humanity, soon to be heading toward the fifth realm!"

Zhang Hanxiang had just pulled up an article when she noticed Zhang Lie returning. "Brother, you're back!"

"Mm." Zhang Lie put down the bags of food in his hands and responded distractedly. He was completely focused on the Chinese man currently being interviewed by reporters on the news.

"A newly birthed monarch-class trying to enter the fifth realm without any disaster-grade gene fragments... is he trying to kill himself?"

A true monarch-class hunter was one who had reached his disaster-grade gene capacity in the fourth realm before heading to the fifth.

Monarch-level hunters were incredibly dangerous hunters who were able to damage the very skies with their attacks, and humanity shouldn't have had more than three true monarchs at this point in time.

He had deliberately lowered his voice to avoid being overheard by his sister, but he hadn't accounted for how sharp her ears were. Zhang Hanxiang asked curiously, "Brother, why do you say that monarch-class hunters shouldn't enter the fifth realm?"

"Many people know about the fourth realm: the final battlefield between mankind and genetic lifeforms. But do you know about the fifth realm?"

Zhang Hanxiang shook her head. "I'm not a fifth-realm god-class hunter, so how would I know what it contains?"

"Hell!"

Zhang Hanxiang was stupefied. "Isn't information about the fifth realm restricted by the world federation? How do you know about it, Brother?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at her. "After all, I'm a hunter myself. Isn't it normal that I would know a little about this sort of stuff? The information's only restricted for regular citizens, not hunters."

In truth, most hunters knew nothing about the fifth realm, not even lord-class hunters who were about to ascend to the fourth realm. At this point in time, there surely weren't more than a hundred hunters in the fourth realm.

As soon as people started to understand the horrors of the fifth realm, perhaps no one would be willing to ascend. And without an influx of hunters as reinforcements, those monarch-class and god-class hunters who had advanced to the fifth realm would surely all perish.

Their death would represent the start of a new dark age for humanity: now too weak to protect themselves, humans would quickly be enslaved by more powerful aliens.

Zhang Lie knew about the fifth realm because he was once a fourth-realm hunter.

It was thought that monarch-class hunters would be able to stand against an onslaught of disaster-grade lifeforms. In hindsight, however, no force of humanity was yet strong enough to kill such creatures in bulk.

Hunters were only able to hunt disaster-grade lifeforms in earnest as the result of a series of remarkable inventions and discoveries over the next decade.

However, just because other hunters weren't able to do so didn't mean that Zhang Lie couldn't. He murmured to himself, "Since I've come back in time, I'll certainly prevent the tragedy of mankind this time around."

Hanxiang smiled as she prodded her brother. "What are you mumbling to yourself, Brother?"

"It's nothing. Let's eat, and then I'll have to head out again."

Zhang Hanxiang pursed her lips. "Ah, right—did Uncle Wang agree to sell us the house?"

"Of course! Nothing would ever fail with your brother in charge!"

"Really? That's wonderful!"

"Haha, we have a house now! This house is purely ours!"

Zhang Hanxiang's tinkling laughter resounded in the small house.

After having an enjoyable lunch with his sister, Zhang Lie again returned to the settlement. The first thing he did was browse through the trading post. The five potbellied-toad soulshards had all been auctioned off as he had indicated, and he had earned a huge profit.

The main currency used within the settlement wasn't federation money, but instead the points that could be obtained by trading in the meat and flesh of genetic lifeforms. The five soulshards alone had brought him 13,000 points.

While fighting the potbellied toads, Zhang Lie had found himself lacking a multi-target skill, lowering his hunting efficiency significantly, and he hoped to rectify that deficiency now.

Unfortunately, even after an exhaustive search, he had found quite a number of suitable fire-attuned techniques, but no water-attuned ones. Either the techniques themselves were lacking, or they weren't suitable for Zhang Lie's hunting style.

Since he couldn't find a suitable water-attuned technique, he would let them come to him instead. Moments later, he posted a new request on the trading post offering ten thousand points for a high-grade multi-target water-attuned technique.

Of course, he still anonymized himself; Zhang Lie didn't want to be noticed just yet.

Finally, he walked out of the settlement, preparing to return to the Bloodcrystal Valley to continue gathering blood whiskers.

Just like last time, however, he found himself surrounded by people once again: none other than Wang Xiaohua and her team, and now even her boyfriend, Qin Xiaotian, and his team as well. A dozen people encircled Zhang Lie.

A large crowd had gathered by the settlement gates, watching the commotion.

"Oho, it looks like there's no way out for our poor king of the dumps this time."

"Wang Xiaohua's a tricky hunter to antagonize, after all."

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"Who's second-to-last on the gene leaderboard? He must be feeling pretty upset right now."

"Ha, he's already last! Zhang Lie hid his ranking on the gene leaderboard about a month ago."

"Eh? Who was the one who said that Zhang Lie was actually hiding his strength? Look at him now!"

Ignoring the crowd, Zhang Lie focused on Wang Xiaohua. "Wang Xiaohua, do you really have nothing better to do?"

"Ah! Xiaotian, look at how rude this fellow is!" Wang Xiaohua, as if shocked, grabbed the young man by her side coyly.

Qin Xiaotian smirked, then turned to Zhang Lie with a look of disdain. "So, you're Zhang Lie? Xiaohua told me you've been bullying her lately. How'd you get your strength? Some fortuitous encounter? Tell me and I'll give you a clean death!"

Qin Xiaotian was the younger cousin of Qin Xiao, currently third on the gene leaderboard. He was handsome in a boyish way, but was notorious for being small-minded and petty. Because of his cousin's strength as a hunter, there were few who dared to challenge him.

In truth, Zhang Lie didn't want to start a feud with him at this juncture, but there was little he could do now. Based on his ranking on the gene leaderboard, Qin Xiaotian had surely filled his mutated gene fragments to capacity, and Qin Xiao would surely have helped him get a few superior gene fragments too.

And his framework was, at this point, only comparable to a mortal-grade framework. The only advantage that he had over Qin Xiaotian was his superior-grade soulshard. Perhaps that would be sufficient to deal with Qin Xiaotian, but what about all his lackeys?

Zhang Lie couldn't take them all head-on. In that case, he had to avoid a direct confrontation—"Hah, you think I'll lose to you so easily? Try me on, you pieces of trash!"—but that didn't mean he had to suffer their insults without retaliation.

Chapter 12: Secluded Glade

With a resounding boom, the crowd saw Zhang Lie's body glowing blue as a translucent ball blossomed into existence around him, knocking those hunters surrounding him

aside. As the crowd watched on, Zhang Lie, his entire body still encased in the sphere generated by the superior white-grub soulshard, bounced off into the distance.

Qin Xiaotian gaped in amazement: how could Zhang Lie, well known to be at the bottom of the gene leaderboard, handle such a confrontation so calmly? It looked as though he really was hiding his strength—and the soulshard that he was using didn't seem too bad, either.

"Interesting. Go on, chase him! Don't kill him too quickly, though, I want to play with him!"

Qin Xiaotian's eyes lit up as he stared at Zhang Lie's fleeing form.

His lackeys immediately raced after Zhang Lie, circulating their genetic energy for a boost to their speed. However, they had clearly underestimated Zhang Lie's capabilities.

In mid-air, Zhang Lie activated his galewolf soulshard, bouncing away even more rapidly than before. He was moving so rapidly that even Qin Xiaotian's lackeys, each of which had reached their mutated gene capacity, weren't able to catch up despite using everything they could.

"Not bad, not bad!" Surprisingly, Qin Xiaotian seemed to grow even more excited, and he pulled Wang Xiaohua with him as he joined in the chase.

The more exceptional Zhang Lie's performance, the more secrets he was hiding, and the more treasure Qin Xiaotian would be able to paw from his corpse.

Qin Xiaotian's lackeys weren't weak, and even though they wouldn't be able to match Zhang Lie's speed in the short term, he couldn't shake them off either. In the end, they vanished out of sight from the onlookers by the settlement gates, all of whom were chattering with each other in shock.

"Have I gone blind?! That Zhang Lie actually managed to escape from Qin Xiaotian's team that easily?"

"Haha, who was the one who said that Zhang Lie was dead meat? I knew he was hiding something!"

"Surely that's a mutated-grade soulshard, at the very least? And we all thought he was useless!"

"Don't you guys think that that ball looks familiar?"

"...like a white grub core?!"

"Damn, could it be?"

"Do you think... that was the reason why that guy spent three months hunting white grubs?"

"Haha, you guys must be crazy! When have you ever heard of mutated-grade white grubs? No one has ever seen any!"

"No, I'll have to check it out for myself!"

"Heh, you fool! Don't believe everything you hear! What I'd really like to know is whether or not he can escape this time."

"You think he can make it out of Qin Xiaotian's clutches, and?I'm?the fool?!" Surely he wouldn't be able to escape!

"Wanna bet?" A heavily bearded man turned to the agitated youth by his side.

The brash youth inclined his neck, refusing to back down. "What stakes?"

The bearded man chuckled. "Say, a small bet of ten thousand points?"

Ten thousand points?! That wasn't a small bet at all!?The youth hesitated, causing the bearded man to snicker.

"What, you don't even have ten thousand points?"

Of course, the youth took the bait. "You think I'm afraid of you? You're on!"

Their conversation had been loud enough, and the crowd bored enough, that the two-person bet had quickly ballooned into something that even the three large corporations of the dimensional world had a stake in.

Of course, most hunters bet that Zhang Lie would die, especially those in the know from the large corporations. They were intimately familiar with the strongest hunters of the dimensional world.

And even though Qin Xiaotian wasn't all that strong, Qin Xiao's name was known to all. He was a bossy and domineering fellow, yet one who would protect anyone in his posse. Qin Xiaotian had surely gleaned quite a few benefits from him.

Meanwhile, one and a half months ago, Zhang Lie had clearly been at the bottom of the gene leaderboard. Even if he had had a chance encounter, there was no conceivable way that his strength could exceed Qin Xiaotian's.

The dimensional world wasn't like reality; except in settlements, the rule of law didn't apply. The strong could do what they wanted. And Qin Xiaotian wasn't alone: his entire team was with him. Zhang Lie had no escape. As a result, the odds quickly tilted in Qin

Xiaotian's favor, eventually settling on a hundred-to-one odds against Zhang Lie's survival.

Of course, Zhang Lie had no clue what was happening back in the settlement; otherwise, he would have bankrupted himself to join in the bet.

As he bounced through the dimensional world, Zhang Lie's eyes glinted.

The world was so large that, despite having been discovered decades ago, there were still a few mysterious regions that weren't common knowledge. And since his pursuers were still quite a distance away, Zhang Lie was, for the most part, free of any danger.

Based on his understanding of the dimensional world, there was no way he wouldn't be able to escape Qin Xiaotian's pursuit. In fact, what he was thinking of wasn't escape, but retaliation.

Qin Xiaotian's intent was clear: to chase him until his stamina gave out, and then to capture him alive. In that case, he certainly wasn't going to take it easy on them.

After travelling hundreds of kilometers, Zhang Lie's genetic energy was flagging. His pursuers grew ever closer, but Zhang Lie's face became more and more relaxed. Right in front of him was a particularly dangerous part of the dimensional world—the Night Forest.

"Stop running away, coward!" Qin Xiaotian's team shouted upon seeing Zhang Lie about to escape into the forest.

"Heh." Zhang Lie ignored their cries as he bounced inside.

The pursuers hesitated by the boundary of the forest. Behind them, Qin Xiaotian called out,

"Go on, keep chasing him! He's all but depleted of genetic energy by now, and he won't be able to go much farther."

As a result, the entire team followed him into the forest.

Zhang Lie turned back and grinned. He knew just where he would lead them.

Once within the forest, Zhang Lie had morphed his bubble into two soft, flexible whips, which he used to swing through the trees like an agile monkey. He led the hunters following him to a lake within the forest. It was fed by a waterfall, one that the hunters could clearly hear from afar.

"We're at the Moonlit Pond!" Qin Xiaotian exclaimed, glancing at Zhang Lie, who was standing right beneath the mouth of the waterfall.

He had once been to the area with his cousin Qin Xiao. It was a rather famous location within the Night Forest, and it was said that a particularly dangerous dragon-type lifeform lived within the pond.

Apparently, it was an exceedingly rare superior-grade moonlight wyrm. There had been quite a few hunters itching to hunt down such valuable prey, but no credible sightings had been reported within the last decade, and the rumors had turned into legends.

It looked as though Zhang Lie was so desperate that he had no other choice to run here, believing in a legend.

Just as Qin Xiaotian was about to order his team to surround Zhang Lie, however, he ran through the waterfall and vanished from sight.

"Hm?" Even Qin Xiaotian was amazed that Zhang Lie had prepared such a way out for himself.

"Quick, chase after him!"

Of course, no matter what Zhang Lie did, he was sure that he would catch him today. Because, just like Zhang Lie, he wanted to kill any threats before they grew into larger problems.

"Captain, it looks like there's an entrance here!" Qin Xiaotian's team quickly found a cave opening behind the waterfall.

"Enter, but be careful of any sneak attacks!"

Qin Xiaotian's team rushed into the cave. Darkness smothered them. The scout in front held one palm up, a flame by his fingertips, as he forged onward. His other hand was holding a blade.

His name was Fang Qiong, and he was the deputy captain under Qin Xiaotian. His genetic framework was high-grade and fire-attuned, and his basic and mutated gene fragments were filled to capacity. He possessed three mutated-grade soulshards, and the blade in his hand was B-grade.

After three minutes, the pursuers walked out of the cave into what seemed to be a secluded glade. Everything in the glade was tinged a royal, mysterious, purple: the grasses and plants growing from the ground, the vines hanging from trees, even the trees themselves, filled with rich and resplendent fruits.

Qin Xiaotian's sharp eyes immediately spotted a few exceedingly rare and precious herbs.

"This place is filled with treasures! Captain, we're rich!"

"Right, Captain, all this is ours!"

Wang Xiaohua, Fang Qiong, and the others had also noticed the rare plants that seemed to grow like common weeds in this hidden glade.

They had almost forgotten that they were here chasing after Zhang Lie. And they certainly didn't notice Zhang Lie, covered in some purple powder, watching them from afar up a little hill.

"Go on, laugh while you can. No matter how many herbs you pick now, you're all going to die!" Zhang Lie stared at his pursuers as though they were already nothing more than corpses. It was only then that Qin Xiaotian and the others finally noticed Zhang Lie in the distance.

In truth, it wasn't that they weren't paying attention, but that Zhang Lie, covered in purple powder, blended in too well with the surroundings.

Looking at his unconventional appearance, as well as his smile, Qin Xiaotian suddenly felt a sense of unease. He had deliberately led them inside this hidden glade, so there had to be some danger in here for them.

"Zhang Lie, your tricks are nothing in the face of absolute power! Since you've brought us here, I'll give you a clean death. Fang Qiong, get him!"

"Yes, Captain!"

Qin Xiaotian decided to kill Zhang Lie on the spot to prevent any complications from arising.

"Xiaotian, don't! I still have a few questions for him!" Wang Xiaohua pleaded, clearly intending on ferreting out some information regarding Zhang Lie's inheritance from his father.

After all, Zhang Lie's sudden growth in power made it quite clear to her that he had inherited something good. It would certainly agree with her father's hypothesis.

Just then, when Fang Qiong had only taken a half-step toward Zhang Lie and Qin Xiaotian and Wang Xiaohua were locked in dispute, a mysterious susurrus began to emanate from the cave behind them.

Qin Xiaotian and the others immediately turned around, eyes widening in shock.

Chapter 13: Scorpion Horde

"Ah, scorpions! So many of them..." Wang Xiaohua began to shriek after a moment of stupefied silence.

Indeed, scorpions. Countless scorpions with a violet, crystalline exoskeleton were skittering out of the cave and the greenery surrounding them, fading in and out of existence as though they were ghostly spirits.

They were only palm-sized, but could move surprisingly quickly. The tips of their stingers was a dark violet, and they were of a breed that even Qin Xiaotian didn't recognize. In an instant, the scorpions surrounded Qin Xiaotian's team.

Strangely enough, there were also quite a few scorpions by Zhang Lie's side, but even though they crawled on his body, they showed no signs of attacking him.

"Haha, they're finally here! These venombane scorpions hate fire, so I hope you're all prepared to die!" Zhang Lie no longer bothered to hide his killing intent.

Ding! Ding! Qin Xiaotian's body glowed golden, and he began swinging his blade. Wang Xiaohua, Fang Qiong, and the others all took on fighting stances, killing the scorpions which swarmed toward them from within the cave. Even the scorpions' blood was purple in color, and sprays of purple mist began filling the air.

"Hah, is this all you can do?" Qin Xiaotian scoffed, having defeated the first wave of scorpions with ease.

"Oh, we're just getting started," Zhang Lie called out, laughing. He sat down by the top of the hill, lazing luxuriantly as he watched Qin Xiaotian.

As furious as he was, Qin Xiaotian and his team was surrounded by a veritable sea of scorpions, and he had no way of attacking him over such a distance.

The scorpions seemed to come at them in an endless tide.

Qin Xiaotian bellowed, "Just you wait, you bastard! I'll make you suffer a fate worse than death!"

Then, he immediately began commanding his team. "Fang Qiong, use the four-spirit formation we devised!"

Beside him, Fang Qiong and three of his other teammates each activated a transformation-type soulshard and morphed into a lava tiger, a vine asp, a firebird, and a crysturtle, four curious lifeforms.

The tiger howled, the snake hissed, the bird called out, and the turtle bayed. After their transformation, they had lost the agility and techniques of their human form, but their size and strength were magnified.

The combination of the four transformations was devastating.

But although they were able to beat back the tide of scorpions, the scorpions continued swarming at them without any sign of stopping, no matter how many carcasses of their own kind they had to wade through.

The four lifeforms were arrayed at each corner of a square formation, protecting the rest of their teammates within. They tried to rush out of the entrapment, towards the hill Zhang Lie was on.

Most of the venombane scorpions were only regular-grade lifeforms, with a few mutated-grade ones scattered among them. Even the most advanced scorpions were only superior-grade. But no matter their level of evolution, all venombane scorpions shared two characteristics:

First, a surprising level of stealth.

Second, venomous poison, of a particularly dangerous sort!

Qin Xiaotian's team had already experienced the scorpions' stealth: after all, even Qin Xiaotian, who had quite a few superior gene fragments, hadn't noticed anything amiss upon entering the glade.

The poison was even more frightening, and was rightly the characteristic by which these venombane scorpions were named.

The scorpions actually had two types of poison: one from their poison sacs and released through their stingers, which would quickly induce cell apoptosis and death. Without the antidote or suppression by genetic energy, it could kill a hunter in a matter of seconds.

The second type of poison was from their blood, which rapidly vaporized when exposed to the atmosphere, forming a poison mist. Those who came in contact with the mist would find the poison seeping through their skin, leading to paralysis.

"Be careful, they're poisonous!" As the mist grew more and more dense around Qin Xiaotian's team, he shouted out a warning.

A large part of Qin Xiaotian's strength was due to his connections and wealth, yes, but he wasn't stupid. Scorpion-type lifeforms were closely linked to poison, and he had been wary of the possibility since the beginning. However, he had noticed the poisonous mist far too late.

Zhang Lie had laid out his plan carefully, and he wouldn't have lured them here if he didn't think he could get away with it. Despite the hunters' attempts to flee the sea of scorpions, there were simply so many scorpions that they were stuck no matter what they did.

The problem was especially bad in Fang Qiong's corner of the square formation: despite knowing that his body was covered in flames, anathema to the scorpions, they still swarmed him preferentially, choosing to die just to inject their venom into his body through their stingers.

Of course, under the effects of a mutated-grade soulshard, regular-grade venombane scorpions could do nothing to him. With the four transformation-type soulshards active, although they couldn't force their way out, neither could the scorpions break through their defenses. Unfortunately, the transformation-type soulshards consumed so much genetic energy that they couldn't keep it up for long.

"Xiaotian, we won't be able to break through this sea of scorpions. We need to retreat; we can't last too long like this!"

"Right, Captain, he's just a rookie! We can nab him whenever we want, there's no need to waste our time here!"

In the midst of the formation, Wang Xiaohua and Qin Xiaotian's remaining team members tried to persuade him to retreat, especially Wang Xiaohua.

The moment she saw these scorpions, she felt a strange premonition of impending doom, a prickling sensation that grew worse upon seeing Zhang Lie's bloodthirsty gaze. At the moment, she couldn't think of anything else besides fleeing.

"No, we have to teach him a lesson now! He won't get away with luring us into this trap!" He raised an outstretched hand, and a resplendent golden javelin began to manifest.

"[Demonbreaker Javelin]! Die!" With a yell, the javelin in Qin Xiaotian's hand began to glow.

The golden light flashed so quickly toward Zhang Lie that it reached him in the blink of an eye. However, unexpectedly, a thick, translucent wall popped into existence just as the spear was about to hit him. The javelin, tossed with great strength, shot toward the wall like a comet, only to be trapped halfway into the wall. It exploded in a burst of golden light.

Zhang Lie didn't even flinch.

Qin Xiaotian's eyes widened in shock. "How—how can this be?! That was a mutated-grade one-use javelin, and it'd be able to break through the defenses of even a regular superior-grade lifeform! How could the attack have been blocked by that technique?!"

"Unless, unless... No, that's impossible! How could a guy like that have gotten his hands on a soulshard of that caliber... no, something had to have gone wrong!"

"Xiaotian, stop muttering to yourself! We need to leave, or we'll die!"

"Captain, look at Zhou Ming's firebird transformation! He's moving a little woodenly, and I think something's wrong!"

While Qin Xiaotian continued to gape in shock, Wang Xiaohua and his subordinates continued trying to persuade him to leave. The poison mist was spreading all around them, and Qin Xiaotian knew that they would all be in serious danger if they didn't leave now.

He glared at Zhang Lie and bitterly called out, "Retreat! We'll leave through the cave and get this bastard some other time!"

Of course, the venombane scorpions certainly weren't going to let this crowd of intruders leave so easily. As if sensing that the other party had just called a retreat, the already-furious scorpions swarmed toward Qin Xiaotian's team in even greater numbers than before.

Even worse, the mutated-grade venombane scorpions, dispersed within the crowd, had also begun to attack.

Suddenly, whirling winds surrounded the time. As Fang Qiong's firebird form flapped its wings furiously, the venombane scorpions surrounding the team were all flung aside. But just as he thought that the coast was clear, a burst of violet light darted toward the teammates behind him.

"Argh!" With a pained yelp, behind the firebird, one of Qin Xiaotian's subordinates collapsed.

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"He Feng!" Qin Xiaotian and another subordinate shouted He Feng's name simultaneously.

However, He Feng didn't respond. He slumped onto the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut. By the right side of his neck, a hole about as wide as a finger was leaking purple blood, and the flesh around the wound was quickly necrotizing.

"Be careful! There are mutated-grade scorpions around us!" A hunter on the left flank fortuitously dodged another flash of purple light. Just as he called out, however, the scorpion struck again, tearing his ear apart.

Qin Xiaotian, scowling fiercely, a golden sword in his hands, sliced at an incoming blur. "Watch out, there's more than one!"

Even Zhang Lie had to admit that he wasn't a weakling.

Mutated-grade venombane scorpions wouldn't drop their stealth until the moment right before their attack, and the fact that he was able to notice and respond so quickly meant that he had to have at least twenty superior gene fragments. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to defeat them with a single blow.

Zhang Lie was very glad that he hadn't opted for a direct confrontation.

Of course, killing just a single mutated-grade venombane scorpion didn't change things; after all, the entire glade was a nest of scorpions. A death or two were meaningless in terms of the number of scorpions that were still swarming toward them.

And even if Qin Xiaotian was able to handle a mutated-grade venombane scorpion, the rest of his teammates and Wang Xiaohua could not. He might be able to save one or two of them, but there were bound to be more casualties.

Shouting in pain, another hunter fell to the ground. Even the four transformed hunters were starting to falter, and the square formation was breaking apart. If Qin Xiaotian didn't do something, the team that he had worked so hard to build would all perish in this nightmarish glade.

Chapter 14: Blood Feud

As his teammates fell one by one, Qin Xiaotian howled, "Zhang Lie, I'll kill you!"

A blinding golden light emanated from Qin Xiaotian's body. Amidst the swirl of genetic energy, he morphed into a gigantic gold pangolin, the effect of a superior-grade transformation-type soulshard!

Zhang Lie's eyes widened. A transformation-type soulshard was rare enough, let alone a superior-grade one. It would be sure to fetch a good price if he were to auction it off.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a human-type lifeform, so the transformation would render one incapable of using genetic techniques. Otherwise, its price would definitely rise at least a hundredfold.

Qin Xiao must like his cousin quite a bit to have sent him such a rare soulshard... Well, I'll thank him for the kindness in advance! Zhang Lie ignored the fuss Qin Xiaotian was making, treating the soulshard in Qin Xiaotian's hand as though it already belonged to him.

By the cave entrance, Qin Xiaotian's claws swiped at the air around him, forcing even those mutated-grade venombane scorpions lurking around him to retreat. The next moment, he grabbed Wang Xiaohua. His scales began to twist rapidly, as though he were a golden drill. With a tremendous grinding sound, he burrowed into the earth.

Except for the four transformed lifeforms, the remainder of Qin Xiaotian's team quickly ran into the hole he had created. Fang Qiong, Zhou Ming, and the other two hunters prepared to cancel their transformations and followed suit.

The transformation had drained them of much of their genetic energy, and their constant exposure to the poisonous mist was making them muddleheaded.

Right after Fang Qiong and Zhou Ming made it into the burrowed hole, however, Zhao Ping and Zheng Cang, who had transformed into the vine asp and crysturtle respectively, felt their transformations break involuntarily and their soulshards forcibly recalled.

Neither of them had enough genetic energy to maintain their transformation any longer. Before the two of them could recover from the shock, the wave of scorpions engulfed them.

"Damn it! Hurry, we have to run!" Fang Qiong and Zhou Ming had no choice but to collapse the entrance to the underground hole.

Thus ended the fight between the venombane scorpions and Qin Xiaotian's team. Both sides had suffered massive losses. The once-idyllic glade had been covered in a layer of scorpion carcasses, along with the blood of eight hunters.

Qin Xiaotian's thirteen-person team had shrunk by more than half. Furthermore, the surviving hunters were all poisoned, and Zhang Lie had no intention of letting them leave safely. Qin Xiaotian had declared a blood feud between them, and neither of them would rest easily before the other was dead.

However, Zhang Lie wasn't in much of a hurry. The poison in the scorpions' blood was slow-acting, but its effects were particularly difficult to dispel. He was certain that Qin Xiaotian and the others wouldn't be able to find an antidote in the short term.

After a few minutes, when the scorpions had finally retreated, Zhang Lie walked over to the eight corpses and began collecting his spoils. None of their flesh or bones remained, and the soulshards in their soulspace had naturally vanished with them.

All Zhang Lie could recover were their weapons. A spear, three polearms, and four blades: the weapons of the eight deceased hunters were quickly thrown into Zhang Lie's potbellied-toad pouch.

Subsequently, he activated his galewolf soulshard and [Rippling Walk], then ran out through the cave, chasing after the remnants of Qin Xiaotian's team. The moment he returned to the waterfall, Zhang Lie discovered something amiss. There were no traces of upturned ground near the tunnel entrance or the lakeside. Even by the nearby

forests, Zhang Lie couldn't see any fallen trees or disturbed soil. Given Qin Xiaotian's condition, he could hardly be so careful as to avoid detection.

In that case... Zhang Lie turned around and ran back into the venombane glade. Evidently, knowing that Zhang Lie would chase after him, Qin Xiaotian had burrowed deeper into the forest rather than out beyond the cave. Unfortunately for him, Zhang Lie was an experienced hunter, and saw through his trick immediately.

Deep within the glade, by an upturned heap of soil, Qin Xiaotian, Wang Xiaohua, Fang Qiong, Zhou Ming, and another hunter slumped against the ground. At Qin Xiaotian's feet was all manner of empty potion bottles.

"Damn it, none of these antidotes are working!"

After swallowing another dose of antidote, Qin Xiaotian began to shout in frustration. His genetic energy was slowly being sapped away, and the extremities of his body were slowly falling into paralysis.

"Xiaotian, what do we do? What do we do?! Are we going to die of poison?" Wang Xiaohua trembled as she held back her tears. In the end, Wang Xiaohua was only a young woman. When faced with the prospect of death, how could she remain calm?

Of course, the other hunters were much the same way.

Hearing Wang Xiaohua's words, Fang Qiong, who had suffered the brunt of the scorpions' attack, squeezed his insensate palm. Clutching onto a forlorn hope, he asked, "Captain, could it be that the antidote just hasn't taken effect yet? All your antidotes are top-tier, after all!"

"The apothecary you bought all these antidotes from surely wouldn't sell us fake potions, would they?" Zhou Ming suggested.

Qin Xiaotian waved his arm in frustration. "No, these antidotes work fine. The poison is just too tricky to deal with!"

Fang Qiong couldn't help but groan. "To think we were tricked by a weakling like him!"

"Wang Xiaohua, it's all your fault! If not for you, Qin Xiaotian wouldn't be fighting against this fellow in the first place. You've killed everyone!" Zhou Ming's despairing accusation made Qin Xiaotian glance thoughtfully at Wang Xiaohua.

However, it was only one glance. After all, he understood quite well that he was the one who had brought them all to this juncture.

On the other hand, Wang Xiaohua, indicted by Zhou Ming, suddenly shouted, "That's right! Zhang Lie! We just need to find him! While we were fighting, the poisonous mist

spread all over the glade, but Zhang Lie wasn't affected! He must either have the antidote or know some way of avoiding the poison!

"Xiaotian, we just need to go find Zhang Lie! As long as we promise him some resources, I'm sure he'll give us the antidote!"

The other hunters' eyes brightened, but then they looked toward her as though she were an idiot.

"What's the matter? Are you all too prideful?" Wang Xiaohua asked, confused.

This time, none of the other hunters bothered to look at her. She was a sheltered orchid in a greenhouse, and clearly didn't understand the true nature of the dimensional world.

As she felt her body slowly seizing up, Wang Xiaohua began to cry. "Xiaotian, I'm begging you, can't we ask Zhang Lie for help?"

"Xiaohua, you're too naive! We gain nothing from asking him except for revealing the fact that we've all been weakened. But you don't have to worry too much—given my cousin's reputation in the dimensional world, he might give us a shameful beating, but he wouldn't dare take our lives.

"As for the poison in our bodies, after circulating my genetic energy a few times, I've found that it only has paralytic properties. At worst, we'll be stiff for a few hours. The purple powder that we saw on that fellow should be the key to avoiding the scorpions' poison.

Furthermore, the fact that we're now deep within the glade rather than out by the waterfall means that it'll take quite a while longer to find us. As long as we make it through the next few hours, we can still beat him!"

Qin Xiaotian was exceedingly patient with Wang Xiaohua, not only dissuading her from her inane decision, but also giving her hope to live.

"Really? Xiaotian, this poison isn't lethal?" Despite Qin Xiaotian's patient explanation, Wang Xiaohua still seemed quite doubtful, causing Fang Qiong and Zhou Ming to let out twin glares of impatience.

They were about to mock her—while their mouths could still move—when they heard a chuckle from the distance.

"Haha, of course it's true. Qin Xiaotian, it looks like you're not an idiot after all! In that case, shall we have a little talk?"

Zhang Lie appeared from a distance.

"Zhang Lie!" Fang Qiong, Zhou Ming, and Wang Xiaohua all exclaimed in shock.

Qin Xiaotian, on the other hand, lying on the ground with his four limbs all but paralyzed, knew that he'd lost. Rather than panic, however, he smiled coldly. "Alright, you win. What do you want from me?"

Zhang Lie's face warped in greed. "Soulshards, all the soulshards in your soulspace!"

"You're a little greedy, aren't you? You're sure you want my soulshards?" Qin Xiaotian's simmering anger was reflected in his words.

Zhang Lie retrieved the spear he had picked up from one of his teammates' carcasses, then pointed it at Qin Xiaotian. "Are you threatening me?"

"Consider it a warning. Most of my soulshards are from my cousin. How do you think he'll react when he finds that you've got them all?"

"Qin Xiao, you mean? I'd like to spar with him if I get the chance. That reminds me, didn't you claim you were going to give me a beating?"

Zhang Lie's face was calm, but Qin Xiaotian could see the pale blue energy emanating from his body, as well as the spear pointed directly at his chest, its tip glinting.

And even though he knew he had to remain calm, Qin Xiaotian shuddered. "No, wait! I'll give you my soulshards, all of them!"

Chapter 15: Stealthy Return

It was clear that Zhang Lie was motivated by his greed, and Qin Xiaotian would certainly prefer bankruptcy to death. Angering him at this critical juncture would be a terribly unwise decision. In that case, he had no choice but to give in.

A dozen soulshards, including the superior-grade transformation-type soulshard he'd been eyeing earlier, ended up in Zhang Lie's hands.

The dimensional world was a curious entity, with its own rules and will. A human, upon entering the dimensional world, would unlock a soulspace granted by the will of the world. This soulspace was where hunters could store their soulshards.

Hunters' strength came from four sources: their framework, their soulshards, their gene fragments, and their genetic energy. Their gene fragments represented their strength and constitution; their framework, the nature and maximum capacity of their genetic energy; their techniques, different ways of unleashing that energy.

Soulshards complemented and augmented a hunter's suite of techniques. To some extent, the quality of a hunter's soulshards dictated their maximum strength, and having

an assortment of valuable soulshards was a hunter's greatest treasure. All hunters' soulspaces were protected by the will of the world, and no one else could steal a soulshard from another hunter's soulspace.

Qin Xiaotian's soulshards would clearly be the cream of the crop. Most of his remaining soulshards were also of the exceedingly rare transformation type, and Zhang Lie had just received a veritable fortune.

"You truly are rich, Young Master Qin. I'll accept your gift with gratitude." Zhang Lie affected a smarmy smile as he swiped Qin Xiaotian's soulshards. In his head, Qin Xiaotian thought to himself, "Shameless bastard!"

Of course, he didn't dare say so out loud. "Zhang Lie, friend, now that I've given you these soulshards, won't you hand us the antidote?"

Zhang Lie roared with laughter. "Eh, didn't you say you would stop at nothing to kill me? I'm not sure I want a friend like you, Qin Xiaotian."

"Wang Xiaohua, you're up next. Qin Xiaotian bought his life with all his soulshards—what about you?" Zhang Lie pointed the spear toward Wang Xiaohua.

When she saw the glinting spearhead, she immediately panicked. "Zhang Lie, I'm begging you, don't kill me! I'll give you everything I have!"

It was only now that Wang Xiaohua understood that the young man she had forsaken was no weakling at all—he was only biding his time. She very much regretted provoking him repeatedly just for a bit of face.

Surprisingly, Zhang Lie was quite genial to her. "In that case, hand over your soulshards. As for your points, we can discuss that once we're back in the settlement."

"Al-Alright! Here!" Wang Xiaohua immediately offered her palm to him, and Zhang Lie took all of her soulshards with a careless swipe of his hand.

Of course, compared to Qin Xiaotian, Wang Xiaohua's soulshards were far more inferior. Except for one or two mutated-grade soulshards, the others were all relatively mundane. That didn't mean he wouldn't take them all, however. There were at least a hundred settlements dotted all over the dimensional world, and soulshards were always in hot demand.

The rest was easy. Fang Qiong, Zhou Ming, and the last remaining member of Qin Xiaotian's team all handed over their soulshards in turn, having watched their captain and Wang Xiaohua do so.

Combined, Zhang Lie had obtained over forty soulshards from Qin Xiaotian's party. Since the remaining three members of Qin Xiaotian's team were hunters that Qin

Xiaotian had intended on supporting in earnest, their soulshards were far superior to those that Wang Xiaohua had.

After collecting everyone's soulshards, Zhang Lie patted his hands and smiled.

"Zhang Lie, now that you've accepted all our soulshards, won't you give us the antidote?" Qin Xiaotian asked carefully. His body had now been completely paralyzed, and even speaking was starting to get difficult. It felt far too uncomfortable to have his life be in someone else's hands, and he wanted to end this nightmarish scenario as quickly as he could.

Right after he spoke, however, the other hunters heard a clean snick and saw a fountain of blood. Wang Xiaohua, Fang Qiong, and the others looked on in horror as Qin Xiaotian's head toppled from his body.

"Ah—Ahhh!"

"Captain!" You damned—"

"Zhang Lie, you're not trust—"

Wang Xiaohua screamed again, and Fang Qiong and the others began to curse Zhang Lie, but Zhang Lie's blade had reached them before any of them could finish.

"When did I say I would spare any of you?" Zhang Lie asked, almost rhetorically. The only hunter still alive was Wang Xiaohua. Of course, the reason Zhang Lie had kept her alive wasn't because he pitied her, but because he would need her to take the blame.

After dealing with Qin Xiaotian and the others, Zhang Lie strode forward toward Qin Xiaohua's prone body.

"Don't kill me! Zhang Lie, I'm begging you, don't kill me! I'll do anything you ask me to!"

A sudden stink filled the air: in her extreme fear, Wang Xiaohua had involuntarily defecated. The scene in front of her eyes was simply too frightening! The hunter by her side had been Qin Xiaotian, scion of the branch of the Qin clan in Jiangdu, and Zhang Lie had killed him without even blinking an eye, as though he were simply squashing a bug!

And all the other hunters beside her—their clans weren't as rich or influential, but still notable and powerful in their own right. How could Zhang Lie have killed all of them?! And if he was daring enough to kill them, wouldn't he also kill her?

Faced with the overwhelming prospect of death, Wang Xiaohua broke down.

"I'm so-sorry! Please, it's all my fault, I shouldn't have left you, I shouldn't have looked down on you, I shouldn't have made trouble for you at your house! It's all my fault! Zhang Lie, I'm begging you... Please don't kill me!"

"Ah, what's this? What happened to Young Miss Wang, who commanded me to beg at the settlement gates for her favor? What, have you learned your mistake?"

"Honestly, I don't care whether or not you've left me. I don't even care that you've been trying to glean information on my father, in hopes of securing his inheritance. I really can't be bothered to care about such matters, but this doesn't mean that I'm scared of you, or of the Wang clan. You shouldn't have repeatedly antagonized me or my sister, and you certainly shouldn't have brought Qin Xiaotian into this affair, damning you and the entire Wang clan!"

"But don't worry, since I didn't kill you before, I'm not going to kill you now. Not only that, I'll even bring you back to the settlement, hale and hearty!" Zhang Lie's tone was chillingly bright.

Even as naive as Wang Xiaohua was, she knew that Zhang Lie surely didn't have good intentions in doing so, but could she refuse? Of course not! She had to hold onto any chance of survival.

"Really? You really won't kill me?"

Instead of replying, Zhang Lie pulled out a curiously large purple flower, then scattered its pollen over her prone body. As a refreshing scent wafted up her nose, Wang Xiaohua felt her paralysis fade.

This soulbloom flower was a rare subsidiary ingredient that Zhang Lie had picked up while gathering ingredients for Potion #1. It was the pollen from this flower that had caused the venombane scorpions to ignore Zhang Lie's presence and served as an antidote against the mist formed from their poisonous blood.

After storing his spoils, Zhang Lie instructed Wang Xiaohua not to run away after she recovered from her paralysis. Then, he headed back into the glade to harvest the rare herbs that grew within. He wasn't at all worried that Wang Xiaohua would escape, because he knew that she had neither the daring nor the capability.

And given that he was planning to return Wang Xiaohua to the settlement, this venombane glade would soon be a well-known location. As a result, he would have to harvest and hunt what he could now.

The exoskeleton of these venombane scorpions were particularly useful, and could be used to brew a variety of medicines, potions, and poisons. Mutated-grade venombane-scorpion soulshards was even more useful, so the glade would soon be packed to the brim with hunters.

Zhang Lie spent the next three days in the venombane glade.

Zhang Lie: a mortal lifeform

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

Techniques: Rippling Walk (novice), Three-Wave Crescendo (novice)

Genes: Basic, 130; Mutated, 80; Superior, 10

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

The reason he had taken so long was both in order to harvest herbs and to hunt for a mutated-grade venombane-scorpion soulshard. It was extremely difficult to find such venombane scorpions while they were stealthed, and if not for Zhang Lie's understanding of their habits and weaknesses, it would have taken even longer.

As expected, Wang Xiaohua didn't even try to run away. All she did was bury her teammates' corpses.

Back in the Blacksteel settlement, outside the gates, a number of gamblers were glancing all around the landscape, searching for a certain hunter.

"It's been three whole days! Surely Qin Xiaotian and his team would be back by now?"

"It's only been three days—given Qin Xiaotian's skill, it wouldn't be unusual for his team to be out hunting for an entire month!"

"That's right! After all, that Zhang Lie surely was nothing more than an interlude for someone like Qin Xiaotian."

"Even calling him an interlude is way too much! You couldn't have bet on him, could you?"

"Of course not! What are the odds now, something like 120:1 against him?"

What the crowd didn't realize was that, amidst their discussions, two stealthed hunters were passing by them and heading into the settlement.

Of course, these two hunters were Zhang Lie and Wang Xiaohua.