

U. Warlord 1301

Chapter 1301: A New Gathering Point

Zhang Lie returned to the fourth realm from within his disaster-grade dragonwhale storage, but he saw not a single genetic hunter left.

They had all run away.

"Surely not..."

Clearly, after the news of Flamin's death had spread, the genetic hunters weren't able to work together cohesively against the beast stampede. Instead, they had split up and fled.

Zhang Lie didn't know that he was actually the main cause of this.

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar] had caused such an incredible commotion that the genetic hunters were worried an even larger and more frightening lifeform was about to appear. If Flamin had been present to calm them all down, the genetic hunters wouldn't have dispersed so quickly—but Flamin was gone, presumed dead.

Without a leader, their morale low, the besieged hunters of the gathering point fled in the face of a crisis that they couldn't stop.

The teleportation apparatus had been stripped bare. Because the genetic hunters had run off in a hurry, they were unable to bring the entire apparatus with them, but they had removed its core components. Clearly, the apparatus was no longer functional.

Zhang Lie was stymied.

"I was intending to report back to the Milky Way once things stabilized, but now... it feels like something big happens wherever I go."

The draconian sage and Li Zongming had called Zhang Lie a herald of disaster. Zhang Lie hadn't thought much of it, but a rare stampede had occurred almost as he ascended to the fourth realm. Could he truly be cursed?

"I thought it would be straightforward to return to the Milky Way, but this stampede—argh, why am I so unlucky?"

Now that the hunters were all gone, having dispersed in all directions, it would be difficult to chase them back down.

He would have to find another gathering point in order to return to the Milky Way.

Zhang Lie listed the tasks he had yet to accomplish in the fourth realm.

First, finish maxing out his gene fragments.

Second, find the next gathering point.

Third, head to the location of the treasure indicated by the map he had completed in the third realm.

Fourth, find a way for Li Qianlin to survive out in the open.

These were the four main tasks Zhang Lie had set for himself.

He retrieved the map of the fourth realm that he had obtained from Hong Tianqi and cross-referenced it with the third-realm treasure map. The map encompassed essentially the entire world, with detailed coordinates about every location of interest.

After all, the treasure map was composed of almost a hundred thousand fragments, each about the size of a finger. Even Zhang Lie had to spend multiple days piecing the puzzle together, but the bright side was that the resulting map was stunningly detailed.

Zhang Lie intended to head in the direction of the treasure and hope that he found a gathering point along the way.

As far as he knew, there were over 130 gathering points in the fourth realm, some of which had been destroyed and some of which were newly built. Based on Hong Tianqi's map and his own past life, he identified the location of a few gathering points on his map.

He glanced at the map and charted his path, jumping aboveground via the hole he had punched deep underground.

All he saw was a pile of old ruins.

"So that's how it is."

Evidently, this gathering point had once been a city, but which had subsequently been destroyed by a beast stampede or a particularly strong genetic lifeform. The city constructed by the hunters of the Milky Way was unable to withstand its might and had turned into a pile of ruins instead. The hunters of the Milky Way escaped underground—compared to the perilous surface, the threats underground were at least less frequent.

This was likely the source of the underground gathering point. The moment Zhang Lie leapt out of the hole, he sensed a few lifeforms nearby. They were hairless, their skin wrinkled, their eyes glowing in green. Their faces were ugly and sharp, and they looked somewhat like apes. The lifeforms emerged from the ruins upon sensing an intruder.

"I don't much like humanoids..."

Zhang Lie sounded like a god of death passing judgment on the condemned. Black genetic energy snaked down his body and toward the apes. Thick dark clouds surrounded him, reaping countless lives like a reaper's scythe.

Before the apes could react, their bodies had already fallen to the ground, swiftly decomposing.

Some more apes emerged from the ruins, screeching in anger. They leapt toward Zhang Lie, their claws raking the air.

"[Ninecarp Transformation]!"

A black serpent materialized behind Zhang Lie, by now so large and so developed that it resembled the world-swallowing serpent Jormungandr. It let out a threatening hiss as its scales clicked together.

The serpent's tail sent all the apes flying away. As they struck the ground, their bodies decomposed rapidly.

Zhang Lie's genetic energy had grown even stronger than before. The black genetic energy was like lethal poison. The other apes, scared by the danger he clearly possessed, fled in fear. The apes that had pounced toward him likewise dragged their decaying bodies away.

Zhang Lie didn't chase after them; he didn't much like consuming humanoid lifeforms, and there would be little need to kill them.

However, it would be difficult for any of those apes struck by his attacks to live. The corrosive black genetic energy would continue ravaging their bodies—the apes would die in fear and pain, watching as their lives seeped away.

As Zhang Lie headed in the direction of the treasure, he encountered five regular-grade lifeforms and two mutated-grade lifeforms, all of which he killed.

[You successfully killed a regular-grade roc. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade roc, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a regular-grade galewind ape. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade galewind ape, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a regular-grade pigeon of rains. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade pigeon of rains, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade mosswind tiger. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade mosswind tiger, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade haunted vulture. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade haunted vulture, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

After killing those lifeforms, Zhang Lie saw the apes from before reappear in his vision. They tossed rocks at Zhang Lie, but those rocks were crushed to powder by his genetic energy before they could land.

The apes clapped and cheered. Clearly, tossing rocks at Zhang Lie was something that brought them great pleasure.

"I heard that apes kept long grudges, that if you ever hurt an ape in a colony, the others would continue pestering the assailant for good. Well, let's see just how many apes are in your colony for me to put down."

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Zhang Lie punched forward, and the black serpent behind him shot forth. A huge serpent shot toward the apes, opening its maw wide and biting their heads off one by one.

Chapter 1302: Another Beast Stampede

spot, raising its arms high into the air as it tried to attack Zhang Lie.

Without turning around, as though already having predicted the attack, Zhang Lie casually waved an arm, sending the huge figure flying. Simultaneously, three other figures launched a sneak attack at Zhang Lie from different angles.

Blue genetic energy gathered around Zhang Lie as space vibrated. The ripples formed a protective barrier around him, shielding him from the three figures' attacks. As he flicked his wrist, the barrier shattered, and the three figures were sent flying.

The skies suddenly darkened as a fish the size of a whale materialized in the air.

Howling winds blew past the ruins. As more and more ripples surged from Zhang Lie's arms, he saw a few hairless apes about an order of magnitude larger than the ones he had sent flying.

The four apes howled and screeched as Zhang Lie manifested a whirlpool of blue genetic energy that grew stronger every second.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!"

A huge wave soared into the air. As Zhang Lie punched the ground, the fish that manifested from his Ninecarp Transformation slammed its huge tail on the ground and sent a torrent of water surging.

Ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him. The towering waves looked like enraged black dragons, flooding the ruins.

As the waves burst apart, the air filled with echoes of Zhang Lie's signature genetic energy, shattering space and swallowing up all life in its vicinity. The apes were obliterated; rubble and flesh rained down from the skies.

[You successfully killed a regular-grade evil ape. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade evil ape, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a regular-grade evil ape. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade evil ape, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade evil ape. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade evil ape, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

The will of the fourth realm's announcements rang out in Zhang Lie's head.

After dealing with the apes, Zhang Lie returned to the disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard and had Li Qianlin prepare the carcasses. After Zhang Lie consumed them all, his gene fragments increased considerably.

Zhang Lie: an emperor-grade lifeform

Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (pinnacle), Blade of the Heavens (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 50; Mutated, 30; Superior, 0; Peak, 0; Disaster, 0; Monarch, 0; Emperor, 0

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wyrms (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Dragonwhale (disaster), Mistmeld Clam (disaster)

Zhang Lie continued proceeding onward. Suddenly, the ground quaked and shuddered.

Countless mutated-grade lifeforms and a large group of regular-grade lifeforms were rushing straight toward him, with no care for their lives.

Zhang Lie smiled with his teeth. "More food, so quickly?"

Pale blue water-attuned genetic energy flashed by his fingertips. As he waved his pointer finger, sword energy erupted like a wave, easily cutting apart the lifeforms before him.

[You successfully killed a regular-grade blackwind demon. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade blackwind demon, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade blackscale leopard. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade blackscale leopard, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a regular-grade blackwind mantis. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade blackwind mantis, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a regular-grade darkwind spider. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade darkwind spider, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade inkruner tiger. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade inkruner tiger, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

Just as Zhang Lie finished collecting their carcasses, he found that more had appeared over the horizon.

"How lucky I am today!"

Zhang Lie discovered that the genetic lifeforms were all heading in a certain direction.

"Another beast stampede?"

Beast stampedes were somewhat frequent events in the fourth realm, thanks to the large population of genetic lifeforms there.

"A superior-grade stampede?!"

Zhang Lie discovered that the main thrust of the stampede was a group of superior-grade lifeforms. There were some mutated-grade ones in the mix, but they were by far the minority. Zhang Lie even found quite a few peak-grade lifeforms in the mix.

This particular horde was formed of at least ten different races of superior-grade lifeforms.

"They must be going somewhere interesting..."

A group of superior- and mutated-grade lifeforms was heading straight for Zhang Lie.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

Zhang Lie extended his pointer finger like a sword, and water-attuned genetic energy gathered around it. As he waved his finger, sword energy erupted like a wave, sending the superior-grade lifeforms flying back with a spray of water.

The water transformed into deadly blades that pierced through lifeform after lifeform. A shark swam forth and opened its bloody maw, tearing the mutated-grade lifeforms in front apart.

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade inkruner tiger. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade inkruner tiger, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade blackscale leopard. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade blackscale leopard, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade madhowl lion. By consuming the flesh of the mutated-grade madhowl lion, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

After the lone superior-grade lifeform was sent flying by the attack, it roared and leapt toward him despite the severe injuries it had sustained.

"[Ninecarp Transformation: Golden Tiger]!"

The image of a golden tiger appeared behind Zhang Lie's back, and its roar echoed through the air. A golden aura suffused Zhang Lie. A mountain of blades rested atop the tiger's back, and Zhang Lie's body itself underwent a transformation. His hair turned silvery-white, until they became akin to silver needles.

His genetic energy likewise became more honed. Silvery-white genetic energy gathered over his body, and tigers' stripes appeared on his arms. His eyes became those of a tiger's, and steely sharpness erupted from every pore.

He slammed a palm forward, cutting the superior-grade lifeform's body into three. It fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade inkruner tiger. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade inkruner tiger, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie's actions roused the attention of a number of other lifeforms, which all pounced toward him.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Concentrated genetic energy solidified into sharp silver crystals.

Zhang Lie sent a flurry of punches forward. The sharp silver crystals quickly pierced through the incoming horde like a rain of sharp blades, cutting them apart as easily as a block of tofu.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade inkruner tiger. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade inkruner tiger, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade blackscale leopard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade blackscale leopard, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade madhowl lion. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade madhowl lion, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

Chapter 1303: Another Gathering Point

Zhang Lie leapt high into the air and vaulted between the genetic lifeforms, many of which pounced toward him.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Chunks of crystal appeared over Zhang Lie's head, reflecting light in five colors, so dazzling it dazed any who looked at it, so beautiful it sparked their desire.

More and more crystals formed above Zhang Lie's head.

As Zhang Lie manipulated space, the crystals shot out in the form of sharp daggers, tearing apart sky and space, in a rain of crystals that were able to penetrate anything thanks to Zhang Lie's mastery of space.

The genetic lifeforms below cried out in pain and shock.

Zhang Lie raised his head and saw the target of the stampede: a city standing tall in the distance, though it remained unclear whether it was a city of genetic hunters or of aliens.

A peak-grade lifeform emerged from the midst of the pack, its black scales layered like armor. It pounced forward, its mouth wide, revealing layer after layer of sharp teeth.

The crystals were unable to pierce through its thick, scaly armor—rather, they crashed into its hide with crystalline plinks.

This peak-grade lifeform's defense had to be incredible if it were capable of blocking those crystals.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!"

As Zhang Lie cocked his fist, dozens of crystalline dragons formed behind his back, roaring in unison and causing the sky to tremble. The next moment, they shot out through his fists, straight toward the peak-grade lifeform.

With a huge explosion, the peak-grade lifeform screamed in pain. Its head had caved in.

Zhang Lie didn't stop. In a single moment, he had launched a flurry of punches, all of which seemed to have been executed in the blink of an eye, and each of which transformed into a beautiful crystalline dragon.

The dragons' crystalline scales flashed in the sunlight. They hammered away at the peak-grade lifeforms' defense—no matter how strong it was, it couldn't withstand the might of a hundred such dragons coming at it at once.

The peak-grade lifeform was mashed into meat paste.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade black-armored rhinoceros. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade black-armored rhinoceros, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Suddenly, as plumes of dust rose into the air, an armored bug charged straight toward Zhang Lie. Its squirming body knocked aside all nearby lifeforms as its momentum carried it toward an impending impact.

The next moment, Zhang Lie vanished from the spot.

Pitch-black genetic energy exploded around him and transformed into a black cyclone that began to widen with every moment. Many nearby lifeforms shrieked and screamed as they were dissolved.

"[Ninecarp Transformation]!"

A black serpent materialized behind Zhang Lie, by now so large and so developed that it resembled the world-swallowing serpent Jormungandr. It let out a threatening hiss as its scales clicked together.

Black genetic energy spread out in front of the armored bug, but it managed to push through the mist and continue charging straight at Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie punched forward and knocked the armored bug away. His black serpent twined around it.

A hurricane of blood and gusts of hot wind spawned around him as Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards.

The next moment, Zhang Lie vanished from sight. Bloody swipes appeared all over the armored bug's body.

Zhang Lie had transformed into a dragonwolf with russet fur and limbs covered with a dragon's scales, and a dragon's horns grew out of his forehead.

Before the armored bug could land on the ground, it had been split open by his claws.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade armored sandstorm beetle. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade armored sandstorm beetle, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie turned and rushed off straight toward the city. Bloody swipes appeared where he passed by, slashing the unfortunate lifeforms in his way to pieces.

The city was suffering from an unprecedented crisis of lifeforms all around. A dark mass of lifeforms, almost so many as to form a sea, was headed straight for the city.

Lin Lingfeng's eyes clouded over with despair. [1]

The hunters of the Milky Way had worked hard together to build a city that had lasted three decades. It had overcome disaster after disaster—but this crisis didn't look like one would survive.

This time, Lin Lingfeng didn't think they would be lucky enough to scrape by.

There were far too many genetic lifeforms present, and a large number of peak-grade ones, too.

Unlike what happened at Zhang Lie's gathering point, this gathering point wouldn't fall because the leader perished. Lin Lingfeng, the leader of this city, had been directing the hunters to fight all along—but there were simply so many lifeforms and so few hunters that some were already starting to flee via the teleportation apparatus.

With a huge bang, a wall that guarded part of the city collapsed. Lightning forked through the air, causing the most well known hunters of the city to be knocked flying. This particular lifeform was too strong—all the hunters in the city were working together, but even combined, were unable to stop its assault.

The lifeform was beyond peak-grade in strength, and might even be the legendary disaster-grade, able to wreck a city on its own.

Lin Lingfeng, standing at the top of the city, saw the ferocious lifeform invading it from below. A stampede of lifeforms followed behind in the devastation it had caused. In her heart, she knew that this city was doomed.

Her aide urged, "We'd better run! We can't save this city."

"Where could we go?" Lin Lingfeng sighed.

"We'll be able to escape to the nearest gathering point if we leave now!"

Lin Lingfeng smiled wryly, mockingly. "It won't be easy to escape from all these lifeforms surrounding us."

Her companion fell silent.

Indeed, even if they were to break out, how would they be able to survive in the cruel, hellish landscape of the fourth realm without any shelter?

Lin Lingfeng sighed mournfully. "All of you should leave. I'll stay behind. As the leader of this city, I'll rise and fall with it. Your trust and expectations still buoy me, after all."

Her companion cried out, "If you die, there won't be anything left!"

"You're right, but I still have to stay here and defend the city. Every additional second I endure might make the difference between life and death for the rest of you—hold on, what's that?!"

Lin Lingfeng looked toward the crowd of lifeforms, at the sky shining with crystal shards, falling onto the lifeforms like rain.

Her companion cried out, "An even stronger genetic lifeform?!"

The genetic hunters still defending the city began to panic.

The peak-grade lifeform that had brought down an entire wall by itself was despairing enough, but now there was an even more mysterious lifeform out there, too?

Lin Lingfeng looked toward the stampede, at the lifeforms that were now slumped over, as hope welled up from her heart once more.

"No, that's not a genetic lifeform."

The silver storm of crystals was slaughtering the stampede of lifeforms in huge swathes.

"What could it be, then?"

"Hold on, it's heading straight for us!"

Chapter 1304: Hidden True Form

Lin Lingfeng could see a flurry of bloody claws tracing a path forward. Where it passed through, the genetic lifeforms all around would fall. It was a blood-colored dragonwolf, and Lin Lingfeng was hard-pressed to believe that this was a genetic hunter—not because the dragonwolf wasn't humanoid, but rather because it was simply too strong.

There were countless non-humanoid races among the hunters of the Milky Way, some even stranger than most genetic lifeforms themselves. However, the dragonwolf was unreasonably, unbelievably strong. It took the lifeforms down as if it were a farmer tilling his field, as though they were made of papier mache.

Zhang Lie headed straight toward the bulk of the lifeforms up ahead, the blade Guicang in his hand. As he slashed forward, the lifeforms fell like cut wheat.

The genetic hunters were terrified by the sight. "What in the world...?"

Blades of light were sweeping across the field and sending huge swathes of lifeforms to their death.

This was no ordinary stampede, but rather one composed mainly of superior- and peak-grade lifeforms.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade inkruner tiger. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade inkruner tiger, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade blackscale leopard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade blackscale leopard, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade madhowl lion. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade madhowl lion, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

The announcements of the will of the fourth realm continuously rang out in Zhang Lie's head.

The lifeform in the lead, which had taken down an entire wall by itself, slowly looked back. It looked like a huge octopus, surrounded by electricity, but where its tentacles would have been were snake heads instead.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

Water-attuned genetic energy wrapped around Guicang. As Zhang Lie struck, the sword energy fell from the heavens like a waterfall.

The octopus sprayed out an electrified discharge that clashed against Zhang Lie's sword. The resulting explosion cut apart even more of the city walls.

The density of lifeforms in the vicinity meant that, as Zhang Lie took on the electrified octopus, he was slaughtering a huge group of lifeforms incidentally as well. The will of the fourth realm kept making announcements in his head.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade inkruner tiger. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade inkruner tiger, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade blackscale leopard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade blackscale leopard, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade madhowl lion. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade madhowl lion, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

To Zhang Lie's surprise, even though he hadn't put much strength into his probing blow, the octopus had managed to deflect it completely.

"It must be beyond an ordinary peak-grade lifeform, but it doesn't seem to be disaster-grade just yet."

Zhang Lie's experience allowed him to ascertain the nature of the genetic lifeform very quickly.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!"

He raised the blade in his hand high into the air, encircled by black genetic energy. The temperature of the air dropped to sub-zero values, and a strong wind buffeted all combatants present. Blood-colored frost appeared around them all.

An underworld river materialized in the air. As though the doors to hell had just been thrown open, tens of thousands of serpents rushed out in a flood.

The octopus's eight snake heads all sprayed out lightning, which crackled around it like an electrified web.

The lightning continuously destroyed Zhang Lie's black serpents, but the serpents could reform quickly and near-endlessly from the remnants of Zhang Lie's genetic energy.

Suddenly, eight pillars of lightning emerged from underground.

Moving rapidly, Zhang Lie avoided their sneak attack, leaving bloody afterimages behind him.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!"

Pitch-black energy immediately spread outward and suppressed the exploding smoke.

An ocean of genetic energy swallowed up the sky. The genetic hunters all looked up as the skies turned dark.

Waves surged forward, sounding like peals of thunder, like stampeding hooves. The surface of the sea frothed with angry waves, like dragons emerging with the tide. The entire sea roiled, and lightning crackled amidst the void. Countless serpents swam across the raging sea as lightning flashed ominously overhead, a scene right out of an apocalypse.

As Zhang Lie struck, an underworld river hurtled into existence, roaring into the sea. The sword energy roiled like black waves.

The sea had morphed into a boundless battlefield. The sea breeze was as a horn to action, and the serpents, thousands of courageous soldiers heeding its call.

The netherworld sea covered up the lightning and swallowed the octopus.

Countless black serpents tore at the octopus's body, black genetic energy corroding away flesh and blood. The octopus released another field of lightning as a protective barrier, but there were so many serpents that it was losing the fight bit by bit.

The ground shook and burst apart in an explosion of lightning—not from aboveground, but from below. Crackling strikes shot straight at Zhang Lie.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!"

Zhang Lie thrust forward with Guicang, summoning a blood dragon and tearing apart lightning and the space in front of him.

A dragon's roar shook the sky as the pitch-black genetic energy turned blood-red. The underworld sea roiled, forming a gigantic blood dragon, its jaws wide open and its claws poised to swipe. The lightning storm was sucked into the midst of Zhang Lie's attack.

The blood dragon tore apart the ground and lacerated the octopus's prone body.

The genetic hunters within the city watched on in shock. The lifeform that all of them working together had been unable to counter, Zhang Lie was dealing with one on one. This couldn't be a genetic hunter!

Zhang Lie frowned. The will of the fourth realm had yet to make an announcement in his head, and it was clear that [The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath] hadn't killed the octopus-like lifeform. Zhang Lie discovered the trick quickly; his gaze turned underground.

"[First Form: Parting the River]!"

Bright sword energy radiated from Zhang Lie like brilliant rays of sunlight, illuminating the entirety of the city.

A frightening force descended, energy rumbling and rippling around him. As Zhang Lie swung the blade in his hand, a huge slash of sword energy shot downward, splitting apart the ground and leaving a large furrow behind.

Deep underground was a core of energy formed of crackling lightning. Eight thick tentacles extended deep underground, buried like roots.

"As expected, its main body was underground..."

Chapter 1305: Cause of the Stampede

The genetic lifeform had almost reached the point of condensing a disaster-grade core, and it was only one step away.

The moment that core condensed fully, the lifeform would ascend into disaster-grade.

This genetic lifeform was particularly interesting. It existed simultaneously aboveground and belowground—but the part aboveground was a disguise for that belowground. Zhang Lie had initially been tricked by the disguise.

With its core exposed, the genetic lifeform instantly began to panic. It waved its feelers around in an explosion of lightning.

"[Shadow and Light]!"

Zhang Lie whirled around. Time suddenly sped up in his vicinity.

His sword slashes struck so quickly they could barely be seen, slicing off countless roots. Even before the lightning attack finished, Guicang had struck the lifeform's core, causing an explosion of lightning as the lifeform roared.

Zhang Lie next struck with Hanguang, tearing apart the last remnants of the roots and hence the core.

The will of the realm's voice rang out in Zhang Lie's head.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade lightning snake octopus. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade lightning snake octopus, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

The other genetic lifeforms, trembling from Zhang Lie's might, all fled in fear. The hunters cheered.

"[Syzygy]!"

A pitch-black sun appeared behind Zhang Lie, and a blood moon by his feet. His aura was magnified tenfold, and a halo of black sun appeared above his forehead. Natural law seemed to warp around him. Runes likewise appeared on the bloody moon by his feet, forming an intricate array.

Struck by the bloody moonlight, the outskirts of the city grew dim. The genetic lifeforms slowed down dramatically. Under the black sun, the fluctuations in Zhang Lie's genetic energy were enhanced.

Zhang Lie crossed his twin blades. The blood moon resonated with the blade in his left hand, and the black sun with the blade in his right. He simultaneously slashed forward with both blades, forming a huge celestial web and snaring the fleeing lifeforms.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade inkrune tiger. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade inkrune tiger, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade blackscale leopard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade blackscale leopard, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade madhowl lion. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade madhowl lion, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

The genetic hunters within the city, understanding Zhang Lie's intent, rushed out of the city to attack the retreating lifeforms.

From afar, Zhang Lie had seen that the city was clearly constructed in the architectural style of the Milky Way, and it was therefore an ally.

Lin Lingfeng walked up to Zhang Lie with her subordinates. She bowed and said respectfully, "Greetings, Senior. Thank you for your assistance. Otherwise, this city would have suffered a terrible fate."

Zhang Lie asked, "Are you the leader of this gathering point?"

"I am, Senior." Lin Lingfeng bowed again.

Her companion began, "Senior, you—I feel as though I've seen you somewhere before."

Lin Lingfeng turned to her companion in surprise. "You know each other?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I just ascended to the fourth realm, and wouldn't know any hunters within."

Lin Lingfeng's companion suddenly gasped, clutching her mouth in shock. "I know who you are now! You're the Heavenly Monarch Zhang Lie!"

"The Heavenly Monarch Zhang Lie?!" Lin Lingfeng exclaimed.

The nearby genetic hunters, overhearing their conversation, began to murmur to each other.

Zhang Lie corrected, "I'm Zhang Lie, not some Heavenly Monarch or what have you."

Lin Lingfeng's companion smiled. "Heavenly Monarch is a title that those hunters of the Milky Way use to refer to you, in addition to, say, Zenith King, Champion of Humanity, King Zenith, the Limit King, and so on. There are all sorts of nicknames, but I personally prefer Heavenly Monarch."

The other hunters were shocked.

"It really is the Heavenly Monarch Zhang Lie!"

"What Heavenly Monarch?"

"Haven't you been back to the Milky Way recently? You don't even know of Zhang Lie! He's the one who discovered how to absorb disaster-grade cores and who came up with limit-breaking potions!"

"So our savior's a hunter, not an alien?"

"I thought it was an alien myself—when did we hunters grow so strong?"

"Ha! The aliens would rather see us all dead. Why would they bother saving us?"

Zhang Lie said, "If I'm not mistaken, all emperor-related titles are afforded only to fifth-realm hunters."

For instance, Hong Tianqi's title of Martial Sage was only widely recognized after he had ascended to the fifth realm. Whether this title came from the united world federation, from public concordance, or from the dimensional realm itself—that Zhang Lie didn't know.

Information about the fifth realm remained top secret, and no ordinary hunter would be able to access it. Zhang Lie himself had only ended up in the fourth realm in his past life.

Lin Lingfeng's companion patted Zhang Lie's shoulder. "It's only a matter of time before you ascend to the fifth realm. We've just been discussing it in advance!"

Lin Lingfeng frowned. "Qing Lingxue, don't be so forward with Mr. Zhang. He's the savior who saved our city."

Qing Lingxue lowered her head.

Lin Lingfeng frowned. "As far as I know, Mr. Zhang, you should still be in the third realm. How did you end up in the fourth?"

"I just ascended."

Lin Lingfeng gasped. "If I'm not mistaken, you haven't even been in the third realm for two Earth months!"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "But that already corresponds to a few years by the standards of the third realm. It's been plenty of time."

Lin Lingfeng would have doubted anyone else who made such a rash claim, but considering the strength Zhang Lie had just demonstrated, she could hardly say anything. However, she suddenly thought of a problem.

"You've just ascended?"

"That's right. I'm still amassing my basic gene fragments at this point."

Zhang Lie only had about 50 basic gene fragments, but thanks to the stampede, he anticipated that he would be able to max out at least his basic gene fragments in no time.

Lin Lingfeng was stunned once again. Zhang Lie was able to slaughter peak-grade fourth-realm lifeforms without even maxing out his basic gene fragments? Just how strong was he?!

Upon learning of Zhang Lie's identity, the hunters hadn't stopped discussing him.

"Zhang Lie's far too strong! Even the strongest hunters in the city were unable to take down that peak-grade lifeform together, but Zhang Lie killed it himself!"

"Zhang Lie's a legend. He's far too different from the likes of us!"

"He's seen a meteoric rise in the Milky Way. Even the previous highest authority of the united world federation was unable to suppress him—no, he even made Zhang Lie shine brighter! I heard that he ended up in a mental institution after trying to take Zhang Lie down."

"Allegedly, Zhang Lie's even discovered peak limit fragments and Potion #4, but because it's too hard to mass produce, he hasn't shared the recipe with the public."

To be precise, Zhang Lie even had disaster limit fragments after successfully researching Potion #5.

There were quite a few genetic hunters in the fourth realm who revered Zhang Lie.

"He's a legend, a veritable legend! He transformed humanity's place in the second realm. We're no longer prey for the xuluo there, but the lords of the realm! He even constructed a kingdom there.

"Then, he rescued the third realm from a crisis that would have destroyed it all, unifying the three thousand worlds in the process, and creating a new world order. Whenever Zhang Lie ascends, he transforms the realm for good."

Zhang Lie frowned. "There must be something unusual about the city that would tempt a stampede consisting of over a dozen different races to target it. Your best hunters are only around peak-grade, aren't they?"

Peak-grade hunters were actually above average by fourth-realm standards.

After all, fourth-realm hunters hadn't had the benefit of absorbing disaster-grade lifeforms until Zhang Lie appeared on the scene. Although there were countless disaster-grade lifeforms in the fourth realm, they had never tried to take one down.

As a result, in the past, peak-grade hunters were essentially at the apex of strength, which was partially what contributed to humanity's struggles in the fourth realm. When Zhang Lie revealed how to absorb disaster-grade cores, this precarious balance changed.

This was why he had been hailed as a hero of the dimensional realm.

Generally speaking, even if there were a stampede, it shouldn't have been so large. It was implausible that ten different races would gather together to attack a city for no reason—or, in other words, there was definitely a secret within this city.

Lin Lingfeng sucked in a breath. "I'm not too sure about this, but please follow me."

Lin Lingfeng led them down a secret passageway underground.

"This was a passageway that we created as a means of escaping the city in times of need, but not long ago, this popped up."

In the center of the tunnel were three huge flower buds, as beautiful as white jade, emanating glowing green light and filled with a concentrated aura of vitality.

Zhang Lie recognized the plants instantly. "Reindeer moss," he announced.

Lin Lingfeng was shocked. "You know what these are, Sir?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "More or less. I've read about them before. They're a prize for superior- and peak-grade lifeforms, allowing them to undergo a metamorphosis—perhaps even allowing them to evolve straight into disaster-grade lifeforms. However, their effect on genetic hunters is significantly reduced, and they need to be consumed with some supplementary herbs to be of any use."

The reason Lin Lingfeng hadn't given the moss directly to the genetic lifeforms was because these lifeforms were yet too weak to have developed anything beyond the most rudimentary intelligence. The failures of countless genetic hunters in the past had informed future hunters that genetic lifeforms couldn't be reasoned with.

Many had tried to negotiate with them—only to end up being additional food themselves.

There were ten different races of lifeforms in the area, but only three buds of moss. The lifeforms would certainly exhaust each other out by fighting for these prizes—and, after they got hungry, feast on the genetic hunters in the city as a snack.

Lin Lingfeng gave him a thumbs up. "As expected of the creator of limit-breaking potions, you're able to identify herbs and plants that no one in the city even knows about! It's useless to us, so why don't you take it, Sir? At least treat it as our thanks for saving us all. I know it's not much in the grand scheme of things, but please don't refuse us."

"Well, I suppose I can."

Leaving the moss in the city would only cause further trouble.

The city had already been battered, and part of the walls destroyed, thanks to the stampede. It wouldn't be able to withstand another such attack.

After Zhang Lie kept the moss, Lin Lingfeng asked, "Did you come here for a reason, Sir?"

"I'd like to borrow your teleportation apparatus to get back to the Milky Way," Zhang Lie replied.

"Of course! That's not a problem."

After the crisis, the city was a mess, and there was much that Lin Lingfeng would have to deal with. She couldn't remain by Zhang Lie's side. After informing him of the location of the apparatus, she left to direct the cleanup with other hunters.

Beast stampedes were a disaster for genetic hunters, but also a crisis from which they could rapidly grow.

Blood accompanied treasure. The stampedes of the fourth realm were like trials. The penalty for failure was death; the reward for success was rapid growth thanks to both combat experience and the flesh that they left behind.

Zhang Lie had mused that the dimensional realm was like a huge training ground, and the fourth realm one specially designed for trials in the form of beast stampedes.

After the countless battles of the first and third realms, all genetic hunters were veterans that would hardly submit or die so easily to the beast stampedes of the fourth realm. Instead, the stampedes would allow them to hone their strength to the best of their ability.

Rather than rush back to the Milky Way, Zhang Lie first stepped into his disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard and dealt with all the carcasses he had accumulated.

Li Qianlin demonstrated her consummate skill, preparing dish after sumptuous dish for both of them.

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade roc, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 51]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade roc, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 52]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade banewind ape, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 53]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade banewind ape, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 54]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade pigeon of rains, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 55]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade mosswind tiger, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 31]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade mosswind tiger, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 32]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade haunted vulture, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 33]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade haunted vulture, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 34]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade inkscale leopard, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 35]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade inkrune tiger, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 1]

Chapter 1306: Hunters' Base

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade inkrune tiger, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 1]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade inkrune tiger, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 2]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade madhowl lion, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 3]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade black-armored rhinoceros, you received one peak gene fragment. Current total: 1]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade armored sandstorm beetle, you received one peak gene fragment. Current total: 2]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade lightning snake octopus, you received one peak gene fragment. Current total: 3]

Zhang Lie: an emperor-grade lifeform

Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (pinnacle), Blade of the Heavens (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 130; Superior, 100; Peak, 30; Disaster, 0; Monarch, 0; Emperor, 0

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wurm (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Dragonwhale (disaster), Mistmeld Clam (disaster)

Thanks to the stampede consisting of lifeforms of ten different races, Zhang Lie had maxed out his basic gene fragments outright, at 160 points, and was only 20 away from maxing out his mutated gene fragments too. Meanwhile, he lacked 50 superior gene fragments and already possessed 30 peak gene fragments.

After a full meal, Zhang Lie smiled with delight.

Li Qianlin rolled her eyes. "You might be comfortable, but what about me?"

Zhang Lie rubbed Li Qianlin's wrists tenderly, but she slapped away his palms. "Go help me clean up if you're so free!"

"Ah, sorry, I have things to do. See you later!" Zhang Lie escaped from the dragonwhale soulshard, leaving the sighing Li Qianlin behind.

There were many genetic hunters in the city waiting to offer their thanks. Zhang Lie nodded to them all, then returned to the Milky Way.

The teleportation apparatus of the fourth realm wouldn't send the hunters back to their own homes, but rather to a galaxywide base of hunters in the Milky Way.

The base was exceptionally crowded, and all manner of hunters were present there.

Communication among hunters was encouraged so as to facilitate sharing intel or updating maps. The best food and accommodation were offered as amenities, along with all sorts of services for the top hunters.

It was similar to a military base for specialized top-tier troops, but with even more freedom and upgraded amenities. In some sense, it was like a vacation resort for hunters.

However, hunters wouldn't be able to remain in the base indefinitely. After some time, the services and food would no longer be free, and the fee would continue increasing in order to avoid hunters spending too much time relaxing rather than training and fighting, to get so used to luxury as to be unable to get back into top condition back in the dimensional world.

Resting and relaxing was necessary, but overdoing it would be a problem.

The hunters present at the base were elites that had passed through the gauntlet of the first three realms, and they naturally weren't overly tempted by these amenities.

Those hunters who returned from the fourth realm would only spend brief periods of time in the base before returning once more.

Zhang Lie found a transceiver with which to contact Hong Tianqi.

As usual, his secretary picked up. After about ten minutes, Hong Tianqi called back. "Haha, I thought you'd vanish for a long time, but you're already back!"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "You might think it's fast back here in the Milky Way, but a lot of things happened to me in the dimensional world.

"How do you feel about the fourth realm?" Hong Tianqi asked.

"How else? I encountered two beast stampedes, and the gathering point I spawned at was lost to one of them."

Hong Tianqi gaped. "What? You just ascended! How could you have come across two beast stampedes already? I don't know whether to call you lucky or unlucky."

Unlucky, for having encountered two such stampedes; lucky, for having survived both.

"They're part and parcel of the fourth realm, I suppose. I just have to get used to them."

Hong Tianqi was speechless. "It's true that stampedes in the fourth realm are commonplace, but not to his extent."

"So I'm the exceptional one?"

"You've always been exceptional."

"If there's nothing else, I'll hang up now. I still have to register as a fourth-realm hunter."

Newly ascended fourth-realm hunters would have to register their new status with the hunter's guild, which was right in the base. Zhang Lie knew where it was, having gone there before in his past life.

Hong Tianqi replied, "I have a lot of things to do on my end, too. If you encounter any trouble in the base, find some humans. We do still have quite a few hunters in the fourth realm, though most haven't made a name for themselves. If you have extra time, check in on some older gathering points and update their status for me, won't you?"

"Very well. Please help me send word to Zhang Hanxiang and the others in the third realm—tell them that I've ascended and am safe and sound."

Both parties hung up. Zhang Lie went off to finish his registration, which involved filling out an electronic form and taking records of his fingerprints.

The process was automated and conducted entirely via AI, and it was rather straightforward. Just teleporting into the base from the fourth realm basically qualified you for everything.

After finishing the registration, Zhang Lie returned to the city to find that a new wave of lifeforms had approached. This time, it was only half the size of the former, and there were none above peak grade.

Even so, the hunters within the city were having a hard time dealing with them. Most of the stronger hunters had been injured in battle from the previous stampede, and this new one was clearly targeting weak spots left over from the previous one. Genetic lifeforms charged at those weak spots heedless of their lives, and the hunters had no choice but to take down each one as they approached.

Zhang Lie, sensing Lin Lingfeng in command atop the city walls, leapt right up to her side.

"Another beast stampede?" Zhang Lie asked.

Lin Lingfeng smiled wryly. "Two days wasn't enough time to fix the walls. When other lifeforms noticed the gap in our defenses, they rushed over."

In just two days, the city was suffering from another crisis that could overwhelm them.

"Do you need help?"

Lin Lingfeng smiled in delight. "Are you willing to help, Sir?"

"It would be difficult for me to use this teleportation apparatus if your city were destroyed. Recall your hunters."

Chapter 1307: Setting Off Again

Lin Lingfeng was stunned for a moment. If the hunters were to return now, it would be akin to opening the city right up to the genetic lifeforms.

Zhang Lie clarified, "They'd hinder me."

Pale blue genetic energy rippled about Zhang Lie's arms. He flicked his wrists, causing a frightening aura to descend on the world. The sky began to darken, and a fish the size of a whale materialized in the air.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!"

A huge wave soared into the air. As Zhang Lie punched forward, the fish slammed its huge tail on the ground and sent a torrent of water surging.

Ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him. The towering waves looked like enraged black dragons, flooding the land and sweeping countless lifeforms away.

A huge rumble shook the heavens, and the entire world quaked.

As the waves burst apart, the air filled with echoes of Zhang Lie's signature genetic energy, shattering space and swallowing up all life in its vicinity. Huge boulders were sent flying, and the will of the fourth realm sent Zhang Lie a barrage of announcements.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade blackwind mantis. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade blackwind mantis, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade inkspider. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade inkspider, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade titan snail. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade titan snail, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

Only a few peak-grade lifeforms survived the tsunami-like attack.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

Then, Zhang Lie extended his pointer finger like a sword, and water-attuned genetic energy gathered around it.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade blackwind mantis. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade blackwind mantis, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade inkspider. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade inkspider, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade goldenvenom beetle. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade goldenvenom beetle, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Only one genetic lifeform remained, a peak-grade one that was black all over, like a mountain of black metal.

This lifeform had survived not out of overwhelming strength, but rather because of its overwhelming defense. Zhang Lie's attack hadn't managed to take it down in one blow.

Before Lin Lingfeng could be amazed by Zhang Lie's techniques, Zhang Lie had vanished from sight. The next moment, he appeared atop the walking mountain of black metal. Ripples of water encircled his sword. Zhang Lie thrust his hand into a scar left on the surface of the metal mountain, then transmuted his genetic energy.

"[Ninecarp Transformation]!"

A black serpent materialized behind Zhang Lie, by now so large and so developed that it resembled the world-swallowing serpent Jormungandr. It let out a threatening hiss as its scales clicked together.

Black genetic energy surged into the mountain through Zhang Lie's palm, causing it to shudder and quake as the corrosive genetic energy dissolved it from the inside out.

Shortly after, the will of the realm rang out.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade titanium snail. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade titanium snail, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Lin Lingfeng had frozen on the spot. Zhang Lie had just ended a stampede that could have been a city-ending crisis for them in the blink of an eye. Peak-grade lifeforms were nothing more than ants in front of him.

Why was there such a disparity between him and other hunters? Was it because of the disaster gene fragments he had accumulated? Or the power of limit gene fragments?

Lin Lingfeng was tempted to restart her journey from the first realm.

The genetic hunters present had all frozen. Zhang Lie's attacks weren't particularly flashy, but were incredibly strong. The hunters were shocked to see what an apex hunter could do for the first time.

Zhang Lie was right—for someone like him, the participation of ordinary hunters would only hold him back. With them gone, Zhang Lie could attack indiscriminately. Lin Lingfeng was just about to command all hunters outside the city to return and shelter when she found that Zhang Lie had reappeared beside her. "There's no need. They're all gone now."

Only then did Lin Lingfeng realize that all the lifeforms had been turned into carcasses. She was beyond shocked—was this really something a genetic hunter could accomplish?

Zhang Lie began cleaning up the battlefield, keeping the peak-grade and relatively intact superior-grade carcasses for himself and bringing them into the disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard.

Li Qianlin grumbled, "Even more?"

"I'll leave it to you, my dear lady."

Li Qianlin cut apart the carcasses with a practiced hand. Zhang Lie had a sumptuous meal as he filled up his gene fragments.

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade blackwind mantis, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 101]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade inkspider, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 102]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade titanium snail, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 103]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade black-armored rhinoceros, you received one peak gene fragment. Current total: 31]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade armored sandstorm beetle, you received one peak gene fragment. Current total: 32]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade lightning snake octopus, you received one peak gene fragment. Current total: 33]

Zhang Lie: an emperor-grade lifeform

Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (pinnacle), Blade of the Heavens (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 130; Superior, 150; Peak, 70; Disaster, 0; Monarch, 0; Emperor, 0

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wurm (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Dragonwhale (disaster), Mistmeld Clam (disaster)

Zhang Lie had finished maxing out his superior gene fragments and acquired forty more peak gene fragments besides. The peak-grade titanium snail, which Zhang Lie had decomposed with corrosive genetic energy, he had chosen to leave outside—he wasn't interested in consuming sludge.

After his feast, Zhang Lie returned to the city and headed straight for Lin Lingfeng, who was overjoyed to see him again. "You're back, Sir!"

Zhang Lie nodded. "I'd like some peak-grade lifeform meat. I can exchange it for other meat at a two-to-one or even ten-to-one rate. As you know, I killed many genetic lifeforms during the stampede.

Lin Lingfeng frowned. "I'm afraid it won't be so easy. It'll take some time."

"How much time?"

Lin Lingfeng splayed her arms. "I don't know, Sir. You've seen the status of our city for yourself. We just survived a crisis that might have destroyed our city, but a new stampede appeared not two days later. We're short on defenders and can't go out hunting, and no one in the city has any stock left. If they did, they'd have eaten it by now."

The strongest hunters in the city were only on the level of peak-grade lifeforms, and if they wanted to kill a peak-grade lifeform, all the strongest hunters, in addition to a large number of supporting hunters, would have to work together to do so.

This was very different from the second and third realms, largely because in all previous realms, superior- and peak-grade lifeforms largely wandered alone. In the fourth realm, however, such lifeforms tended to roam in packs. Taking down a pack was as tiring as participating in a war.

After killing a peak-grade lifeform, all genetic hunters participating in the kill would be eligible for a piece. As such, no matter how large the lifeform was, there wouldn't be much meat to be shared.

Lin Lingfeng continued, "Sir, as a benefactor who has saved our city twice over, we'll treat you with the utmost respect. If you need peak-grade lifeform meat, I'll gladly arrange a team of the strongest hunters in the city to kill one for you, once I finish dealing with urgent affairs. I'll be able to promise you peak-grade meat within a month."

"Forget it, then. A month is too long."

Zhang Lie hadn't harbored high hopes of obtaining more peak-grade lifeform meat from within the city, so this wasn't much of a disappointment.

"How about mutated-grade meat?"

Lin Lingfeng replied, "That's no problem at all, Sir. There's plenty of such meat available in the city. How much do you need?"

"I simply need two different lifeforms' worth of meat. I can exchange it for six different lifeforms—I have a pretty large supply."

"Please, take it for free, Sir. I have some in my inventory, I believe." Lin Lingfeng retrieved three lifeforms' meat from her extradimensional storage, neither of which were species Zhang Lie had just killed.

As Zhang Lie took the meat, Lin Lingfeng asked, "Sir, would you be interested in becoming the deputy leader of this gathering point? I'd gladly offer up my position as leader if you'd like as well."

If Zhang Lie was willing to be the leader of this gathering point, they wouldn't ever have to worry about stampedes again. If she could, Lin Lingfeng would have exchanged ten such positions in a heartbeat.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I'm not interested in becoming a leader of any gathering points. I have tasks to be done, and a place I'm heading towards."

"Where to, Sir? I'm quite familiar with the vicinity."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I'm going somewhere far away."

"What a pity."

"Why don't you tell me about the locations of nearby peak-grade lifeforms?"

Lin Lingfeng was very grateful that Zhang Lie would ask such a question.

Zhang Lie had killed fifteen such packs of lifeforms near the city. Within the short term, the gathering point would be particularly safe, but as more lifeforms encroached on the area, it would become dangerous again. If they weren't able to repair the city walls before more such lifeforms appeared, they would suffer another city-ending crisis.

However, if Zhang Lie were intending to take down even the peak-grade lifeforms in the vicinity of the city, it would be far harder for any lifeforms to invade.

She hurriedly took out a map of the gathering point and marked the locations of all peak-grade lifeforms she knew of. There were none in the immediate vicinity, of course; otherwise, the city would have long since been destroyed.

Zhang Lie returned to the disaster-grade dragonwhale to find Li Qianlin still cleaning up.

Li Qianlin turned around and asked, "What's the matter?"

Zhang Lie grinned as he took out the mutated-grade meat he had received from Lin Lingfeng.

Li Qianlin groaned.

This was a 'happy' problem to have, in her estimation. She enjoyed being able to see Zhang Lie so often. In the third realm, Zhang Lie had been so busy dealing with problems all around that she had very few opportunities to be with him. Now, however, he popped up so often that Li Qianlin was starting to get a little peeved, especially since he would always bring back a huge quantity of lifeform meat.

Li Qianlin was happy to be able to help Zhang Lie, but she was getting annoyed that Zhang Lie only returned when he needed her to cook. Even so, she made another feast.

Zhang Lie obtained another thirty gene fragments.

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade swordblade tiger, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 131]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade glazed carp, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 133]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade flatstone tiger, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 134]

As he maxed out his mutated gene fragments, Zhang Lie waved to Li Qianlin. "I'll come back soon!"

"Scram!" Li Qianlin shouted back.

Zhang Lie returned to the fourth realm proper and headed off in the direction his map was leading him.

Following Lin Lingfeng's additions to his map, he headed toward the marked peak-grade lifeforms' territory.

The region with the highest density of peak-grade lifeforms nearby was the dark swamp, an area that no ordinary genetic hunter dared brave. Any being from outside the swamp who wandered in would never return.

The superior-grade lifeforms that lived outside the swamp were dark red leeches, each the size of a long snake. They were thick and extremely long, and looked particularly disgusting as they squirmed around the mud of the dark swamp.

"I don't think I could bear to eat those..."

They were too vile for the likes of Zhang Lie, even with the temptation of peak gene fragments.

Zhang Lie had just stepped forward when a group of leeches surged toward him.

Expressionless, Zhang Lie sent a pulse of pitch-black genetic energy spreading out from him. Struck by the corrosive genetic energy, the leeches fled, not daring to draw near.

As Zhang Lie walked deeper into the swamp, he saw all manner of strange superior-grade lifeforms, one of which was a sphere with countless mouths arrayed all over. It didn't look edible, either.

As Zhang Lie stepped into lifeforms' territory, he was surrounded and attacked by those lifeforms. He repelled them all with pulses of pitch-black genetic energy.

There were unusual fish nearby, streamlined, with small eyes, and two protruding lips, each with two petal-like teeth on either side of both lips. Its gills resembled combs with a dense series of tines, and its skin patterned like black flowers.

Chapter 1308: Mudman of the Swamp

Zhang Lie propelled himself off the ground with a layer of black genetic energy. His feet didn't sink into the muddy swamp; even in the swamp, he was able to walk as though over flat land.

The fish that had gathered around him were particularly ugly. The moment he drew close, they swarmed him.

Pitch-black genetic energy surged forth from Zhang Lie like dark clouds, but the ugly fish actually seemed to resist its corrosion.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Zhang Lie punched forward, and the black serpent behind him shot forth through the swamp, leaving a deep furrow behind.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade garbage collector. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade garbage collector, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade garbage collector. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade garbage collector, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade garbage collector. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade garbage collector, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

A number of the garbage collectors were sucked into the serpent's wake.

The ugly fishes' ability to resist the corrosive energy only went so far.

The serpent's appearance summoned a peak-grade garbage collector. Just like its superior-grade brethren, it was streamlined with small eyes and two protruding lips, each with two petal-like teeth on either side of both lips. Its gills resembled combs with a dense series of tines, and its body was black with white spots all over. It was disgusting to behold, and Zhang Lie didn't want to look at such an ugly peak-grade lifeform any longer.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

As Zhang Lie punched forward, a black serpent roared in outrage and shot forward, launching it up and away from the swamp, then straight back down.

As the peak-grade garbage collector landed back in the swamp, it began sucking up the mud from all over, causing a whirlpool to arise over the swamp's surface. The garbage collector's belly swelled. The next moment, it shot out all the mud it had sucked up, spraying it all over. The black serpent tore apart the waterfall of mud, but failed to strike the garbage collector.

As the mud splashed all over, the peak-grade garbage collector shot out from within, heading straight for Zhang Lie like a sharp blade. A poisonous spike shot out of its tail fin.

Zhang Lie clenched his fists tightly and launched a punch.

Mud sprayed from all over his feet. The peak-grade garbage collector was sent flying once more. The black serpent soared up from behind the fish and bit its tail as it rose into the air.

A wave of annihilation exploded around the dragon. Pitch-black energy swallowed up everything in the vicinity like a storm at sea. A black hole sucked up the swamp's mud. No peak-grade lifeform could survive such a devastating explosion, and the will of the realm's announcement rang out in Zhang Lie's head once more.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade garbage collector. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade garbage collector, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie raised his head and looked up at the black hole that had formed in the air. "It looks like I won't be able to consume it, will I?"

Zhang Lie wouldn't have wanted to eat such an ugly fish, at any rate.

The genetic hunters of Lin Lingfeng's city hadn't explored any of the areas beyond the swamp, but most of the scouts predicted that there would be at least two peak-grade lifeforms within, likely more.

Zhang Lie certainly hoped that more would be present; after all, the ones he had encountered weren't edible.

Just as he was about to delve deeper into the swamp, he suddenly stopped. Rather than step forward, he took one step back, then punched in a certain direction.

Black mud erupted dozens of feet into the air.

"Come out!" Zhang Lie called out.

A humanoid figure appeared from deep within the swamp.

"Killing my pet in my territory, and making such a big ruckus about it... it's the first time I've seen such an arrogant lifeform."

Zhang Lie frowned at the humanoid formed out of the swamp mud. "An alien?"

He was shocked that aliens lived within the swamp.

The mudman sneered. "Since you're here, you might as well stay. Have fun playing with my pets.

Five peak-grade lifeforms flew over.

They had the head of mosquitoes and the body of caterpillars. Bug wings to their back allowed them to fly at a surprisingly rapid rate.

The mud beneath Zhang Lie shook as nine black-skinned salamanders emerged, opening their maws wide toward Zhang Lie and sealing off his escape routes.

The next moment, bloody light flared around Zhang Lie.

The unusual mosquito-bugs and black salamanders were quickly torn to shreds.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade caterpillar fly. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade caterpillar fly, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade swamp salamander. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade swamp salamander, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade caterpillar fly. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade caterpillar fly, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade swamp salamander. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade swamp salamander, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

As Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards, he transformed into a dragonwolf with russet fur and limbs covered with dragons' scales. His aura became magnified as a hurricane of blood spawned around him.

The mudman clapped in applause. "Impressive, very impressive! I hadn't expected you to transform."

"There are many things I can do you wouldn't expect."

Thanks to the influence of Zhang Lie's blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards, his black genetic energy had turned a garish blood-red.

Genetic energy burst forth from Zhang Lie as though there were hundreds, thousands of dragons surging throughout his body. Each muscle formed a dragon.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!"

A horde of dragons launched out of Zhang Lie's left arm as he expended half his genetic energy in one supercharged attack.

Howling with the force of thunder, the hundred dragons soared through the air.

They were fierce and domineering, and all hundred of them boasted the power of annihilation.

The mudman transformed the mud of the swamp into a storm that surged toward the hundred dragons.

As they exploded and released bursts of annihilation, the entire swamp became covered in a huge black storm.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade caterpillar fly. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade caterpillar fly, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade swamp salamander. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade swamp salamander, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade garbage collector. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade garbage collector, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade swamp leech. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade swamp leech, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

The will of the fourth realm's announcements continuously rang out in Zhang Lie's head. Clearly, the storm had sucked in lifeforms from all over the swamp. Zhang Lie quickly stored the peak-grade swamp salamander's carcass in his extradimensional storage before it could be sucked up into the storm and destroyed.

As the energy of annihilation dissipated, it revealed a brand-new swamp, the topography of which had changed to such an extent that it didn't look like the old one at all. A huge hole had formed with Zhang Lie at its center, as though a nuclear warhead had been detonated on the site. Black mud fell from the skies and filled up the hole.

Chapter 1309: Follower of Eternal Sun

The mud that fell from the skies glommed together and were reconstituted into a man composed of black mud. "Oh? You're quite strong. Are you interested in becoming my slave?"

Zhang Lie punched the black mudman, who exploded and then reformed. "Your attacks are useless. As long as this dark swamp exists, I'll be able to revive indefinitely."

Zhang Lie smirked. "No existence is invincible. Let me guess—the reason you're able to reconstitute yourself indefinitely, despite my energy of annihilation, is that your core or main body isn't here."

Zhang Lie's words struck home. The black mudman immediately shouted, "Ridiculous!"

"Oh? If you're making such a big fuss, it must mean that I'm right. Let me guess where your core is, then—it must be somewhere in this swamp."

The black mudman snorted. "And so what? This swamp is so large that you can hardly search it all."

"That's fine. I just have to attack the entire swamp—I'll destroy it sooner or later." Zhang Lie unsheathed Guicang and raised it high, causing a rain of blades to fall on impact.

Zhang Lie was carrying out a carpet bombing over the entire swamp.

The rain of blades spread out from all around Zhang Lie. Sooner or later, they would strike the area where the swamp was hidden. The black mudman hurriedly shouted, "Do you know who I am?"

The rain of blades continued.

"I'm an envoy of Eternal Sun, son of Cthaat!"

If Zhang Lie weren't mistaken, Eternal Sun was one of the two strongest and most ancient organizations of the fourth realm. He hadn't expected to encounter them so quickly.

Cthaat's son shouted, "If you don't want to die, submit to me now!"

On his command, the mud from the entire swamp rose up and transformed into a giant. The giant seemed somewhat amorphous, as though the energy of annihilation had been imbued into it. Somehow, the mud giant had absorbed a fraction of Zhang Lie's strength.

"I was going to spend some time digesting your unusual strength, but if you so desperately want to die, so be it!" the black giant roared. A huge palm of mud slammed down on Zhang Lie.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

With a huge flash of sword energy that illuminated the heavens, Zhang Lie cut apart the mud giant's arm. A raging shark swam forward, carried by the sword energy, opening its bloody maw and biting a hole through the mud giant's chest.

Black mud fell over the hole, patching it up but causing the mud giant to shrink significantly in size. As it waved an arm, black mud crested over Zhang Lie like a tsunami.

Zhang Lie leapt up high into the air to avoid the attack. He raised his sword, encircled by black genetic energy.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!"

The temperature of the air dropped to sub-zero values, and a strong wind buffeted the air above the swamp. Blood-colored frost appeared all around.

The black mud was freezing over, bit by bit.

An underworld river materialized in the air. As though the doors to hell had just been thrown open, tens of thousands of serpents rushed out in a flood.

The serpents tore at the mud giant, consuming the mud that made up its body.

Cthaat's son shouted, "I'm an envoy of Eternal Sun, son of Cthaat!"

"You've said that before," Zhang Lie replied, his eyes cold.

"If I perish, my father won't ever forgive you. Eternal Sun itself will be your enemy!"

"I'll look forward to it."

The pitch-black genetic energy expanded as it swallowed up the sky, replacing the dark clouds above the swamp with black genetic energy.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!"

Waves surged forward, sounding like peals of thunder, like stampeding hooves. The surface of the sea frothed with angry waves, like dragons emerging with the tide. The entire sea roiled, and lightning crackled amidst the void. Countless serpents swam across the raging sea as lightning flashed ominously overhead, a scene right out of an apocalypse.

As Zhang Lie struck, an underworld river hurtled into existence, roaring into the sea. The sword energy roiled like black waves.

The sea had morphed into a boundless battlefield. The sea breeze was as a horn to action, and the serpents, thousands of courageous soldiers heeding its call.

The netherworld river swallowed up Cthaat's son in a torrent of darkness.

Deep within the fourth realm, the sea itself roiled, its surface transforming into a giant's face. "Who? Who was it that killed my son?!"

Zhang Lie stepped out of the disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard, having consumed the black salamander's flesh and gaining ten peak gene fragments.

Zhang Lie: an emperor-grade lifeform

Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (pinnacle), Blade of the Heavens (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 80; Disaster, 0; Monarch, 0; Emperor, 0

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wurm (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Dragonwhale (disaster), Mistmeld Clam (disaster)

He sighed. His skill had been so strong that it had destroyed the entire dark swamp. Otherwise, he would have been able to acquire the flesh of an even wider variety of lifeforms.

He set off again, killing two peak-grade lifeforms along the way and obtaining twenty peak gene fragments. Only then did he arrive at the location indicated by the treasure map.

Where the treasure map was located was a barren mountain of rock. At the top of the mountain lived a huge group of superior-grade lifeforms, an army of what seemed to be stone soldiers.

"[Ninecarp Transformation: Golden Tiger]!"

The image of a golden tiger appeared behind Zhang Lie's back, and its roar echoed through the air. A golden aura suffused Zhang Lie. A mountain of blades rested atop the tiger's back, and Zhang Lie's body itself underwent a transformation. His hair turned silvery-white, until they became akin to silver needles.

His genetic energy likewise became more honed. Silvery-white genetic energy gathered over his body, and tigers' stripes appeared on his arms. His eyes became those of a tiger's, and steely sharpness erupted from every pore.

Zhang Lie transformed into a beam of silver light as he shot into the midst of the stone soldiers, bisecting them at their waist.

Although their exterior was that of stone, their interior was a body of flesh and blood.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade stone soldier. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade stone soldier, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade stone soldier. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade stone soldier, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade stone soldier. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade stone soldier, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

The announcements of the will of the fourth realm continuously rang out in Zhang Lie's head.

As Zhang Lie continued his indiscriminate slaughter, he quickly aroused the attention of the leader of the army. A spear flew whistling through the air.

Over Zhang Lie's palm, concentrated genetic energy solidified into sharp silver crystal spears, which he tossed forward.

His spears knocked aside the stone spears as they shot deep into the mountain.

Zhang Lie followed straight behind the spears. Deep within the stone mountain was a huge soldier, at least ten times the size of those outside, but with a hole perforating its shoulder—clearly the result of the crystal spear Zhang Lie had tossed.

The peak stone soldier lifted a huge boulder and was right about to throw it at Zhang Lie.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Suddenly, Zhang Lie punched forward. Sharp silver crystal pierced through the soldier's head, which burst open. Its arms wobbled as it staggered, but it stabilized itself by taking a step forward. So heavy was its body that the ground under its foot cracked. It tossed its boulder, but its target had long since vanished.

Zhang Lie had appeared behind the soldier's back.

The will of the realm hadn't rung out; Zhang Lie immediately understood that his attack hadn't been enough to kill the peak-grade head soldier. He immediately rushed to the soldier's back.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

A crystal wall appeared behind Zhang Lie, reflecting light in five colors, so dazzling it dazed any who looked at it, so beautiful it sparked their desire.

As Zhang Lie manipulated space, that crystalline genetic energy shot out of the wall behind him in the form of sharp daggers, in a rain of crystals that were able to penetrate anything thanks to Zhang Lie's mastery of space.

The daggers tore through space in a storm of silver, causing rubble and boulders to explode. After a series of explosions, the will of the realm finally announced belatedly,

[You successfully killed a peak-grade stone soldier. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade stone soldier, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

However, the peak-grade stone soldier's body was a mess of blood and flesh, and its flesh had combined with the stone powder in the vicinity. It was, again, inedible.

Zhang Lie was having a hard time consuming peak-grade flesh. He was so strong that peak-grade lifeforms were unable to withstand his attacks, and he could beat them to a pulp before they could do a thing.

He searched for quite some time around the stone mountain, but didn't discover an entrance that seemed to lead to the purported treasure.

"It looks like I'll have to destroy the whole mountain, then."

He had painstakingly accumulated the pieces of the treasure map, then traveled all this way to the location of the treasure. Even if he had to dig three feet underground, he would uncover the treasure at any cost.

Zhang Lie rose into the sky, leaping up from the tip of the stone mountain. From high in the air, he condensed his genetic energy in the form of sharp white crystals that floated around his body.

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!

As Zhang Lie cocked his fist, dozens of crystalline dragons formed behind his back, roaring in unison and causing the sky to tremble.

The next moment, they shot out through his fists, smashing into the rock mountain and obliterating it within moments, thanks to hundreds of explosions that rang out all throughout.

"It really does exist, after all!"

There was a door hidden deep below the rubble of the mountain.

It wasn't clear whether the rock mountain had formed naturally, or was intentionally designed to hide this door.

Zhang Lie opened the door and stepped inside, only to see six different colors of light. The red light scorched like flame, the black light was as heavy as the earth, the purple light was charged with lightning, the blue light flowed like water, the pale white light felt like living frost, and the golden light let out a blinding glow.

These six different lights came from six different rocklike lifeforms, each of which was above peak-grade, and with a gem embedded in the head of each one.

A ruby was embedded in the forehead of a stone qilin; an onyx, a black tortoise; an amethyst, a lion; a sapphire, a dragon; a diamond, a tiger; a topaz, an ox.

The gems flashed with light, as though forming a hexagonal formation.

Suddenly, the gemstones all glowed with incredible light, suffusing each other with energy. The stone qilin opened its mouth wide and sprayed out scorching heat. From its attack, Zhang Lie could tell that it went beyond peak-grade and was now disaster-grade.

Zhang Lie punched forward with a fist, cleaving the flames.

Next, the amethyst lion summoned a field of lightning around itself as it charged forward. Not only was it strong, it was blindingly fast.

"[Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]!"

The image of a dragonturtle manifested behind Zhang Lie, and his water-attuned genetic energy turned heavy, sluggish, and a dark yellow color. Ripples of genetic energy spread out all around him like mud, slowing down the lion to such an extent that it almost seemed to stop entirely..

Zhang Lie kicked through the shield of lightning and sent the lion flying away.

The onyx tortoise slammed the ground with a claw. A crack propagated toward Zhang Lie.

"[Rune: Gravity]!"

Zhang Lie raised an arm high into the air once more, and the image of a dragonturtle manifested behind him. Runic tablets crashed down onto the ground, preventing the crack from spreading.

The interaction between these tablets and the Keys of the Elder Gods had strengthened the power of the tablets immensely. Runes of unknown provenance appeared from the tablets, then floated down and surrounded the tortoise until it was trapped in a localized gravitational field. Each movement would take dozens, hundreds of times its original strength, and those within would feel as though they were shouldering the weight of a huge mountain. The six stone lifeforms slowed down, their power and momentum sapped away.

From earlier observation, Zhang Lie was certain that the reason these supposedly peak-grade lifeforms had been able to employ disaster-grade attacks was because of the gems embedded into each of their foreheads. The gems seemed to have the ability to temporarily transmit the power of all six lifeforms into just one attacker.

If this were true, the gems would undoubtedly be an incredible treasure. As Zhang Lie attempted to confirm this hypothesis, the genetic lifeforms attacked. The sapphire dragon's gem pulsed with blue light as it shot out a jet of compressed water.

Chapter 1310: The Six Gemstones

Zhang Lie weathered the current, then charged forward and kicked at the stone dragon.

The stone dragon was protected by a watery barrier of energy, which deflected Zhang Lie's attack.

Zhang Lie was shocked to find that the six genetic lifeforms were linked both in terms of attack and defense. The stone dragon swept its tail, spawning a current.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!"

Before he released his punch, the ground began to quake. Gravity distorted in the vicinity of the space, and the stone dragon was sent flying. Zhang Lie's fist struck the ground, which cracked and split.

As the ground beneath the water dragon broke apart, the dragon barely avoided falling into the resulting hole.

The six stone lifeforms charged forward, led by the diamond tiger.

"[Rune: Control]!"

The two gravity-controlling tablets smashed into the ground. Black ripples emanated from the two gravity-altering tablets, forming a localized region of distorted gravity.

The six stone lifeforms, caught unawares by the gravitational distortion, fell to the ground.

The stone tiger was the first to adapt. The other lifeforms' gems all shone. As the lifeforms shared their energy, the stone dragon spat out a howling blizzard.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Having invoked the dragonturtle transformation, Zhang Lie's genetic energy had turned mud-yellow. His punches were all but unstoppable, and the heavy blow shattered the incoming attack.

Simultaneously, the mud-yellow punch, imbued with gravity, sent the six stone lifeforms flying again.

The six stone lifeforms were clearly divided based on element, and Zhang Lie was certain that that was the crux to dealing with them. One of the elements was the weakest—it might have been the obvious choices of fire and lightning, which generally had the strongest offensive abilities, or even the exact opposite, earth and water, which generally had the strongest defensive abilities.

Zhang Lie didn't know precisely how the elements of these lifeforms interacted with each other, and neither did he want to figure it out. Rather, he would simply use brute force.

The topaz ox rushed forward, its gem glowing with light, augmenting its strength and allowing it to charge forward despite Zhang Lie's gravity manipulation.

The gem's golden light transformed the stone oxen into a golden one.

"[Rune: Control]!"

The image of a dragonturtle appeared before him as Zhang Lie raised his hand. Ripples spread out from the two tablets, sealing the lifeform's will and power.

The six lifeforms found their own strength dropping and their thoughts slowing down.

Zhang Lie charged forward. His fists landed on the golden ox with the sound of a tolling bell.

The ox tried to impale Zhang Lie on its horns, but he pulled aside.

As Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards, he transformed into a dragonwolf with russet fur and limbs covered with dragons' scales. His aura became magnified as a hurricane of blood spawned around him.

He swiped forward with bloody claws, slashing at the golden ox's tough exterior, leaving long scars on its body, trailing with sparks. The golden ox was entirely suppressed, without the ability to counterattack.

The remaining five genetic lifeforms attacked simultaneously in an attempt to free the golden ox, but they had already transferred their energy to it. At this point, their attacks were weaker than even those of superior-grade lifeforms, and Zhang Lie nullified it easily. The golden ox's body grew scarred under Zhang Lie's rapid-fire attacks.

The resonance between the six gemstones was indeed incredible, tethering the six lifeforms' energy and strength together. It was able to give one of the six lifeforms disaster-grade offense and defense, but Zhang Lie himself was beyond disaster-grade, and could take it on by brute force.

"[Rune: Resonate]!"

The four dragonturtle tablets began to resonate as one, sending ripples that melded with the space and forming an absolute domain over all things within and without.

The six genetic lifeforms' attacks stopped short.

Zhang Lie tore the topaz off the golden ox's head, causing it to scream as its energy weakened dramatically. It transformed back into a stone ox. With the topaz removed, the other gemstones' luster also faded, along with the lifeforms' energy.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Zhang Lie punched forward, manifesting a blood-colored dragonturtle, which crushed the stone ox near-instantly.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade sturdy ox. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade sturdy ox, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

The blood-colored dragonturtle continued charging forward with the energy of annihilation. Suppressed by the four runic tablets, the other five lifeforms couldn't even escape. They were smashed to bits as well.

The gems on their foreheads fell to the ground as the will of the realm's voice rang out in Zhang Lie's head.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade flaming qilin. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade flaming qilin, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade earthen blackturtle. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade earthen blackturtle, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade lion of lightning. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade lion of lightning, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade deepsea dragon. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade deepsea dragon, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a peak-grade whitefrost tiger. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade whitefrost tiger, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie picked up the fallen gemstones, prepared to study them carefully. Perhaps he would be able to reproduce that incredible ability linking the six lifeforms and confer it on the members of Team Zenith.

As he picked up the gemstones, Zhang Lie found to his surprise that the stone lifeforms were similar to the stone soldiers outside. The interior of their bodies was flesh and blood, but whereas the soldiers were natural, these stone lifeforms were clearly manmade.

In other words, the six lifeforms were originally ordinary lifeforms of different elements that were subsequently captured and sealed inside stone using some special technique, in order to use them as guardian beasts.

Just then, a door before him swung open. Zhang Lie smiled. "This is an invitation, isn't it?"

He certainly wasn't going to resist.

However, before that, he intended to bring the lifeforms back into the disaster-grade dragonwhale's soulspace, so as to increase his strength.

Li Qianlin made another sumptuous feast, and Zhang Lie devoured it all.

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade flaming qilin, you received one peak gene fragment.

Current total: 101]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade sturdy ox, you received one peak gene fragment. Current total: 111]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade lion of lightning, you received one peak gene fragment.

Current total: 121]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade earthen blackturtle, you received one peak gene fragment.

Current total: 131]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade deepsea dragon, you received one peak gene fragment.

Current total: 141]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade whitefrost tiger, you received one peak gene fragment.

Current total: 150]

Zhang Lie: an emperor-grade lifeform

Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (pinnacle), Blade of the Heavens (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 150; Disaster, 0; Monarch, 0; Emperor, 0

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wyrms (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Dragonwhale (disaster), Mistmeld Clam (disaster)

Having maxed out his peak gene fragments, Zhang Lie stepped through the door.

The door was surrounded by a layer of spatial energy, which teleported Zhang Lie to an independent space that seemed like a small world. The ground was littered with skeletons and broken pieces of armor, and a gigantic black nine-headed lion guarded an imposing set of doors.

The doors seemed like the gateway to hell. They were formed of skulls and chains, and gave off a chilly aura. The black nine-headed lion seemed to be made of black steel. It released incredible pressure just by sitting there.

The moment Zhang Lie appeared, the dozing lion opened its eyes wide and released a black aura around itself. Its formless pressure seemed to bear down on Zhang Lie with the weight of a mountain.

As black energy swamped the small world, the nine-headed lion pounced forward with incredible strength. From the aura it gave off, it was unquestionably a disaster-grade existence.

As it did so, the land cracked apart. Its black claws were charged with killing intent. Boulders large and small were hurled into the air and sent smashing toward Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie waved a hand, sending the rubble back toward the nine-headed lion. He darted among the rocks and landed on the black lion's body as naturally as though he were a floating leaf, then grabbed it by its mane.

The nine-headed lion howled. Light shone all over its body as it shook Zhang Lie off. Zhang Lie summoned pale blue genetic energy over his arms. He flicked his wrists, causing a frightening aura to descend on the world. The hall began to darken, and a fish the size of a whale materialized in the air.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!"

A howling gale swept over the arena. As more and more genetic energy gathered around Zhang Lie's arms, it looked as though he were at the heart of a whirlpool.

A huge wave soared into the air. As Zhang Lie punched forward, the fish slammed its huge tail on the ground and sent a torrent of water surging.

Ripples of energy from [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar] spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him. The towering waves looked like enraged black dragons, flooding the enclosed space.

As the waves burst apart, the air filled with echoes of Zhang Lie's signature genetic energy. The nine-headed lion fell from the skies, and its crystalline body cracked.

It roared so loudly and ferociously that an ordinary hunter's soul might have been expelled from the hunter's body. The fight between Zhang Lie and the lifeform took place over a battlefield of unparalleled size.

Its nine heads howled as one, sending nine waves of umbral energy into the sky.

The ground cracked.

Zhang Lie resisted the attack at full force, then counterattacked. Man and beast chased each other for hundreds of miles as the battlefield grew larger and larger.

The nine heads roared again. The sound waves took on physical form, and golden ripples covered the air.

As Zhang Lie and the lion fought each other off, moving rapidly from one place to the next, the umbral waves caused the surrounding low-lying mountains to crack and fall, and some boulders even burst apart into powder.

The black lion's physique was shocking, and its claws had the power to destroy mountains. When those claws smashed into Zhang Lie's fist, the resulting boom could be heard all throughout the world.

As the lion's body smashed into Zhang Lie's, umbral light encapsulated both combatants.

Zhang Lie had only maxed out his peak gene fragments; on the other hand, his disaster-grade foe was exceptionally strong. It had safeguarded this vault for an eternity and slain the manifold challengers that had come its way. It was halfway to monarch-grade itself.

Its nine heads all widened their jaws to reveal incisors over a meter long. Gleaming light shot right by Zhang Lie's face, scraping his skin and cutting off a few strands of hair. Far into the distance, where the light struck a mountain, the mountain crumbled.

Zhang Lie's heart thumped as he converted his pale-blue genetic energy into a pitch-black version.

"[Ninecarp Transformation]!"

A black serpent materialized behind Zhang Lie, by now so large and so developed that it resembled the world-swallowing serpent Jormungandr. It let out a threatening hiss as its scales clicked together.

His fist smashed into the black lion's incisors with a tremendous clang, as though he had struck steel, or as though a heavenly drum was beating out a rhythm through the skies.

The man and lion fought and fought and fought, summoning winds around them from nothing but the force of their blows. The world shook and trembled.

As they clashed again, the black lion roared, sending a bombardment of sound waves at Zhang Lie. Gritting his teeth, Zhang Lie weathered the assault.

Struck by battle-frenzy, Zhang Lie was fighting as much like a beast as a man. Heated blood pumped through his body, and his eyes were those of a predator's.

As he punched forward, the black serpent behind him shot forth.

The black lion, surprised by the attack, reflexively dodged at extreme speed. It morphed into a bolt of black that pinballed through the air in a rumble of black lightning.

Despite how rapidly it moved, however, the serpent shot forward with destructive energy, cracking a mountain as it shot through its middle.

Dust billowed into the air as a cloud, revealing an ashen lion that had once been black. Large patches of scales had fallen off its body, and one of its heads had almost been smashed open. A terrible wound marred its body, and flowing blood dyed one of its eyes red.

The lion's howls were like thunder. Shining brilliance drowned the sky in gold.

As Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards, he transformed into a dragonwolf with russet fur and limbs covered with dragons' scales. His aura became magnified as a hurricane of blood spawned around him.

The next moment, Zhang Lie vanished from sight and appeared before the lifeform.

Smoke filled the air.

Zhang Lie launched his strongest attack. Within the clouds, lightning crackled.

A huge burst of light dissipated the mist and smoke. Although it hadn't yet truly broken through the disaster-grade threshold, its combat prowess was no laughing matter.

Zhang Lie and the black lion tussled with each other in the sky. This was a dangerous close-combat fight. Zhang Lie rode the lion, gripping its mane tightly as he launched attack after attack at the largest of its heads.

Just then, the black lion howled again. A ball of light—a miniature black lion—shot out toward Zhang Lie with devastating force.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" As Zhang Lie punched forward, a blood dragon roared in outrage and shot forward.

The blood dragon and miniature lion crashed into each other, and the frightening energy that lay dormant within the blood dragon's body surged out.

A wave of annihilation exploded around the dragon. Pitch-black energy swallowed everything in the vicinity like a storm at sea, covering up the sky. The explosion was like a black hole that sucked up everything in sight, land, sea, and sky alike.

The black lion widened its maw and shot out another ray of umbral light, resplendent with energy.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!"

A horde of dragons launched out of Zhang Lie's left arm as he expended half his genetic energy in one supercharged attack.

Howling with the force of thunder, the hundred dragons soared through the air. They were fierce and domineering, and all hundred of them boasted the power of annihilation. The black lion's might was suppressed head-on.

If not for Zhang Lie's fear of destroying the black lion so completely that not even parts of its flesh remained, it would have been pulped.

Zhang Lie grabbed its mane with one hand and smashed a fist into its skull with another in an outpouring of genetic energy.

The black lion howled, its skull caved in and almost cracked entirely open. Its black fur stood on end; one of its heads suddenly grew multiple times larger, like an umbral millstone brimming with light.

It opened its maw, transforming the air before itself into a crackling ocean of lightning.

Zhang Lie unsheathed Guicang and split the ocean into two. In fear, the black lion tried to run, but it was too late. The two heads to its left were chopped off in a fountain of blood.

The lion roared again. Fearful and unwilling to resign itself to its fate, it immediately retreated.

With another slash, two more of its heads on the right were chopped off. The lion howled in pain.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!"

The temperature of the air dropped to sub-zero values, and a strong wind buffeted the two combatants. Blood-colored frost appeared around them.

An underworld river materialized in the air. As though the doors to hell had just been thrown open, tens of thousands of serpents rushed out in a flood, devouring the bruised and battered lion.

[You successfully killed a disaster-grade nine-headed lion. By consuming the core of the disaster-grade nine-headed lion, you may receive one to ten disaster gene fragments.]

When Zhang Lie's serpents dissipated away, they left behind only a single black core. The black core gave off the impression of hell, of mountains of corpses, and was fearful to behold.

Zhang Lie cut his palm with his sword, then dripped blood onto the core. The moment it touched the core, the blood was quickly absorbed into its interior.

It sucked up more and more of Zhang Lie's blood until it turned blood-red.

Zhang Lie opened his wounds again and again until the core became perfectly transparent. Then, he closed his eyes and began pouring concentrated, black genetic energy from his body into the core.

As Zhang Lie clutched the crystalline orb, he felt some unusual sense of kinship with it, as though it was already part of his body.

Zhang Lie swallowed it whole without even daring to chew it. As the core slid down his throat, Zhang Lie felt a fiery, numbing sensation spread throughout his body.

Subsequently, all that energy contained within the core burst apart.

Almost immediately, Zhang Lie took on the color of a boiled prawn.

Blood seeped from his skin and pores, then boiled in the air. The residue detached itself automatically from his body, forming black grains of sand that revolved around him.

His blood boiled, his body swelled, and golden light emanated from his body.