

U. Warlord 1291

Chapter 1291: Xianchen's Lone Blow

"[Night Parade: Hundredfold Echo]!"

A huge number of ghostly figures emerged from Ye Xianchen's body, then simultaneously enveloped her. Her eyes turned ink-black as ghastly winds surrounded her, almost as though she were being possessed. Her short black hair suddenly lengthened.

Pitch-black ghosts crawled over her skin. Ghostly hands dangled as though cursed.

She howled like a banshee, and a demonic shadow appeared behind her.

Right then and there, Ye Xianchen seemed to have transformed into a creature straight out of a nightmare.

"[Madness Claws]!"

Ye Xianchen slammed her palms down on the earth as hundreds of claws emerged from underground and swiped toward Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie stomped on the ground, causing pale blue energy to ripple like the tides, clearing away the claws and leaving behind only a pair of pitch-black eyes staring at him, like those of a malevolent ghost's.

When Ye Xianchen spoke under this transformation, she sounded like a banshee, with eerie undertones that caused all the spectators to shiver.

"Before receiving everyone's training, faced with such a powerful master that I despaired of ever trying to beat him, I would already have surrendered—but now, I'm not fighting alone. Everyone is standing behind me, and I'll defeat you thanks to their hard work and expectations!"

"If you're the hero of justice, then I must have become the great evil you have to defeat," Zhang Lie couldn't help but joke.

"This is my strongest attack!"

Ye Xianchen's body floated into mid-air. She gripped her daggers tightly. As though a demon were descending on the realm, black genetic energy poured from her and manifested in the form of a fierce demonic head.

"[Nightmarish Strike], [Heaven's Judgment], [Darkbane Dragon's Remnants]!"

Wind and storm combined and crackled at the tip of Ye Xianchen's sword, spinning and manifesting in the form of a dragon of shadows and tiger of darkness.

As [Darkbane Dragon's Remnants] exploded, the dragon of shadows coiled around Ye Xianchen and infused itself into her blade, causing the pitch-black storm winds to double in size.

Zhang Lie frowned. "A very familiar technique."

The space around Ye Xianchen shattered like glass. Pitch-black genetic energy ignited and transformed the winds into a cyclone of black flame.

Countless ghostly hands emerged from underground. Ye Xianchen had compressed the strength of her techniques again and again until she was at her limit. Only then could she unleash such a blow.

Her sword possessed incredible might, as though hundreds of ghosts accompanied her strike. The blade shot forward amidst wailing cries. The attack was composed of dark-attuned genetic energy, but had been transformed fourfold to encompass four different elemental effects: darkness, wind, thunder, and fire.

The fact that she had been able to develop such a technique was an incredible shock to Zhang Lie, who could only sustain a dual-element transformation at the moment. Ye Xianchen's ability to manipulate elemental attunements surpassed even his own.

Although she wasn't as practiced as Zhang Lie, she possessed an incredible talent.

Burning ghosts pounced toward Zhang Lie.

"It looks like I'll have to be a little serious against this technique. I'll use a third of my strength, then."

Ye Xianchen had clearly spent a considerable amount of time on this technique, and it was only reasonable to treat it with commensurate strength.

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.

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.

"[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 arena, extinguishing the burning ghosts, and sending a surge of water toward Ye Xianchen until she screamed in shock.

However, the flood of water didn't land on Ye Xianchen. It flew harmlessly overhead, smashing into the cracked barriers that Zhu had erected.

Huge, reverberating sound waves shook the air as the flood of water broke barrier after barrier before exploding in mid-air in a burst of terrifying energy, shaking the entire unified world.

Howling winds scoured the world as Ye Xianchen slumped to the ground in shock, her legs turned to jelly. She looked at her master dumbly for quite some time, unable to speak.

Zhang Lie asked, "What did you think?"

Ye Xianchen belatedly came to her senses. "My knees are still trembling..."

If that blow had struck her, she wouldn't just have turned into a heap of flesh—her bones might well have crumbled into powder.

Only now did Ye Xianchen realize just what sort of monster the members of Team Zenith had to face.

Zhang Lie asked, "What did you intuit from this fight?"

Ye Xianchen, still not fully recovered from the shock of the attack, numbly shook her head.

Zhang Lie commented, "You really have surprised me. To be honest, I'm a little shocked by how much you managed to learn from everyone from Team Zenith. You've really worked hard on your elemental transmutation that I talked to Sun Xiaowu about, and you've done more with it and gone even farther than I could have expected. You're far more talented than I had imagined."

Ye Xianchen couldn't help smiling at Zhang Lie's praise.

"However, there are some obvious problems you'll have to figure out. There's too large a gap between you and the other members of Team Zenith. At the start of the fight, your techniques were still reasonable, but your [Nightmarish Strike], [Heaven's Judgment], and [Darkbane Dragon's Remnants] aren't very strong techniques. Fang Yi's strongest attacks incorporate the combination of at least five or six different types of energies, but at the moment, you're only incorporating four different elements and three techniques."

She was only using half as many combinations in her attacks as Fang Yi did.

Ye Xianchen asked, "Master, does that mean that I need to work on my techniques?"

Zhang Lie replied, "The structure and skeleton of your techniques is good, but you haven't mastered them to your full abilities at the moment. I look forward to seeing how you've grown in the fourth realm, when you're able to expand your repertoire."

Ye Xianchen promised, "I'll keep working hard, Master!"

Zhang Lie turned to Jun Jiuxiao. "I expect the same of you, Jun Jiuxiao. When we meet in the fourth realm again, I'd like to see both of you grow even stronger."

Jun Jiuxiao nodded seriously. "I won't disappoint you, Master."

Chapter 1292: A Time for Farewells

Zhang Lie told the members of Team Zenith, "It's time for me to leave."

Sun Mengmeng sighed. "Must you leave, Captain?"

Yang Ze placed both hands behind his head. "Don't make it sound like you won't see each other again! We can ascend to the fourth realm right now as well."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "You'd better not. Although you do possess sufficient monarch gene fragments to ensure your survival in the fourth realm, your own strength is a bit lacking, and you should grow stronger now if you want to be able to develop rapidly there. You've never stopped fighting since ascending to the third realm, so take advantage of the birth of this new world to rest a little and digest the combat experience you've accumulated to date.

The members of Team Zenith nodded.

Zhang Lie continued, "Furthermore, it'll be necessary to maintain law and order in this new world. I'd recommend staying here and waiting for a few months, perhaps even half a year, before ascending."

Sun Mengmeng began, "All of us will see you again eventually, so there's nothing we're too concerned about, but some of us will never be able to ascend to a higher realm."

Zhu nodded. "You must be speaking of Li Qianlin, Mengmeng."

Zhang Lie's body shook, and he sighed. "I'm not fated to be with her. It does leave me with regrets, but..."

But he had already made up for tearing his heart out in his past life, and what remaining regrets he had meant little in comparison.

"I won't be leaving immediately, after all. I'll be talking with Hong Tianqi first, then returning to bid farewell to all those who have impacted me in the third realm.

Zhu helped teleport Zhang Lie back to the humans' settlement in the draconian kingdom, where the teleporter out of the dimensional world was located.

Zhang Lie warned, "Zhu, I'll be leaving the third realm for some time."

"Got it." Zhu waved a hand as Zhang Lie stepped into the teleporter and returned to the Milky Way. It had been a long time since his last return.

He immediately called Hong Tianqi with his transceiver. As usual, his secretary picked up. Zhang Lie had a bath and waited for a bit before Hong Tianqi returned the call.

"Long time no see."

"Haha, it might have been a long while for you, but it was just three days over here. However, from the perspective of the Milky way, I suppose ridiculous changes have occurred in the third realm—the formation of a new unified world, a kingdom for hunters from the Milky Way, and the construction of a high council for the third realm. I've been having nonstop meetings for three days just because of what's been happening."

Zhang Lie nodded.

Hong Tianqi continued, "You really are impressive, to shock me over and over again, as though you have no limits whatsoever. I never caught the attention of the ruling upper class of the third realm. I thought it was impressive enough that you managed to obtain so much information about the superior worlds of antiquity—but you even destroyed them outright, too!

"I thought that that was astounding enough, but you even rebuilt the third realm and unified the countless worlds within, then constructed a high council to rule over it..."

Zhang Lie waved a hand. "That's quite enough praise. I've heard too much of the like, and I'd prefer not to hear more."

Hong Tianqi continued, "I've received a report about the high council of the third realm, and there's not much I need to ask you about there. Well done. You've created an opportunity and established important status and precedent for the Milky Way hunters."

The current head of the high council was Yun Bing of Earth, from the Milky Way.

Hong Tianqi looked at Zhang Lie earnestly. "To be frank, you've done far more to help humanity in the dimensional world than I, the highest authority, have. I really must thank you."

Zhang Lie was as blunt as ever. "I don't need any thanks. Is there anything else? Otherwise, I'll cut the call."

Hong Tianqi shouted, "Hold on! Is it that hard for you to entertain a conversation with me?"

"If there's nothing else, let's stop here."

Hong Tianqi finally cut to the chase. His tone was serious as he asked, "I heard you're ascending to the fourth realm?"

"I've stayed in the third realm for too long, and the third realm can't withstand my current level of strength."

Hong Tianqi asked, "Do you know what the fourth realm is like?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "More or less."

"To the hunters of the Milky Way, the fourth realm is even more of a mess than the third realm. The third realm might have been divided into three thousand worlds, but there are plenty of different races inhabiting those worlds, and we snuck through the cracks, before you and your Team Zenith arrived in the third realm. Considering how decentralized power in the third realm was, we even managed to acquire some status of our own—but in the fourth realm, all that's left to us are the cracks."

There was a huge disparity in strength between the inhabitants of the third realm and of the fourth.

Hong Tianqi took a deep breath. "There are far too many strong aliens in the fourth realm, and even the genetic lifeforms aren't to be trifled with. The disaster-grade lifeforms that were so rare in the second and third realms are plentiful and commonplace in the fourth, and there are even existences beyond disaster-grade. To date, none within the Milky Way have killed those existences."

Monarch-grade lifeforms!

It was clear that monarch-grade lifeforms didn't have to be specially cultivated in the fourth realm, just like disaster-grade lifeforms in the third realm. They might still be rare, but not so rare as to be non-existent.

Hong Tianqi continued, "The most frightening aspect of the fourth realm are the hordes of genetic lifeforms and various alien organizations that have taken root. Even all the hunters of the Milky Way working together wouldn't be able to defeat one such horde or organization; the hunters of the Milky Way are pitifully weak by fourth-realm standards.

Despite the fact that the dimensional world had existed for decades, there were only a rare few hunters who could ascend to the fourth realm—fewer than ten from on a single planet on average.

Furthermore, if a hunter were to ascend without having maxed gene fragments, that hunter would be far weaker in the new realm; even those hunters with maxed gene fragments would have a period of weakness.

Hong Tianqi thanked Zhang Lie again. "Without your limit-breaking potions, the hunters of the fourth realm wouldn't have any breathing room whatsoever."

This was no exaggeration. The Milky Way hunters were doing particularly poorly in the fourth realm, and their strongholds were quickly torn down after being established.

Hong Tianqi continued, "As someone who has once ascended to the fourth realm, let me give you some advice, or perhaps experience: be cautious and circumspect."

Zhang Lie couldn't help laughing. "Are you sure that's your experience talking, and not just a warning?"

Hong Tianqi replied seriously, "Don't laugh—treat this seriously, please. I wouldn't joke about something like this; it's experience accumulated from countless experienced hunters' wisdom. After you advance, don't try to max out your gene fragments immediately. Remain cautious at all costs—survival is the most important."

Zhang Lie couldn't help but wonder, "It looks like you were whacked pretty hard in the fourth realm, almost to the point of psychological trauma."

Hong Tianqi retorted, "You might be able to laugh about it now, but once you ascend to the fourth realm, you'll understand how easy you had it during the first three realms! The fourth realm is on hell difficulty—that's when the true nightmare begins."

How many geniuses had fallen after ascending to the fourth realm? They had continued flaunting themselves the way they did in the first three realms, thinking that they were the apex of strength—only to be crushed into nothing more than meat paste.

Hong Tianqi urged, "You're my most favored junior, and I'd like to see you remain alive in the future."

This was why Zhang Lie had never intended on bringing Li Qianlin into the fourth realm.

The fourth realm was far too cruel, and survival wouldn't be easy. Even with Zhang Lie's current strength, he wasn't confident he would be able to sweep through the fourth realm with abandon.

Hong Tianqi sighed. Such was the curse of the blessed; they had built up their own mythos and were unwilling to listen to reason.

"Now that you're about to ascend to the fourth realm, I can share relevant information about it with you."

Information about the fourth realm had been semi-classified among the Milky Way, a decision made by the united world federation in order to avoid a new generation of hunters fearing what they would have to encounter and choosing to remain in a lower realm instead. When hunters from the third realm were about to ascend, there would be senior hunters to contact and share information with them.

Zhang Lie had learned about this in his past life.

Hong Tianqi began reading off the information packet. "The fourth realm contains many teleportation apparatuses, all of which have been left behind when we Milky Way hunters fled. Some are located where old Milky Way strongholds used to be, but they were destroyed by one alien organization or another. The two strongest such organizations are the Eternal Sun and the Ancient Gods' Abode. If you see members of either organization, run away immediately."

"I understand!"

Generally, most hunters who heard this information were very shocked and immediately asked why. Hong Tianqi had done so himself back then, but Zhang Lie seemed completely unperturbed.

Hong Tianqi mistook Zhang Lie's insouciance as arrogance.

He warned, "I'm not trying to scare you. Most fourth-realm races are strongly xenophobic, and they believe that us intruders, us foreigners, are all invaders hoping to take over their world and constrict their living space. Of course, even more fourth-realm aliens and organizations view us as fresh food, especially the two top organizations of the fourth realm."

They were strong enough to treat anything in the fourth realm as food, and they thought of Milky Way hunters as particular delicacies.

"I'll transmit information about these two organizations to you shortly. Make sure to commit it to memory. However, at least for the short term, I don't think you'll have to worry. Apparently, an extremely strong organization has just sprung up in the fourth realm, and it grew so rapidly that it's now able to compete with the two strongest organizations for strength."

Zhang Lie hadn't heard this piece of news in his past life.

Back then, the death spirits' war hadn't yet started, and Zhang Lie was still struggling to make it through the third realm.

Hong Tianqi smiled. "The two strongest organizations of the fourth realm are currently fretting and trying to think up of ways to deal with this unwelcome intruder, so it's the best time for you to ascend. As long as you're not too unlucky and end up in a safe location, you won't have to worry about your life."

Zhang Lie replied, "If there's nothing else, let's end the call here. I still have to say goodbye to friends and family in the third realm."

Hong Tianqi reiterated, "Remember not to make a commotion in the fourth realm."

"I know, I know." Zhang Lie hung up. By then, Hong Tianqi had already sent the relevant information packets to him. He glanced through them in a cursory fashion; the information was essentially what he knew from his past life. He had a meal, then returned to the third realm.

The moment he did so, Zhu rushed over to him.

Zhu shouted, "Bad news, bad news, Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "What's the bad news?"

Zhu tugged on Zhang Lie's hand. "There's no time to explain. Come with me!"

Zhu was about to teleport them both away when Zhang Lie shattered space and stopped her. "Just what has happened? Tell me everything first."

Zhu cried out, "It's not the time for this, Zhang Lie! If we delay any longer, someone might die—the third realm might be destroyed!"

Zhang Lie cocked his head. "If you don't explain clearly what's going on, how can I resolve the issue?"

Zhu was panicking. "You'll know when you see it, Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Lie replied, "I'm very curious just what it is that could have happened in two days that you, the ruler of the realm, can't resolve. Even if you can't do so, can't the members of Team Zenith help you?"

Zhu asked, "Zhang Lie, are you sure you want to know?"

"Tell me. Just what sort of problem can't you resolve?"

"Li Qianlin and Sun Mengmeng have started to fight."

Zhang Lie:...

"...do you at least have a more believable lie?"

Zhang Lie responded, after a stunned silence.

He wasn't looking down on Li Qianlin; rather, Sun Mengmeng was at the peak of the third realm, and even Li Qianlin and her father together might not be able to take Sun Mengmeng down.

Perhaps only the three former superior kings, in addition to Zhu, would be a match for Sun Mengmeng.

If Li Qianlin and Sun Mengmeng really were to start fighting, the members of Team Zenith would stop them.

Zhu was clearly lying.

"I'm telling the truth! If you don't believe me, go have a look!"

"Very well. I'll pretend to be tricked by you, but if this ends up being something silly..."

Even though he knew that Zhu was very clearly lying, there was the slightest possibility he could be wrong, and he couldn't negate that possibility.

Zhu teleported them to the venue immediately.

Fireworks and streamers rang out as Zhu and Zhang Lie appeared.

When Zhang Lie saw what lay before him, he was stunned.

[Savior of the Realm's Farewell Ceremony—Zhang Lie, we'll forever remember you!] read a banner hanging in the sky. A humongous circular table below was heaped with a feast, and those who had been with Zhang Lie throughout the third realm were each shooting streamers into the air.

The members of Team Zenith, Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Li Feng, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, Zhou Ying, as well as Hong Xi, Zhang Hanxiang, Ye Xianchen, Jun Jiuxiao, Li Zongming, the draconian sage, the Lie king, his brother, Dong Mingxing, Yun Bing, Chu Feng, and the Yeluo chieftain—familiar faces were smiling at Zhang Lie, welcoming his arrival.

Zhang Lie stood still in a daze, then slowly turned to Zhu.

"This is your so-called 'fight'?"

Zhu smiled happily. "It's a farewell party for you. Aren't you happy?"

"You brat, you've started lying to me! Those members of Team Zenith have corrupted you, haven't they?"

Zhang Lie reached out and mussed up Zhu's sea-blue hair.

She shrieked as she tried to run away and hid behind Sun Mengmeng's back.

"Zhang Lie, aren't you happy?"

Sun Mengmeng smiled. "We didn't organize anything when you ascended to the third realm, so we wanted to do something for you now before you ascended to the fourth realm."

"For genetic hunters, ascension is a natural rite," Zhang Lie replied, sighing. He sounded exasperated, but his lips curled up in a smile.

Zhu protested, "But we're not all genetic hunters here! There are lots of us who won't be able to see you again, likely for good!"

Yun Bing explained, "This isn't just a farewell party for you, Zhang Lie."

Zhang Lie pointed at the banner in mid-air. "So that's fake? I hope you won't be tearing my name off afterwards..."

Yun Bing laughed. "No, no, Zhang Lie, you misunderstand. It's also a celebratory banquet in honor of you."

Sun Xiaowu laughed. "We've all learned so much from you, Zhang Lie, Captain! We know you prefer to keep a low profile, so we've only invited those who are near and dear to you."

Zhu stepped forward. "Without you, Zhang Lie, I could never have become who I am today."

The members of Team Zenith likewise bowed in gratitude. "It's all thanks to you that we can be who we are, that we could have advanced so quickly in the third realm, to grow to become the peak existences that we are today."

Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Li Feng, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, Zhou Ying, as well as Hong Xi, Zhang Hanxiang, Ye Xianchen, and Jun Jiuxiao, all said heartfelt words toward Zhang Lie.

Li Zongming said, "Without your having come to the world of the west, the Zongming world could never have been founded, and I would never have been able to fulfill the wishes left by my ancestors. Neither would I have managed to acquire the status I have now. I have you to thank for all this."

The draconian sage said, "Everyone else has already said what I want to say..."

"I'm the person who's most grateful to Master here! Without Master, I would already have died multiple times over. Please, Master, accept my kowtow." The Lie king knelt on the ground and knocked his forehead against the ground three resounding times.

Zhang Lie sighed as he helped the Lie king up.

"Wipe away your tears, now. You're already the king of the Lie kingdom, one of the four great kingdoms of the new world, and a council leader in the high council—no longer that weak ninth prince you once were. Don't cry anymore, alright? Otherwise, others will look down on you."

The Lie king wiped away his tears. "Please don't mind my disrespect, Master. I won't be able to remain by your side in the future."

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "As though you were frequently by my side beforehand!"

"I apologize, Master."

The Lie king seemed to return to his original self as the ninth prince.

"Alright, alright. I don't mean to criticize you. I was around for you when it was necessary, but now that you're alone, you'll have to learn how to stay strong. I've been examining your growth from afar, and you've grown to a tremendous extent. Your transformation from the ninth prince to the Lie king is the fastest among my disciples."

"It's all thanks to you, Master."

"All I did was help you a little; I barely taught you anything," Zhang Lie replied. "Do you know why I was willing to help you in the beginning?"

"For the primordial starflower, wasn't it?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "With my strength, do you think I wouldn't have been able to get the primordial starflower myself?"

The Lie king shook his head. "Of course not, Master! You'd be able to get anything you wanted."

Zhu nodded fervently, her eyes full of reverence. "Of course! There are plenty of primordial starflowers in the unified world, and I harvested a mountainful when you guys were researching Potion #5."

Zhang Lie smiled and corrected the two of them.

"Actually, at that time, I did do it for the primordial starflower."

Zhu frowned. "Ah, you're embarrassing me, Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Lie patted the Lie king's shoulder.

"I did help you at the beginning for the primordial starflower, but the fact that I chose to take you in as a disciple was because your actions moved me. As weak as you were, you had dreams far beyond your reach. Any other person might think your actions foolish, but your will was resolute. You reminded me of myself, so I chose to help you."

The Lie king couldn't help but feel touched once again.

Zhang Lie continued, "Make sure to govern your kingdom well. You're a king now."

Yun Bing bowed. "As a representative of the hunters of the Milky Way, I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart, Zhang Lie. Without you, the Milky Way hunters would never have the status they do now, and neither would we have the Zenith Alliance of the third realm. This will have deep and significant ramifications for future generations of Milky Way hunters."

"And you must govern your kingdom well too, Yun Bing."

The draconian sage clapped his hands. "Now that everyone's done, let's start the feast! I've worked hard on the food, so don't let it go cold."

Everyone noticed that Zhang Lie was looking all around, as though searching for someone. Dong Mingxing leaned over.

"What, are you searching for someone?"

Zhang Lie didn't know how to answer at the spur of the moment.

Dong Mingxing continued, "If you miss her, you should go find her. She's still in the draconian kingdom, waiting for you."

Zhang Lie was about to step away when he aborted his actions, then shook his head in exasperation.

Li Zongming looked over. "You two young adults... I don't know what to tell you."

Zhang Lie seemed surprised. "You don't blame me?"

Li Zongming laughed coldly. "Don't think you're all that. You don't know how happy I am to have the fellow trying to kidnap my daughter leave. Do you really think I'll be happy to have you call me father-in-law? I'm glad my daughter will stay with me rather than abscond with a lad I don't know anything about."

Dong Mingxing sighed. "Like father, like daughter!"

Chapter 1293: Goodbye, Third Realm

Dong Mingxing hadn't believed Li Qianlin when she told her that her pride was hereditary, but now that she was seeing it for herself, she had no choice but to do so. Pride truly was hereditary!

Li Zongming downed a cup of wine ferociously.

"What else could I say? I can't even beat him in a fight. If he's going to leave, what will scolding him do? I'm the king of the Zongming kingdom, after all, and I'd rather save myself some face."

After a long silence, Zhang Lie was about to speak when Li Zongming suddenly cut him off. There's no need for you to apologize. Those a decade younger might not understand—but the older you are, the more you'll know. You're giving up on her not because you don't love her, but because you love her too much."

Li Zongming, who had experienced life in all its complexity, understood just what Zhang Lie was going through.

The person whom this separation hurt most was none other than Zhang Lie.

He was a resolute man, one who hadn't given up against even the strongest of foes. For him to be forced to let his love go—it hurt more than a thousand knives stabbing into his chest, but for Li Qianlin, he had no other choice.

Li Zongming felt as though even he couldn't understand the depths of his affection, and he was even more impressed.

How much did you have to love someone to make a decision that would otherwise be unthinkable?

"Thank you."

Sun Mengmeng asked, "When will you be setting off, Zhang Lie?"

"I intended to say my farewells to my friends and companions in the third realm first, but it looks like you're all here. I intend to set off tomorrow—after all, as is, I'm dealing damage to the structure of the third realm just being here."

"I'll see you in the fourth realm, Captain," Sun Mengmeng pledged.

Zhang Lie nodded to the members of Team Zenith.

"I'll see you all in the fourth realm."

With their farewells said, the next morning, as Zhang Lie prepared to ascend, Dong Mingxing headed off in search of Li Qianlin.

Leaning against the doorframe, she asked, "Zhang Lie's about to leave. Won't you speak with him?"

Li Qianlin's eyes were red and puffy, and it was clear she hadn't slept for the night. "What's there to see? He's about to leave."

Dong Mingxing asked, "Can you really let him go just like that?"

"Even if I can't, I have to learn how. That's what he wants, isn't it?"

Li Qianlin rubbed the gift that Zhang Lie had gotten her on their travels, her eyes filled with beautiful recollections and thoughts. Why couldn't time have stopped back then?

"And what of your hopes and dreams?"

Li Qianlin grumbled, "My hopes and dreams? Are they important? It's clear he hasn't kept me in mind."

Dong Mingxing continued, "If you miss this opportunity, you might regret it all your life. You've experienced so much together—it would be a shame if you couldn't be together."

"I just want a response from him."

"Is it that important?"

"Isn't it?"

"It's how you feel rather than how he feels?"

Li Qianlin repeated her best friend's words mindlessly. "It's how I feel, rather than how he feels?"

Dong Mingxing took a deep breath. "I'll ask you once again. What do you want from him?"

Li Qianlin looked down and closed her eyes. When she felt she had an answer, she raised her head again. "I want..."

Dong Mingxing pulled Li Qianlin up from where she had been sitting. "If you know what you want, don't just sit here! He's about to set off. Go, go! Don't leave regrets behind. Find him, seek him out!"

Upon hearing Dong Mingxing's words, Li Qianlin blinked as though she had just awoken from a dream. "Thank you, Mingxing. You truly are my best friend."

She hugged her tightly, her face full of smiles, then ran off unfettered in search of Zhang Lie.

Watching her friend from the back chasing after her loved one, Dong Mingxing smiled. Envy filled her eyes.

"Qianlin, tell him what I'm not brave enough to say myself, tell him everything."

On the day of departure, even Red Comet showed up. It had replaced Zhu as the main custodian of the farm and spent its days managing them. Except under extraordinary circumstances, it wouldn't leave the farm.

Red Comet nuzzled Zhang Lie's body as he lightly patted its head. He had many fond memories with the genetic lifeform that he had tamed near the start of the third realm.

"You're free now. Go live the life you want to—someone else can handle the farm. Find a companion and have a brood of kids."

Red Comet's wings fluttered in a mournful screech.

Zhu smiled. "Red Comet already has a brood of children on the farm."

Zhang Lie pointed at him. "Ah, you! Were you abusing your job for private interests?"

Red Comet covered its face with its scythe-like arms as Zhang Lie smiled and patted him again.

"I'm sorry I didn't know. I apologize for not having visited your kids. It's good to have a family, to settle down."

Zhu said, "Zhang Lie, don't worry. With me around, nothing will happen to the third realm."

The Yeluo chieftain gave him a large batch of Zhou Ying's Restorative #3. "Zhou Ying and I worked together to be able to mass-produce these potions, and this is the first batch. Your Majesty, please use them well as you enter the fourth realm. I hope it'll be of some use to you."

Zhang Lie smiled. "Do you want me to become injured?"

The Yeluo chieftain shook his head. "No, no, Your Majesty, I don't mean that! Given your strength, I'm sure barely anyone can hurt you even in the fourth realm."

Zhang Lie accepted the gift of potions with thanks. Just like Zhou Ying's Restorative #2, even if he couldn't use it personally, the aliens and companions he encountered along the way very well could. The Yeluo chieftain's restoratives were particularly effective, and they were a worthy gift indeed.

They could even be used as currency—when the Lie kingdom had been a large world and Zhang Lie had met the Lie king for the first time, he had sold some of the potions off in exchange for coins.

The Yeluo chieftain next retrieved a large bundle of potions. "In addition to Restorative #3, I made use of the draconian kingdom's resources and herbs to brew a few batches of these potions. Your Majesty, please take them as well—they might come in handy. I've notated their usage and dosage on each vial."

Zhang Lie accepted the generous gift. "Thank you for all your hard work, everyone. If we're fated to do so, we'll meet again."

Sun Mengmeng sighed. "Zhang Lie, won't you wait a little longer?"

Sun Xiaowu urged, "Wait a little longer. Someone might show up!"

Yang Ze added, "Wouldn't it be upsetting to part ways now without saying goodbye?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Better that we not meet. It would only upset everyone if we did."

Without wasting any more time, Zhang Lie marshaled his own energy. Zhu summoned the will of the world.

"Zhang Lie's ready to ascend now, so could you please help guide him through, Will?"

The multicolored dragon scale manifested in the air.

Chapter 1294: Intelligence in Love

Zhang Lie: a disaster-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, 100; Monarch, 100; Emperor, 5

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

The air began to vibrate as a ball of energy encapsulated Zhang Lie. The will of the world's voice rang out in his head.

[Your status exceeds that permissible within the second realm. Please advance to the fourth realm immediately!]

Wrapped in multicolored light, Zhang Lie waved at the gathered crowd.

The members of Team Zenith, Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Li Feng, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, Zhou Ying, as well as Hong Xi, Zhang Hanxiang, Ye Xianchen, Jun Jiuxiao, Li Zongming, the draconian sage, the Lie king, his brother, Dong Mingxing, Yun Bing, Chu Feng, and the Yeluo chieftain all saw him off, their eyes filled with reluctance at his departure. The Lie king and Zhu's eyes filled with tears.

As for the members of Team Zenith, Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Li Feng, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, Zhou Ying, as well as Hong Xi, Zhang Hanxiang, Ye Xianchen, and Jun Jiuxiao—to them, this was only a momentary farewell. They knew that they would meet Zhang Lie again, in another time, at another place.

To the Lie king, however, it might be farewell for good.

Despite the fact that the Lie king had become an existence beyond an ordinary superior king, that he now held one of the four major seats of the high council of the third realm, he was simply too young. When he saw Zhang Lie, who had guided him through his most vulnerable period, leave, he couldn't master his emotions.

Zhu and Zhang Lie were even more intimately connected. To Zhu, Zhang Lie was a father figure, a brother, and someone she respected and admired. Parting ways with him made her feel terrible—who knew how long it would be before they met again?

As everyone glanced at Zhang Lie and the rainbow light that shrouded him from view, no one noticed a figure running over and jumping toward Zhang Lie.

In a flash of light, Zhang Lie and that figure were teleported into the refinement chamber. Zhang Lie looked at the figure in his lap in shock before shouting, "Are you crazy?"

Li Qianlin had jumped into Zhang Lie's lap right as he was teleported away.

Instead of responding, she kissed him on the lips. "I'm crazy. I was crazy for you ever since that botched wedding. I don't care whether you love me, or what happens in the future—I love you!"

Zhang Lie sighed. "Do you know how dangerous it's going to be? I can't protect you in the fourth realm. I can't."

Li Qianlin hugged Zhang Lie tightly.

"I won't let you go, no matter what. Regardless of how dangerous the fourth realm is, I want to be with you forever and ever, even if I might die!"

"You—"

Li Qianlin reached out and clasped her hand over his mouth. "Tell me now: are you willing to bring me with you, or not?"

Zhang Lie didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Right now, Li Qianlin was behaving like a fool, just like he had been when he first saw her in this life. There was a saying that those in love would lose their rationality. Zhang Lie scoffed at that saying back then—but now, he was certain his IQ was in the negatives.

Li Qianlin had done what he should have from the very beginning—express his emotions clearly!

Suddenly, in his head blared the will of the realm's voice. [Warning! An intruder has been detected within the refinement chamber. Expulsion protocols activated.]

Zhang Lie knew that there wasn't much time left. He hurriedly said, "Qianlin, listen up. The route ahead will be perilous. If you want to stay with me, you'll need to learn how to bear with solitude. Before I grow strong and have a safehouse, you'll have to stay in a certain location all alone."

Despite the circumstances, Li Qianlin seemed overjoyed. "Anywhere, as long as I'm with you!"

The space around her distorted, and Zhang Lie felt a sense of repulsion. Rather than explain further, he hurriedly stowed Li Qianlin in his disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard.

The will of the realm's voice rang out again. [Intruder removed. The refinement ceremony will continue in ten seconds. 10, 9, 8,...]

A burst of energy filled the chamber, surrounding Zhang Lie and forming a huge cocoon around him.

Tremendous energy drifted into the chamber, making Zhang Lie feel as though he were immersed in a heated pool, unbelievably comfortable. Perhaps intentionally or because the will of the third realm was far stronger than those of the first and second realms, the refinement energy seemed thousands of times more concentrated compared to when he had ascended to the third realm.

The refinement energy circulated throughout his body, as though burying seeds deep within the earth and watching them sprout with life.

Zhang Lie sat deep in meditation, his body forging itself anew with every breath.

An incredible metamorphosis was occurring within his body, as though the disaster and monarch gene transformations were occurring once more.

An indeterminate amount of time passed, but Zhang Lie remained perfectly in harmony with his environment the entire time. Without anyone to disturb him, without any sudden fluctuations to his emotions, he gradually began to smile, a reflection of his heart and inner being. Light began to shine from his body. He was surrounded by a glowing ball of light, and the skin beneath that was revealed was a pearlescent white, supple and smooth.

A spiritual glow suffused him. His bones cracked as they became even stronger and sturdier, taking on a metallic luster. A membrane of crystalline light formed over their surface, strengthening them, improving their ductility and hardness. His body was being reforged from the inside out and the outside in, as though becoming that of a deity.

Muscle, flesh, skin, and bone merged together in a flash of blinding light, which coalesced into a skin-like membrane that gave Zhang Lie a holy, immaculate appearance. He looked like a man from the heavens above, one untouched and unsullied by mortal contact.

Chapter 1295: Entering a New World

Every part of Zhang Lie's body was pure and shining, with unadulterated vitality.

In the refinement chamber, Zhang Lie forgot everything: strife, passion, and all worldly possessions. His mind was tranquil, at ease. He breathed out with a puff of light. The air that was sucked into his body took on the shape of dragons. He breathed with a particular rhythm, neither quick nor slow, ever following the pulse of the world.

The air that Zhang Lie inhaled took on the form of dragons. As he exhaled, those dragons coiled around his body and transformed into genetic energy. Behind Zhang Lie appeared swimming pale blue fish, an ink-black serpent, a resplendent golden tiger, a heavysset dragonturtle, a flaming red lion, an electrified wyrm, and a phoenix of storms.

Basic, mutated, superior, peak, disaster, and monarch genes were converted into a boundless strength. As Zhang Lie's flesh and blood evolved, his genes underwent an incredible transformation.

Basic, mutated, superior, peak, disaster, and monarch genes formed the foundation of this transformation. Zhang Lie's genes mutated within the rainbow cocoon into an even more perfect state.

Three days passed by in the blink of an eye. Even after Zhang Lie's genetic transformation, the will of the third realm showed no signs of slowing down. Even more refinement energy was poured into the cocoon—a measure of gratitude to Zhang Lie for having unified the third realm and restored the will.

His body glowed. His organs gave off light as a rosy sheen appeared over his body.

Every cell and every gene seemed to roar like a dragon. Ripple after ripple emanated from him. His bones cracked and popped; his blood and flesh vibrated. The runes of the [Keys of the Elder Gods] manifested outside his body and glowed with light.

Zhang Lie opened his eyes. Strands of black hair floated around him. His eyes were like lightning, as though he were a martial god who had descended from the heavens.

As runes flared all over his body, his bones creaked, and his flesh trembled, his essence transformed into a dragon that soared into the air.

The runes merged with his body, causing his cells to transform into resplendent galaxies. Even the cocoon was no longer able to contain Zhang Lie. It shattered, along with the refinement chamber itself.

The next moment, Zhang Lie was whisked away.

At the last moment, the will of the realm manifested and sent a glowing multicolored ball into Zhang Lie's body.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in the dark.

He had appeared in front of a teleportation apparatus. There was dim light around him, and traces of artificial construction. He walked out of the apparatus and saw human figures. Unlike the will of the second realm, that of the third realm was far more considerate, and had sent Zhang Lie straight to a gathering point for the Milky Way.

Despite all the issues that Zhang Lie had caused for the unified world of the third realm, he was essentially its creator, a parent. It cost little for the unified world to help Zhang Lie out this final time.

Zhang Lie first considered the changes to his genetic data.

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, 0; Mutated, 0; 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), Mismeld Clam (disaster)

An emperor-grade lifeform! Not monarch-grade, but straight to emperor-grade?

Zhang Lie was elated.

Perhaps because the unified world had specially given Zhang Lie more than his fair share of refinement energy, or because of his maxed monarch gene fragments and disaster limit fragments, or a combination of all these reasons, Zhang Lie had started the fourth realm as an emperor-grade lifeform, far beyond the norm.

In his previous life, Zhang Lie had ascended with only maxed peak gene fragments, and disaster gene fragments had only been discovered then. However, Zhang Lie wasn't the one who discovered them. Working together with Fang Yi, he barely obtained ten disaster gene fragments, and had begun the fourth realm as only a peak-grade lifeform.

This time, however, he was an emperor-grade lifeform! He was about as strong as a fledgling emperor-grade lifeform before he maxed out his genes, but he was far stronger than the average fourth-realm being. He wouldn't lose out against a fourth-realm monarch-grade lifeform, and would easily triumph over disaster-grade ones.

Because he was standing right outside by the exit of the teleportation apparatus laughing to himself, the hunters of the Milky Way all around him seemed rather perplexed by his behavior.

"This is a human, isn't it?"

"Have the humans always had such a hunter?"

"He seems very familiar, as though I've seen him somewhere before..."

The hunters of the Milky Way all seemed taken aback by the sudden appearance of this stranger whom no one knew.

"He's not a newbie, is he?"

"To have been sent straight to our gathering point—I can't believe how lucky he is."

Zhang Lie headed straight toward the nearest hunter. "I have a few questions for you, sir. You're from the Jadeite race, aren't you?"

The Jadeite insects had dark yellow carapaces speckled with gray spots. Although they were bipedal, they had the appearance of bugs, with feelers on top of their heads and large black eyes that revealed themselves to be compound eyes on close inspection.

The Jadeite hunter ignored Zhang Lie, who grinned and retrieved three vials of Restorative #3 from his extradimensional storage.

"I had Jadeite friends in the third realm, and I know how helpful they are. I have three high-quality restorative potions, of particular efficacy even compared to fourth-realm potions."

The Jadeite hunter glanced at a potion and sniffed it as his feelers quivered. He reached out a bamboo-like appendage and patted Zhang Lie's shoulder.

"Ask me anything you want, friend."

The Jadeites were an immoral race that would do anything for money, and Zhang Lie found them excellent sources of information.

The healing potions that weren't too valuable in the second and third realms could be sold for incredible prices in the fourth because of the terrible conditions of the fourth realm. No hunter had the leisure time to search for herbs and plants, causing a lack of supply and incredible demand, especially for high-quality potions.

The stash of Restorative #3 that the Yeluo chieftain had given him was like a treasure trove.

Chapter 1296: Genetic Hunting Grounds

Considering the remarkably hostile environment of the fourth realm, every hunter would get injured at some point. Those who were injured had little choice but to return home via the teleportation apparatus to receive treatment, but this was clearly impossible while in battle. As a result, healing potions and restoratives could literally be life-saving.

The Jadeite hunter immediately stored the potion. "Ask me anything, friend! You've found the right person to ask. I know more than anyone else in this area. I know you must be here to ask about the fourth realm, and I know quite a bit about it. To hunters who have just ascended from the third realm, it might as well be apocalyptic—"

Zhang Lie raised a hand, cutting off the Jadeite hunter. "No, I already know all this."

The Jadeite hunter shook his head. "If you want to live on, I recommend that you listen closely. I know you learned about the fourth realm to some extent from your seniors before your ascension, but it's not something you can understand so easily."

"I know everything I need to."

Zhang Lie had ascended to the fourth realm before in the past, and what the Jadeite hunter knew, so did he. What he really wanted to know about was the specifics of this gathering point.

The Jadeite hunter shook his head in exasperation. "What do you want to know about, then?"

Zhang Lie replied, "I'd like to know where the nearest genetic hunting grounds are."

The Jadeite hunter looked him up and down. "You are experienced, aren't you?"

If not for the fact that he had seen Zhang Lie pop right out of the teleportation apparatus, and the fact that he had never seen him before, the Jadeite hunter would have thought Zhang Lie an old veteran.

"I'll bring you there," the hunter offered.

Because of the hostile conditions of the fourth realm, the Milky Way hunters found it hard to survive. They worked out a system where they would hunt genetic lifeforms in fixed locations, colloquially called genetic hunting grounds.

It was little different from the spawning zones of the first realm where various genetic lifeforms gathered; the hunters of the Milky Way simply made the delineation clearer.

This particular hunting ground was underground. The Jadeite hunter retrieved a soulshard

that glowed with light. Past a long, artificially excavated tunnel was a spacious underground cavern filled with dense starlight. Black beetles crawled all over the walls. Where their tails were, there was a glowing orb of light that illuminated their surroundings, much like fireflies.

Zhang Lie grabbed a bug with his hand, which screamed shrilly and curled up into a ball. As Zhang Lie squeezed, the bug exploded, splattering black liquid all over.

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

The Jadeite hunter praised, "Impressive, to have such strength as a newcomer."

Zhang Lie frowned. "This is a hunting ground for regular-grade lifeforms?"

The Jadeite hunter rolled his eyes. "What else? Do you think you can hunt in mutated-grade hunting grounds right now? You just ascended. Don't think that your strength means anything here—this realm is far crueller than you might expect. Start by maxing out your basic gene fragments. If you're lucky, you might find mutated-grade bugs around. I won't accompany you any further, then."

To the Jadeite hunter, Zhang Lie was an arrogant upstart.

Only when he had sensed that the Jadeite hunter was far away did Zhang Lie head into his disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard.

The space within the soulshard had grown significantly different. It was remodeled and furnished with all sorts of furniture, and almost looked like a little cottage.

Zhang Lie saw a figure hard at work. Li Qianlin brought out a delicious dish and placed it on the table.

"I thought you would be bored, so I wanted to drop in as soon as I had a chance—but it looks like you've been hard at work," Zhang Lie commented, shaking his head.

There had been nothing within the disaster-grade dragonwhale's soulspace, but Li Qianlin had extradimensional storage of her own.

As Li Zongming's daughter and the princess of a superior world, even before the merger of the worlds of east and west, she was naturally able to acquire a dimensional-type soulshard. After all, Li Zongming was king of a large world, and he had connections with hunters from the Milky Way.

Aliens and genetic hunters alike loved to stuff all sorts of knickknacks in their soulshards, but Li Qianlin clearly had more than the average person did. She had only been in the disaster-grade dragonwhale's soulspace for three days, but it looked almost as though she were constructing a brand-new house.

When Li Qianlin saw Zhang Lie, she smiled in delight—then turned crimson when she thought about her audacious actions back in the refinement chamber.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but laugh. "You were so daring just a few days ago—but now you can't even speak?"

Li Qianlin scowled. "Don't laugh at me!"

Zhang Lie thought for a moment. "Are you growing used to this place?"

"It's alright, I suppose." Li Qianlin asked, "Are you in the fourth realm yet?"

"Yes, I've ascended."

"Can I go outside?"

"No."

"Have you encountered something problematic?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "It's not me, but you."

Li Qianlin didn't seem to understand.

Zhang Lie sighed. "All realms have their own rules, but these rules are formless. Those native to this realm have internalized these formless rules during the process of gestation, and they won't be affected by the realm's influence. However, you haven't received the acknowledgment of the realm, and your body and flesh are unmarked."

For aliens, the tribulations they encountered when ascending would serve as an imprint and qualification.

"The rules of high-dimensional realms are far more potent to low-dimensional lifeforms than you can imagine. If you're strong enough, you can resist them, of course."

Zhu had been a peak second-realm existence when she stowed away into the third realm; she had only been a step away from ascending on her own merits. Considering her individual strength, the imposition of the third realm's formless rules did little to her.

Although Zhu's illegal entry had prevented her from initially growing stronger, she was able to resist the formless laws' effects on her body. The Yeluo chieftain was no slouch either, and the third realm's laws were significantly looser than the fourth realm's.

"If you leave the dragonwhale soulshard, you'll perish."

This was no joke. Even for stowaways, surviving in the fourth realm required a commensurate level of strength.

Otherwise, all manner of aliens would have stowed away with genetic hunters, causing huge problems in the fourth realm.

Chapter 1297: Lightbeetle Meat

The dimensional world was an ecosystem that had formed naturally, and there wouldn't be any easily exploitable loopholes.

In order to survive without penalty in the fourth realm, to be unaffected by its unwritten laws like Zhu in the third realm, Li Qianlin would have to reach the peak of the third realm, with at least equivalent strength to a superior king.

If she were weaker, perhaps only at the level of a king of a large world—or a disaster-grade lifeform—then she would slowly degrade and wither away due to the imposition of natural law. Furthermore, her cultivation would be blocked from progressing, so she would surely perish.

The king of chaos' subordinates, the members of the halls of chaos, were all at least at the level of superior kings, and some could easily have ascended on their own. They were naturally able to resist the influence of the fourth realm.

Furthermore, the king of chaos hadn't stowed any of his subordinates away. Rather, he and all his subordinates had forcibly broken past the boundaries of the third realm, inviting tribulation on them all. The rules of the dimensional world allowed such behavior but certainly not stowaways, and the entirety of the halls of chaos would be able to continue cultivating and ascending in the fourth realm.

If even disaster-grade lifeforms and kings of large worlds would be unable to survive the fourth realm, then Li Qianlin would suffer even more.

She was hardly defenseless; she had cultivated with Li Zongming for some time, but she knew she was untalented in this domain. She had chosen to give up early, and she had about the strength of the king of a small world.

For someone as weak as she was, entering the fourth realm would cause her to be crushed by natural law immediately.

Li Qianlin sighed. "In other words, I won't be able to survive here, or even go outside."

Zhang Lie looked down in a combination of guilt and shame. "If you're regretting your actions, I'll try my best to send you back home. The fourth realm's internal structure is significantly firmer than that of the third realm. You're aware of the king of chaos, aren't you? His ascension with the halls of chaos was what almost destroyed the third realm.

Li Qianlin nodded.

Zhang Lie continued, "However, this also meant that the king of chaos managed to create a route between the third and fourth realms. As long as we can find the king of chaos, we'll be able to find the dimensional crack between the realms, and I can send you back to the third realm in that manner."

Li Qianlin reached out for Zhang Lie's hand. "No, I won't go. It was difficult enough for me to remain by your side—as long as I can stay with you, I won't even mind being imprisoned."

Touched, Zhang Lie vowed, "I'll make sure to find a way for you to survive unscathed in the fourth realm proper."

Li Qianlin nodded. "I believe you."

She tugged on his hand.

"Come over, won't you? I just made some food, and it'd be far too boring to have it alone."

Zhang Lie ate a mouthful, a blissful smile on his face. "It's excellent. Right, I hunted a few weird lifeforms outside. Do you think you can make it more appetizing for me?"

"Let me have a look."

Zhang Lie returned outside the dragonwhale and glanced at the walls of the spacious cavern, which were filled with lightbeetles.

Because they were only regular-grade lifeforms, their numbers were frighteningly high.

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.

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

"[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 region.

A huge rumble shook the cavern, and the earth 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.

The will of the fourth realm repeatedly announced in his head, [You successfully killed a regular-grade lightbeetle. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade lightbeetle, you may receive one to ten basic gene fragments.]

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

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

After his ascension, he had certainly grown stronger, but the imposition of the formless laws of the fourth realm did weaken him to some extent.

The pale blue genetic energy swept half the cavern clean of lightbeetles, filling the ground with their carcasses. Zhang Lie swept them up and brought it back within the soulspace. Li Qianlin peered at the mess he had brought back. "You've pulped them too much. Just what lifeforms are these?"

"Bugs—a species of regular-grade lifeforms known as lightbeetles."

Li Qianlin pursed her lips, but she brought the remnants of the lightbeetles to the kitchen and began preparing them as salad and skewers.

Zhang Lie didn't mind. He had eaten all manner of strange creatures from the first realm to the fourth, and it wasn't the first time he had consumed insects. The first time was the hardest, but after that, well...

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade lightbeetle, you received one basic gene fragment.
Current total: 1]

As Zhang Lie ate the lightbeetle skewers, he gave Li Qianlin a thumbs up. "These are remarkably fragrant! I know bringing you up here with me was definitely the right choice.

Li Qianlin smiled. She was pleased to have been of use to Zhang Lie so early on.

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade lightbeetle, you received one basic gene fragment.
Current total: 8]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade lightbeetle, you received one basic gene fragment.
Current total: 9]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade lightbeetle, you received one basic gene fragment.
Current total: 10]

Within moments, he had obtained ten basic 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, 10; Mutated, 0; 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), Mismeld Clam (disaster)

Chapter 1298: Annoyances Persist

After chatting with Li Qianlin and depositing a number of material resources for her, Zhang Lie left the dragonwhale again.

He walked back where he had come, in search of the Jadeite hunter to ask about whether there were other hunting grounds nearby.

As he saw the hunter heading his way with a group of people, his eyes lit up. "Hey, I was just about to search for you!"

"Boss, it's this fellow over here!" the Jadeite hunter shouted, pointing at Zhang Lie.

A few hunters of the Milky Way were making their way over with unfriendly looks on their faces.

"I heard you've been stealing our potions, lad."

"Give them over, or we'll take them by force."

Zhang Lie blinked. "So this is what you're trying, is it?"

The leader of the Milky Way hunters had a bull's head. "Do you know who I am? I'm Flamin, the one in charge of this gathering point. All affairs here are under my jurisdiction."

Another genetic hunter, this one in black armor, stepped forward. "I'm the strongest hunter in this gathering point, and my name's Black Armor. Hand over the potions you stole—we won't let you leave with them."

Zhang Lie looked at the Jadeite hunter. "You tried the potion, then?"

The Jadeite hunter gave him a thumbs up. "It was excellent."

"How much are they paying you?"

The Jadeite hunter smirked. "Quite a bit."

It was evident what had happened.

The Jadeite hunter had tested the potion. The efficacy of Zhou Ying's Restorative #3, developed by the Yeluo chieftain himself, was nothing short of wondrous. Even the members of Team Zenith, at the peak of the third realm, praised these potions.

The unified world's blessing had created a preponderance of spiritual herbs and plants, and the Yeluo chieftain had brewed this batch of potions with the best ingredients, prioritizing efficiency over cost.

After all, this batch was meant for Zhang Lie, and the Yeluo chieftain had brewed it with the best ingredients he could.

After the Jadeite hunter tested the potion and was shocked by its efficacy, he passed the information on to the de facto leader of the gathering point, who came prepared to snatch his entire stock.

Flamin thundered, "I'm talking to you!"

"I know. So what?"

"If you don't want to die, hand over the potions!"

Zhang Lie sighed. "It's precisely because of people like you that this gathering point's such a mess."

Flamin sneered. "It looks like you'll be needing some incentive, hmm? It's been a while since anyone dared talk to me like this. You're an interesting newbie, aren't you?"

Black Armor scoffed. "What does he know? He's just ascended!"

Flamin pointed toward the ground. "You might have been lauded as a genius in the third realm, but up here? You're trash."

Black Armor shouted, "Kneel on the ground and hand over your belongings!"

Flamin laughed. "Do you think you're safe just because they're in your extradimensional storage? You think that your potions will be safe because your soulshards will shatter when you die, that the potions will be ejected straight out into the void, don't you?"

Black Armor added, "In an emergency, you can even shatter the soulshards yourself, leaving us with nothing and making you not worth extorting."

Flamin narrowed his eyes. "We might not be able to kill you, but we have a thousand ways of making you beg for death."

The Jadeite hunter suggested, "You had better take out your stock of potions. No one here can defend against the two of them."

Zhang Lie stretched his arms and legs. "I was able to kill those regular-grade lifeforms instantly, so I can't even test out my newfound strength. It's good of the two of you to be willing to help me out."

Flamin sneered. "You won't give up without a fight, then."

Zhang Lie curled a finger at him. "Come take them from me if you can."

"You're in for it now!" Flamin struck immediately. From the fluctuations in his aura, it seemed that he had at least maxed out his mutated gene fragments and was halfway finished with his superior gene fragments—but that was meaningless against Zhang Lie.

He punched forward with a burst of genetic energy, sending Flamin flying into a nearby wall. His body caved in the wall, and despite his lackeys attempting to pull him out, they weren't able to succeed no matter how hard they tried.

The onlookers were shocked.

Was this truly a rookie who had just ascended?

Flamin was respectably strong even among the top hunters of the gathering point.

Flamin shouted, "What are all of you standing there for? Attack him!"

Genetic energy surged underneath Zhang Lie's feet, rippling out like waves and sending the hunters approaching him flying.

"[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, flinging the Milky Way hunters back.

A giant shark surfed on the waves and opened its bloodthirsty maw wide. Flamin's face was pale; he barely avoided peeing out of fear.

A fist obliterated the shark, turning the pale blue water-attuned genetic energy into ripples of water.

Zhang Lie was surprised to see a hunter of rather passable strength among this substandard crew. Black Armor had blocked the attack aimed at Flamin with a heavy fist.

Flamin's eyes widened in delight. "You really are reliable when I'm in need!"

Just then, however, Black Armor spat out a mouthful of blood. His eponymous black armor cracked, and he staggered to the ground, propping himself up with a single knee. His breathing had turned ragged, the sound like that of a broken bellows.

"What's wrong, Black Armor?!"

Zhang Lie laughed coldly. "If you can take [The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave] at 30% of its maximum strength, you must not be too weak."

Upon hearing Zhang Lie's words, Black Armor spat out an even larger mouthful of blood.

The genetic hunters that accompanied Flamin turned tail and tried to run.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes, sharp as a viper's. "When did I allow you to leave?"

Black genetic energy poured from his body, surrounding him like thick, dense clouds.

"[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 black energy shot toward the fleeing hunters with incredible corrosive strength. The hunters fell to the ground, staring at shock at their feet, which were now flesh and bone. Their bones sizzled as the genetic energy continued to corrupt their bodies.

The hunters knelt on the ground and pleaded for mercy.

"Please, let us go! We won't do it again!"

"We were forced into it!"

"Sir, please forgive us! Have mercy!"

Chapter 1299: A Lifeform Stampede

Flamin tossed a Restorative #3 at Black Armor. "Quick, use it!"

Zhang Lie didn't stop Black Armor.

After using Restorative #3, Black Armor's wounds healed at a rate visible to the naked eye. Black Armor roared and charged at Zhang Lie past the barrier of black, corrosive fog.

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

As Zhang Lie pointed a finger, black genetic energy transformed into a demonic serpent, snaking its way through the narrow tunnel and piercing Black Armor's chest instantly. Black Armor glanced down at his chest and stilled.

A hole was visible through his body, and he could see behind him by looking into it. Black Armor fell to the ground in shock and disbelief.

Zhang Lie blew at his fingers and sighed. "Far too weak..."

Flamin cried out, "What in the world are you?!"

Wasn't he supposed to be a newbie? Even a hunter with maxed peak gene fragments couldn't do what he had done!

Flamin cursed himself for listening to the Jadeite hunter and being consumed by his greed. It was apparent that this would be no easy opponent to take down.

As Zhang Lie walked ever closer, Flamin shouted shrilly, "Don't come over here!"

A sound like rumbling thunder echoed throughout the underground space, like that which would precede an earthquake or exploding volcano. The world shook.

Zhang Lie frowned. "What's going on?"

Just then, he could hear genetic hunters shouting, "A stampede, a stampede! Lifeforms from two hunting grounds are stampeding!"

"Where's Flamin? He has to muster a defense!"

Flamin's face paled. "A stampede..."

The hunting grounds of the fourth realm weren't artificial; instead, they were simply where a certain group of lifeforms tended to roam. Every so often, the lifeforms would stampede.

Genetic hunters were responsible for deflecting or turning back these stampedes, so each gathering point had its own leader and scouts.

Flamin laughed. "It looks like even the world is on my side! I'm the only one who can stop the stampede now. Without me, everyone will die."

There were many possible reasons for such stampedes. Perhaps a new king had been born among the population, or perhaps the population had grown too large to support. If the stampede managed to secure a larger patch of territory, the lifeforms would expand; otherwise, they would lose enough of their population to be sustainable again. Another possible reason was a large-scale migration.

It was possible that a strong member of the species had been born to a neighboring population, causing other species nearby to flee.

"Nonsense!"

Zhang Lie waved a hand, causing a bundle of black smoke to encircle Flamin like a poisonous serpent.

Flamin rolled on the ground, screaming. "What are you doing? Are you trying to destroy the gathering point and drag everyone down with you?!"

As Flamin screamed, flesh sloughed off his body.

Zhang Lie smirked. "Do you think I'd let you go and give you another chance to annoy me?"

The corrosion was so severe that pale bone could be seen on Flamin's body.

"You don't know just how frightening such beast stampedes are. Without me, everyone will die. Only I can organize a resistance in such a short period of time!"

Zhang Lie could sense a huge number of lifeforms approaching from all directions. They were mostly regular-grade lifeforms, with a few mutated-grade ones in the mix. He smirked. "It's been a while since I saw such a stampede. I wonder if I can stop it with my current strength?"

Flamin screamed, "You're far less dangerous than a beast stampede! You don't know just how insignificant an individual hunter is against their combined might—only by working together can we quell them!"

A single lifeform might not be particularly strong, but when they banded together, their combined strength was more than sufficient to fatigue even the strongest hunter.

Flamin shouted, "I know that you're very strong, but even your strength won't do anything against an endless stampede! You won't make a difference."

Half of Flamin's body had been corroded away by Zhang Lie's genetic energy, but his constitution and will to live forced him to keep speaking.

Flamin cried out, "If you save me, I'll let you go, and I swear I won't cause trouble for you in the future!"

The corrosion had consumed his body, leaving him only with a head.

Flamin immediately corrected himself. "I apologize. You killed my strongest hunter, and I'll need a replacement. You're very strong, and I won't be able to control you—instead, I'm willing to cede control over half the gathering point to you. We can defend against the stampede together."

Zhang Lie raised a foot. "Goodbye."

As his foot slowly descended, Flamin cried out, "I'll give you everything, the gathering point, all my possessions! I'll even be your dog!"

With a squelch like that of an exploding watermelon, Flamin's head was crushed.

Flamin's lackeys themselves were writhing and squirming like worms as the black, corrosive genetic energy consumed them.

The Jadeite hunter was among their number. He begged, "Please, let me go! I'll hand everything over. I don't even want the potions anymore—I'll return them all! Won't you spare me this once?"

"Let them accompany you to your death."

Zhang Lie jumped back as the ground underneath him tremored. A huge earth dragon emerged, sweeping all the hunters up with its mouthpiece.

The earth dragon looked very much like a centipede, or an armored snake. Its black scales were dotted with red, and its head was sharp and spiky. Its head unfolded like a flower, revealing row after row of sharp teeth, sticky saliva, and a long, flexible tongue.

The lifeform was shocked that Zhang Lie had avoided its sneak attack. It was just about to pounce forward when Zhang Lie struck first.

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

Zhang Lie punched forward, and the black serpent behind him shot forth.

The serpent corroded the lifeform's flesh, but Zhang Lie didn't hear the will of the fourth realm's announcement. It was evident that the earth dragon hadn't yet died; the lower half of its body was quivering madly, shocked and terrified by Zhang Lie's strength. It was about to burrow deep into the earth and escape when Zhang Lie punched forward and sent a blood dragon out at it.

Chapter 1300: Stopping the Stampede

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

As Zhang Lie punched forward, the blood dragon roared in rage and tore apart the earth dragon.

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

After claiming the remaining pieces of the dragon's body, Zhang Lie returned to the gathering point. He was attacked by a few more of these dragons, but Zhang Lie easily defeated them with just one punch each. However, their vitality and constitution meant that they didn't die that easily, and Zhang Lie had to spend more time killing them. As a result, it took him some time to get back to the gathering point.

By then, the demonic earth dragons had invaded the entire territory, along with a different species that looked like rats covered in ore.

Each rat was about the size of two people, and looked far more ferocious than the demonic earth dragon.

After killing one such rat, the will of the fourth realm announced, [You successfully killed a regular-grade earthvein rat. By consuming the flesh of the regular-grade earthvein rat, you may receive one to ten regular gene fragments.]

With a casual attack, Zhang Lie killed a dozen or so demonic earth dragons and earthvein rats simultaneously, lowering the pressure the other dragons had to face.

Zhang Lie waved down a genetic hunter. "Which hunting grounds are stampeding?"

The hunter glanced all around him in fear. "It's a hunting grounds rather far away from the gathering point, filled with regular-grade lifeforms."

There were benefits and drawbacks to having an underground space.

Subterranean spaces were largely free from random attacks from genetic lifeforms in the field, and the competition for territory and space that was so prevalent aboveground. The drawbacks, however, were equally evident. They would have to face attacks from subterranean lifeforms instead, fewer though they were.

The genetic lifeforms burrowed out of the ground all over; defending the gathering point would be no easier than it was aboveground.

The genetic hunter asked, "Have you seen Flamin? Only he can muster a defense and set up defensive lines to quell the stampede now!"

The genetic lifeforms had already made their way into the gathering point. Although individual hunters were stronger than individual lifeforms, they seemed to pour out without end. Without someone to lead and coordinate the defense, it was only a matter of time before the gathering point fell.

Flamin was key to that defense.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "He's dead."

The genetic hunter clutched his head in shock. "He's dead?! That's impossible! Black Armor's by his side. Flamin's a terrible man, and he frequently snatches resources from the rest of us, but he's maxed out his superior gene fragments, at the very least! How could he be dead?"

For Flamin, their leader, to be dead at such a critical moment... It looked as though the gathering point's remaining lifespan would be a matter of minutes or hours.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Don't worry, I'm not lying. I killed him myself, you see."

"Oh, is that so—you killed him?!"

"He tried to snatch what belonged to me, so I took care of him."

The genetic hunter cried out in anger and panic, "How could you have killed him? Flamin's the leader of the gathering point, with the strongest hunter around as his bodyguard! Who would be able to kill him?!"

The hunter was panicking to such an extent that he had all but turned incoherent.

"Believe me or not—it's up to you."

Although he didn't want to believe what Zhang Lie had said, it was true that Flamin and Black Armor hadn't shown up despite the invasion of lifeforms.

Flamin, who treated the entire gathering point like his personal possession, wouldn't allow such a stampede to go unchecked. Even if Zhang Lie hadn't killed him, he was likely in dire straits.

"How could you have killed him? He's not a good person, but he's still our leader! What are we going to do now? How are we going to survive this invasion? Our gathering point's done for! I have to flee—I can't stay here!"

Zhang Lie patted the hunter's shoulder in consolation. "It's not so bad. I'm here, aren't I?"

By then, however, the hunters were in full panic mode. Zhang Lie's words had no effect.

"Do you know where the lifeforms are coming from?"

The hunter continued murmuring to himself, "I have to run, I have to run! With the leader dead, we can't defend against even a stampede of regular-grade lifeforms!"

Irrked, Zhang Lie shouted, "I'm asking you where they're coming from!"

The hunter regained his senses. "They're coming from all over! How would I know in which direction they're coming?"

"Do you at least know where their usual hunting grounds are?"

The hunter pointed at the direction of their usual hunting grounds.

Zhang Lie charged forward in that direction as the genetic hunter turned his back to the gathering point and fled. To him, this gathering point was as good as dead.

Zhang Lie rushed toward the original hunting grounds, killing all the demonic earth dragons and earthvein rats he saw along the way.

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

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

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

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

The fastest way to stop a beast stampede, besides mustering a defense with hunters in the vicinity, was to take the initiative and destroy the genetic lifeforms' original hunting grounds.

Weaker gathering points simply didn't have the manpower for the latter option, but stronger ones combined both approaches.

One person wouldn't be able to defend against genetic lifeforms from all over, not even Zhang Lie, no matter how strong he was. Unlike Sun Xiaowu, he couldn't transform into a hundred thousand clones.

As such, the fastest and most convenient way for him to stop a stampede was to make use of his own strength to destroy the lifeforms' hunting grounds and force them to return.

The deeper he went into their territory, the more lifeforms barred his way.

"You won't stop me now!"

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

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

"[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 region and knocking aside everything in his way.

The genetic lifeforms before him were either obliterated by the flood or washed away. The flood removed all obstacles in his way.

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

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

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

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

A huge rumble shook the ground.

All the genetic hunters at the gathering point were terrified. They didn't know what the source of the sound could be, and many of them suspected that an even more terrifying genetic lifeform had emerged. Many of the hunters thought to flee.

As the flood reached the end of the passageway, the waves burst apart and the air filled with echoes of Zhang Lie's signature genetic energy, shattering space and swallowing up all life in its vicinity. Boulders flew up as a storm devoured everything in sight.

After Zhang Lie's attack passed by, the passageway was wider and more spacious than it ever had been.

However, it could no longer be described as a passageway. The passageway had burst apart and expanded to such a large extent that it looked more like a gymnasium that extended endlessly forward.

Zhang Lie strode forward. The genetic lifeforms barring his way had all been cleared away, and the pale blue storm of genetic energy that he had released had even opened up a hole aboveground. Light shone down from above, revealing a mess of blood and body parts.

The demonic earth dragons and earthvein rats in the hunting ground had all been killed, and the remaining ones were hurriedly scampering and digging away.

The stampeding lifeforms did fear death, but the hunters were uniformly too weak to pose a threat to them.

"I suppose this is where the hunting ground is located..."

Zhang Lie could still sense, to his surprise, a few weak pinpricks of life. A battered demonic earth dragon slowly arose from underneath a pile of rubble.

"To think there were still a few living ones... I don't know whether to call you unlucky or lucky."

Lucky, to have survived Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]; unlucky, to have encountered Zhang Lie, and hence to die.

"[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. The demonic earth dragon's head fell to the ground.

A raging shark opened its maw wide and began tearing at the demonic earth dragons.

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

Zhang Lie hummed in surprise. "A mutated-grade lifeform? No wonder it was so resilient as to have survived [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]."

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar] had shocked all the other lifeforms in the vicinity. The demonic earth dragons and earthvein rats fled without looking back, solving the gathering point's immediate crisis.

Zhang Lie tried searching for a mutated-grade earthvein rat, but it seemed that there were none to be found. In the end, he gave up and returned to the disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard.

"Qianlin, long time no see! I missed you."

Li Qianlin seemed surprised. "Why are you back so quickly?"

Zhang Lie retrieved some dragon and rat carcasses from his extradimensional storage. He slumped into a chair, steepled his hands under his jaw, and parodied, "May these scorching-hot creatures from deep underground, steeped in darkness, burned by eternal sun, be transformed into delicacies. So spake I, drenched in the blood of slaughter, my will consumed by eternal hunger."

Li Qianlin stared at him. "Speak properly."

"Can you make me some good food out of the flesh of these lifeforms, like a soup or something? I usually just roast them, and they taste fine that way. I was just fighting some beasts, and now I'm hungry."

Li Qianlin sighed. "It shouldn't be a problem."

She picked up the carcasses with some disdain. "These lifeforms have been pulped."

Zhang Lie sighed. "These are some of the better ones—I don't dare to show you the ones that really are just meat paste."

He intended to bring the remaining carcasses back to the gathering point to see if he could exchange them for the flesh of other regular-grade lifeforms.

Li Qianlin was an excellent chef, and she quickly transformed the dragon and rat meat into delicacies. Zhang Lie had grown quite hungry after the battle, and he ate her cooking with gusto. Announcements from the will of the fourth realm continued to ring throughout his head.

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade demonic earth dragon, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 11]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade demonic earth dragon, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 12]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade demonic earth dragon, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 13]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade demonic earth dragon, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 14]

He subsequently consumed the mutated-grade demonic earth dragon.

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade demonic earth dragon, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 1]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade demonic earth dragon, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 2]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade demonic earth dragon, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 1]

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, 30; Mutated, 10; 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 Wurm (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Dragonwhale (disaster), Mismeld Clam (disaster)

After finishing his meal and absorbing his gene fragments, Zhang Lie waved farewell to Li Qianlin. She smiled with happiness and helped Zhang Lie straighten his clothes. "Go on. I wish you success. Remember to be safe."

Her relationship with Zhang Lie had taken an unusual turn, but it was, in most aspects, the life she had wanted.

Zhang Lie sighed. "Don't make it sound like I'm about to leave on a long journey!"