

U. Warlord 281

Chapter 281: Forced Transferral

The fourth transformation of [Ninecarp Transformation], the dragonturtle, gave off a sense of overwhelming authority, a large part of which emanated from the tablets on its back.

The fifth transformation's qilin possessed a type of genetic energy that seemed to go against all the tenets of usual frameworks. The energy took the form of a burning pyre, but Zhang Lie knew that, despite its exterior appearance, it was actually an evolution of his water-attuned genetic energy.

The effects of [Ninecarp Transformation], Zhang Lie's most prized possession, had gone beyond his wildest imagination. He now had five types of genetic energy at his disposal.

A dual-attunement framework like [Rondo of Wind and Storm] was already an extremely rare existence. As far as Zhang Lie was aware, there were sage-grade frameworks accessible in higher realms that were triple-attunement, but Zhang Lie's [Ninecarp Transformation] was already at five attunements despite only being at the level of a peak-grade framework.

Zhang Lie had wondered whether it was really the case that [Ninecarp Transformation] would ultimately give him access to nine elemental attunements at its limit; he wondered no more. He marshaled the energy of his genetic core to surround his body and the disaster-grade lifeform's exterior shell.

As the refinement energy entered the mix, it looked as though Zhang Lie suddenly became wrapped up in a seven-colored cocoon. Within the cocoon, Zhang Lie began to infuse genetic energy into the disaster-grade lifeform's exterior shell, combining it with all sorts of precious materials that he had amassed for this very purpose.

As befitting its original form, this would be a suit of crystalline armor. While Zhang Lie had established a form for the armor, it had yet to solidify. The next step was the final, and most complicated, step: to meld this suit of armor with his genetic core so that it would fully become part of his body.

The cocoon of energy surrounding Zhang Lie dissipated as the bulk of the energy, along with the genetic armor, melded with Zhang Lie's body.

[The refinement process has concluded. Congratulations on advancing to the second realm!]

The moment Zhang Lie's genetic armor was wholly incorporated into his body, the will of the world rang out in his mind, and Zhang Lie's data automatically appeared for his inspection.

Zhang Lie: a peak-grade lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX, Ninecarp Transformation, Fifth Form: Qilin

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

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 10; Disaster, 10

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Galewolf (mutated), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Venombane Scorpion (superior), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Forest Wolfman (superior), Flamewing (superior), Runic Salamander (superior), Moonlight Wyrm (peak)

A... peak-grade lifeform?! Zhang Lie was shocked by the very first line alone.

The will of the world had categorized him as a peak-grade lifeform! In principle, the first realm of the dimensional world should only have been able to produce superior-grade lifeforms, so those hunters that ascended to the second realm would be at most the equivalent of superior-grade lifeforms.

The moonlight wyrm and its ilk were exceptions, but, it seemed, so was Zhang Lie.

[Because your status exceeds the threshold of the first realm, you are unable to return to the first realm. Congratulations on entering the second realm!]

The next notification, however, hit him like a bucket of cold water. There was far too much he still had to do in the first realm—his sister had just entered the dimensional world, and he hadn't been prepared for any of this!

Zhang Lie's original intention of acquiring disaster gene fragments had found him barely surviving with his life, then forcibly expelled from the first world.

[Teleportation commencing in ten seconds.]

[Ten, nine,...]

"Wait! I refuse!"

A miracle happened. The will of the world, which had never responded to any lifeform before, rejected Zhang Lie's request.

[Unacceptable. Your existence has already wounded the first realm. Please obey the laws of the dimensional world and advance.]

The extradimensional space around him began to melt away. He felt as though he was being forcibly expelled, but the will of the world seemed to be unusually weak. The feeling of expulsion was strong, but not entirely irresistible, and Zhang Lie certainly didn't intend on being expelled against his will.

Pitch-black genetic energy exploded from his body, destroying the extradimensional space. Zhang Lie's surroundings changed in the flash of an eye.

Chapter 282: Pressure of the Void

To be frank, Zhang Lie wasn't aware of the current limits to his own strength. After all, it was the first time in either of his lives that he had managed to obtain disaster gene fragments, and he had underestimated their potency.

Following the usual rules of the dimensional world, one superior gene fragment was stronger than ten mutated gene fragments, so ten disaster gene fragments would be superior to a hundred peak gene fragments.

In other words, Zhang Lie was strong enough to completely overwhelm the natural law of the first realm of the dimensional world. Breaking apart the extradimensional space in which he was trapped, Zhang Lie found himself back in the Blacksteel settlement, a familiar location that nevertheless felt strange.

None of the buildings or infrastructure had changed; however, all the greenery within the settlement seemed to have wilted over the course of a single night.

Furthermore, Zhang Lie couldn't sense a single lifeform in the entirety of the settlement. Just what was going on? Shouldn't the Blacksteel settlement be in the midst of the rebuilding process? Why wasn't there a single hunter—no, a single living creature!—around?

What could have happened? Had another disaster struck after he vanished? This was the only plausible explanation Zhang Lie could think of, but that didn't seem right, either.

As far as he knew, after the appearance of the disaster-grade lifeform, the first realm of the dimensional world would welcome a long stretch of peace and prosperity, without even the barest sign of a beast stampede.

Mired in his thoughts, Zhang Lie heard the will of the world.

[Your continued presence in this realm is warping natural law. Please ascend to the second realm immediately!]

[Your continued presence in this realm is warping natural law. Please ascend to the second realm immediately!]

[Your continued presence...]

Zhang Lie ignored the warning. It was far more important that he figure out just what had happened to the Blacksteel settlement, to his sister, to his apprentices, and to the members of Team Zenith.

[Warning! Your continued presence in this realm will cause irreparable damage! Expulsion procedure commencing!]

[Warning! Your continued presence in this realm will cause irreparable damage!]

[Warning! Your continued presence...]

Zhang Lie felt an immense force, much like a formless hand, reaching down toward him.

"I've told you, I don't intend on advancing for the moment!"

Of course he wasn't going to leave before figuring out what had gone wrong within the Blacksteel settlement!

He shot a beam of black genetic energy into the air, fending off the formless hand that sought to capture him. A huge shock rumbled through the ground. The devastating force of the attack caused the skies above the first realm to warp, and cracks began to propagate all across the realm.

The will of the world, like a persistent routine, continued to enforce natural law; Zhang Lie, stubborn as he was, refused to be compelled to another's will. Neither party relented.

Energy roiled through the cracked and leaking skies, as though an apocalypse was nigh. Zhang Lie found, to his shock, that all his surroundings were quickly vanishing, as though some god or deity had wiped the world clean.

As he glanced into the distance, he saw that the greenery from afar was quickly wilting and decomposing to fuel the will of the world's strength. Furthermore, in places too far away for him to see, countless superior-grade lifeforms had perished because of the clash between him and the will of the world.

The will of the world was, in essence, a godlike being, one that would support and nurture all the lifeforms in the realm, except for outsiders like Zhang Lie. In order to deal with Zhang Lie, it had had to start consuming the lifeforce of the lifeforms within the first realm.

Back when the will of the world forcefully initiated the transferral procedure for Zhang Lie, it had done so as well, but Zhang Lie was far easier to control back then. It was sufficient for the will of the world to consume the greenery around the Blacksteel settlement, along with the low-grade lifeforms nearby.

Now, on the other hand, Zhang Lie's strength had been augmented after the transferral procedure, and he could easily distort natural law with his attacks. In order to suppress him, the will of the world would need a far stronger source of energy.

Zhang Lie didn't know why the will of the world was forcing him out of the first realm; after all, even if he was recognized as a peak-grade lifeform, hadn't the peak-grade moonlight wyrm managed to make a home for itself in the first realm? Why hadn't it been expelled?

That said, Zhang Lie was aware of the consequences of his continued resistance. Within just ten seconds, all that he could see had turned into a wasteland, and the Blacksteel settlement itself had been reduced to nothing.

As he glanced all around him and recalled the will of the world's urgent messages, the truth crept unbidden to his mind: could the calamity that had befallen the Blacksteel settlement, that had eliminated all life within, be... him?

If that were the case, the more he resisted his expulsion, the more destruction he would wreak on the realm, but if he didn't resist, he would no longer be able to return.

What was he to do?

Chapter 283: Entering the Second Realm

If he were to give up now, he wouldn't be able to take care of his sister and his two apprentices during their formative growth. He had intended on allowing them to acclimate themselves to the first realm before he ascended, but under these circumstances, he would be unable to do so without causing irreparable damage to the realm.

This wasn't something he wanted to see; after all, all that he gained, he had gained here. Furthermore, the first realm was meant to be a training ground of sorts for incoming hunters, and it served a tremendous purpose. If Zhang Lie were to destroy it here because of his stubbornness, what would Zhang Hanxiang and the other incoming hunters do?

Zhang Lie sighed. "Please stop. I'll agree to ascend!"

The formless hand above Zhang Lie immediately dissolved. Once the pressure abated, Zhang Lie reined in his genetic energy, and the cracks surrounding the Blacksteel settlement, along with the void underneath Zhang Lie's feet, slowly began to recover.

The moment Zhang Lie gave up his resistance, his body was instantly teleported into the extradimensional space in which his transferral procedure was held—or, more precisely, into a new copy of that extradimensional space.

A pale blue teleportation array sprung up around Zhang Lie's body. As it flared, Zhang Lie's surroundings turned dark, and the array activated.

The next moment, he found himself in the second of the five known realms of the dimensional world, that of the sura. The first realm, the realm of void, was akin to a tutorial for incoming hunters, whereas the second realm was a battlefield.

There were far more intelligent lifeforms in this realm than just those inhabitants of the Milky Way.

Fortunately, these alien races were inimical to one another, and there was constant fighting over several locations in the second realm rich in usual resources. If not for the discord between these races, the inhabitants of the Milky Way would hardly have dared to venture into this world.

The reason the second realm was known as the sura realm was because it was dominated by lifeforms of the so-called sura race. Mankind was a relatively weak force in this realm, and only had four cities under its control: the cities of Feng, Qi, Ming, and Wang.

Even these cities didn't represent absolute safety. Initially, mankind had built eight such cities, four of which had been destroyed due to coordinated incursions from the sura race, who had done so because of a fad for human flesh—yes, for that alone, the sura clan had found and destroyed four of humanity's cities.

There had been a fiasco about this entire affair, and several of the highest authorities of mankind had even contemplated transgressing into the second realm to punish the sura, but the five realms of the dimensional world all had rules and laws restricting them from doing so.

As such, they could only watch on as mankind defended itself. The sura, native to the second realm, were fierce and fearsome warriors, men and women alike. Their strength and numbers were far superior to those of mankind, even to all the lifeforms of the Milky Way at large.

And the inhabitants of the second realm weren't just these sura. Barely weaker than them were races such as the mara and the demonic ants, who were themselves far stronger than the humans.

In the second realm, mankind was a weak existence.

The Qi valley was where the teleportation array in the city of Qi connecting the first and second realms of the dimensional world was located, and it was kept under heavy patrol at all times.

After all, this was where hunters fresh from the first realm would arrive. They would spend half a year here as a recruit in the armed forces, before being permitted to enter the main city as a one-star warrior.

Memories of Zhang Lie's past life flashed through his mind even as a piercing shout interrupted his thoughts.

"You there, yes, you! What're you doing just standing there? Come over here! Don't block those behind you!" A silver-armored hunter motioned for him to step forward.

Zhang Lie stepped off the teleportation array and asked, "May I ask which city this array is associated with?"

"We're in Qi," the hunter replied gruffly.

Zhang Lie's eyes widened. Qi—the will of the first realm had disadvantaged him from the very beginning!

"If there's nothing else, follow the party of soldiers ahead of you!" The hunter pointed at a small team of hunters in front of where he was standing.

"Ah, thank you." Zhang Lie was well aware of the rules of the second realm, and he rushed toward that team of hunters.

"Another newcomer! And clad in a rather strange get-up, too. Fancy dressing up like the champion of the Void Cup, Zhang Lie, do you? Which settlement are you from?"

Chapter 284: The Qi Barracks

The members of the hunting party all looked at him, and one even teased him about his appearance. What the man could hardly have expected was that his remark had hit the nail on the head.

After all, Zhang Lie was notorious for dressing up in such a fashion. Zhang Lie himself didn't try to hide his identity; there was a chance that he would have to be with the hunting party for half a year, and he surely wouldn't be able to hide his identity for so long.

"You mean... you're Zhang Lie?!"

"Zhang Lie of Ning, the champion of the Void Cup?"

Everyone present was aware of Zhang Lie's fame, the newcomers who had just arrived at the second realm, and even the party leader in charge of looking over them. The two hunters at the very back of the party reacted the most quickly: they turned around and stared at Zhang Lie's half-exposed face.

One of them, the one who had teased him, tried to remove Zhang Lie's hood in a moment of curiosity, but just as he reached out, Zhang Lie took a half-step back and removed his hood himself.

"I-It really is Zhang Lie!"

"I can't believe I'm in the same party as Zhang Lie! Haha, this is something I'll be able to brag about for life!"

The two closest hunters both scabbled for a writing instrument.

"An autograph!"

"Right, right, won't you give us an autograph?" the two of them requested, prompting the other hunters in the party to act as well.

They retrieved beast pelts, canine teeth, and all sorts of other items for Zhang Lie to sign.

"Surely we'll have plenty of opportunities to do that later—why don't we head to base camp now? We're in the same party, after all. Don't you agree, team leader?" Zhang Lie couldn't bear the thought of signing more autographs after his nauseating session at the Blacksteel Inn, so he immediately appealed to the leader of this party for assistance.

What Zhang Lie didn't know was that the leader, Zhou Xiao, had likewise been rummaging through his bag in search of something that Zhang Lie could sign. Only after Zhang Lie spoke did he recall his position and assignment, and he hurriedly stuffed the items back into his bag.

"Right, Mr. Zhang Lie's exactly right. We'll have plenty of time for that in the future. Our priority now should be to get back to base."

Although there was a little grumbling, everyone listened to the party leader. Indeed, as Zhang Lie himself had claimed, if they were to be in the same party, then there would be plenty of opportunities for them to get an autograph from him.

The two hunters at the very end sidled up to him. They might not be able to get his autograph now, but surely a story or two wouldn't hurt?

"Zhang Lie, won't you tell us about what happened during the Void Cup?"

"Right! We all heard that a high-ranking member of the winged tried to assassinate you—"

"Oh, that's old news! Can we hear about the disaster that just happened in the first realm of the dimensional world? I heard that, even before the disaster happened, you informed the military about the impending incident, and that you were the first to head into the dimensional world after the disaster. What did you know about this incident beforehand?"

"And what happened during your three months of secluded cultivation? Apparently, you caused the Blacksteel Inn to collapse, and then the vegetation all around the settlement withered. Did something happen to you in the meantime?"

By that time, all the other hunters had gathered around him, asking all sorts of questions.

As he tried to fend them off, he gleaned quite a bit of information: his transferral procedure had lasted almost three months, and the destruction of the Blacksteel settlement did have something to do with him.

The party of hunters reached the army barracks in just a few minutes' walk. By that point, the party leader Zhou Xiao had already informed his superiors that Zhang Lie was in his party, so the commander of the Qi forces, Su Hong, was personally standing outside the barracks to welcome him when they arrived

Su Hong was a scion of the Su clan of Ning; he was from a younger generation than Su Feng, and had heard quite a few tales about him from Su Feng when he returned home for a visit. Su Feng had specially advised Su Hong to treat Zhang Lie politely if Zhang Lie were to arrive in the second realm at the Qi valley.

That was before the Void Cup commenced, so Su Hong had scoffed at Su Feng's request, but by now, he had relinquished all his pride. After all, the hunter standing in front of him was the champion of the Void Cup, the only hunter of Earth who had managed such a feat.

Even the governor of Qi, who had been in secluded cultivation, was making his way over.

"I, Su Hong of the Qi barracks, welcome Dragonlord General Zhang Lie!"

The party of hunters headed to the Qi barracks was stunned by the formation of hunters awaiting them. Dragonlord General? When had Zhang Lie taken on such a title?

Even Zhang Lie himself had to think for a moment before recalling that it was the direct upgrade to his title of dragonsoul warrior. Although it didn't grant him command over any of the army's forces, he was indeed to be treated as a general in terms of military affairs.

Su Hong was part of the military; even though they were in the dimensional world, and such etiquette could be ignored here, it wasn't improper for him to acknowledge Zhang Lie's title, either.

Su Hong had no choice, after all. He was older than Zhang Lie, and in principle had the higher status, but the Su clan head himself had instructed him to treat Zhang Lie with the same courtesy as the clan head. To reconcile these viewpoints, Su Hong had to appeal to military rank.

Chapter 285: Entering the City

Su Hong's decision perturbed Zhang Lie. While he hadn't intended on hiding his identity, he didn't want to be treated as a high-profile celebrity, either. Now that even Su Hong was addressing him as a general, how was he supposed to maintain a low profile?

"Please don't address me by military rank here, Battalion Commander Su Hong! You're the one in charge here; I'm just a new recruit!"

At the very least, it seemed that Su Hong was being sincere, and Zhang Lie would certainly reciprocate that sincerity. Su Hong thought that he was being modest, but before Su Hong could respond, Zhang Lie felt a strong pulse of genetic energy coming from the left flank of the barracks.

Zhang Lie began circulating his own genetic energy, and he was about to warn Su Hong when laughter emerged from that direction.

"If your skills aren't sufficient to deem you a general, Zhang Lie, then no one's skills would be!" A man had emerged almost out of nowhere.

"We greet the governor of Qi!" all the hunters in the barracks shouted immediately, shocking Zhang Lie and the other newcomers in his party.

The governor of Qi? He had come to welcome Zhang Lie himself? Only then did the other newcomers realize just how superior Zhang Lie was to them. If they were the only newcomers, not even the battalion commander would have made an appearance, let alone the governor of Qi himself.

He looked to be a man in his forties, with sun-darkened skin and a bristly beard with hairs that looked like steel needles. To Zhang Lie, he appeared more like a valiant commander than a lord of a city.

"I'm Xiao Zhengyang, governor of Qi. The moment I heard of your arrival, I wanted to meet you in person, Zhang Lie!"

"It's an honor to have you welcome me personally, Governor Xiao. I hope I'm not a disappointment compared to all the rumors being spread around."

"Disappointment? No, of course not! I'm amazed that you're still so humble given your accomplishments!"

"You overpraise me, Governor Xiao. I'm just a newcomer to the second realm, and there's certainly a lot more I still have to learn in terms of experience."

"I have to say, I really like promising young hunters like you. I don't think there's any need for you to remain in the barracks, especially given your ability. If you'd like, I'll extend you an offer to join the special forces of Qi," Xiao Zhengyang proposed.

Zhang Lie thought for a moment. "I'll gladly accept, Governor Xiao!"

Xiao Zhengyang then turned back to Su Hong. "Su Hong, I'll be taking him away, then. What he's supposed to learn from the barracks, I'll have the special forces teach him."

"Yes, Governor!" Su Hong was somewhat unwilling to see Zhang Lie leave; after all, he was the champion of the Void Cup, and the head of the Su clan had wanted him to develop a good relationship with Zhang Lie. However, he certainly wouldn't be able to countermand the governor of Qi, especially after Zhang Lie had agreed.

"In that case, let's go now!" Xiao Zhengyang beckoned for Zhang Lie to follow him. A pair of wings sprouted from his back, and he flew off with a gust of wind.

Zhang Lie bowed toward Su Hong, then shot into the air as well.

The two of them were headed toward the main city of Qi, quite some distance away from the barracks. They were moving so quickly that the air seemed to distort where they passed.

Xiao Zhengyang seemed to be intent on testing Zhang Lie's abilities, and he sped up thrice in rapid succession. Even so, Zhang Lie followed a fixed distance behind him, no shorter and no longer.

Xiao Zhengyang smiled. "Not bad! But can you keep up now?"

His speed suddenly increased by so much that he broke the sound barrier, causing a gigantic boom in the air. Genetic energy trailing in his wake, he was almost out of sight by the time Zhang Lie reacted.

Nevertheless, Zhang Lie didn't panic. Summoning his reserves, he shot through the air like a ray of darkness, catching up to Xiao Zhengyang within a second at most.

Xiao Zhengyang's eyes widened. He was a peak existence even within the second realm, and this was essentially his top speed. Even then, Zhang Lie had easily caught up to him, and it looked as though he could travel even faster. Just what sort of hunter was he?!

Rather than push himself beyond his limits, he continued rushing toward the city at his current speed. Two streaks of light shot through the city. Because of Xiao Zhengyang's presence, Zhang Lie was able to enter the heavily guarded city without any resistance whatsoever.

"Haha, good lad! I was worried that you would be bullied for entering the special forces without any experience whatsoever, but it looks as though they'll be lucky not to get bullied by you!" Xiao Zhengyang clapped Zhang Lie on the shoulder.

Clearly, Zhang Lie had passed Xiao Zhengyang's evaluation. His speed and dark, mysterious genetic energy left a strong impression on Xiao Zhengyang, and he didn't intend on probing Zhang Lie's strength further. Given the fluctuations in genetic energy emanating from Zhang Lie, he was at least at the level of a peak superior-grade hunter in the second realm, meaning that he was almost at the realm's limits despite just having entered it.

Xiao Zhengyang had heard rumors that Zhang Lie had managed to defeat a peak second-realm hunter at his dojo's opening ceremony, but he had waved it off as mere hearsay.

Now, however, after meeting and inspecting Zhang Lie for himself, he had to admit that the rumors might even have been an understatement—he seemed to be even stronger than Martial Sage Hong Tianqi while he was in the second realm. It was rumored that even the Martial Sage himself had suffered in the second realm, but unless Zhang Lie were to go too deep into the regions controlled by the asura, there was little threat he would face.

He had been somewhat worried about whether or not the special forces troops would try to bully him on account of his sudden insertion into the special forces as a newbie, but now, he was more worried about whether those bullies would escape unscathed.

"If any of the troops challenge you, I hope you won't be too harsh on them," Xiao Zhengyang advised.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Please don't worry, Governor Xiao. I know what to do."

Xiao Zhengyang nodded, then turned to a nearby attendant. "Summon the troop leader of the special forces, Zhou Luan!"

Chapter 286: Troop Leader Zhou Liao

"Yes, Governor!" The attendant ran off with Governor Xiao's message.

"Well, the special forces' barracks is quite some distance away, so let's have a chat inside first." Xiao Zhengyang was getting more and more enamored with Zhang Lie, and Zhang Lie himself had no reason to refuse.

Governor Xiao's manor, like Governor Xiao himself, gave off the same feeling: simple and straightforward. Stone sculptures of prominent hunters adorned his estate, a style that suited Zhang Lie's tastes as well.

Zhang Lie had heard of Xiao Zhengyang's name before, but in his past life, he had never met the man in person. After all, he had hardly been able to reach such vaunted heights.

His meeting with Governor Xiao today validated the claims and rumors that he had heard about him in the past. Soon in the future, the sura would once again come for mankind. Xiao Zhengyang was the only one of the city governors who chose to fight to their death without retreating so as to secure the safety of the troops and civilians within. Allegedly, in order to avoid being taken as a slave, he even self-destructed at the end of the fight, taking down a whole wave of sura with him.

To the past Zhang Lie, this had just been a tale of remembrance. Now, however, he had become a member of Qi, and he too would have to face the sura invasion. Furthermore, after getting to know him a little, he was favorably inclined toward Governor Xiao.

They passed through a rather large courtyard and into a meeting room. Xiao Zhengyang motioned for Zhang Lie to sit by his side, as though they were already close friends.

"Here, have a taste of this bloodvein tea!"

"Bloodvein tea?" Zhang Lie stared at the proffered cup of tea doubtfully, the very image of a country bumpkin.

"Indeed, bloodvein tea! It's a superior type of tea leaf, extremely rare even in the second realm. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't even let them smell such a delicacy!"

Zhang Lie didn't know quite how to respond to his generosity. After all, they had met each other for the first time not fifteen minutes ago, but Xiao Zhengyang was already treating him like an old friend.

"Thank you, Governor Xiao!" He lifted the cup of tea to his mouth and took a tiny sip. The tea was refreshing, with a bittersweet aftertaste that remained at the tip of his tongue. A unique fragrance suffused his nostrils. Zhang Lie's eyes widened. "This is good tea!"

Governor Xiao smiled. While awaiting Zhou Liao's arrival, the two of them had more tea as they chatted with each other.

Zhou Liao arrived within ten minutes, marching stiffly into the room. When he saw Zhang Lie, his eyes widened momentarily before he turned to the governor. "At your service, Governor Xiao."

Governor Xiao told Zhang Lie, "Here, let me introduce the two of you. This is Zhou Liao, my direct subordinate responsible for the special forces of Qi, as well as your new troop leader. He'll be responsible for arranging your entrance into the special forces."

Then, he turned to face Zhou Liao. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you who he is, do I?"

Zhou Liao seemed to be in his thirties, with piercing eagle-like eyes and a vigilance about him that reminded him of the specialized Blackwind troops under Su Feng's direct command.

"Champion of the Void Cup, the new star of China, the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie... it's a pleasure to meet you in person." Zhou Liao relaxed as he looked Zhang Lie up and down, admiration and excitement warring in his eyes. He was excited that Zhang Lie had ended up in Qi, that he was about to become one of his men, that they would be working together for quite some time afterwards.

Indeed, he was already itching to spar with him.

"It's a pleasure," Zhang Lie replied politely.

"Alright, then! Let me be direct. From today onwards, Zhang Lie will join the special forces of Qi as a new recruit. Zhou Liao, find some space for him in your troop—and warn those hunters not to mess with him, or they're the ones who will suffer!"

Zhou Liao hesitated. "Governor Xiao, what of those recruits who have been training hard to join the special forces? Zhang Lie's certainly qualified, but unless there's a demonstration of some sort, I'm sure there'll be friction from those hunters who weren't selected owing to his arrival..."

He glanced at Zhang Lie intermittently, trying to discern his thoughts, but Zhang Lie himself revealed nothing.

Instead, Xiao Zhengyang remarked to Zhang Lie, "They're all young, hotblooded recruits. Don't hurt them too badly—they haven't had it easy, you hear me?"

Zhou Liao frowned again. Those hunters who wanted to join the special forces of Qi had been in the second realm for five Earth-years—in other words, they had spent five decades in the second realm! They had almost all maxed out their gene capacities, and their genetic armor, framework, and techniques were perfectly compatible.

How could Zhang Lie, who had just arrived in the second realm, be able to challenge them?

Although he was certainly strong relative to first-realm hunters, and it was even rumored that he had killed two elite hunters of the second realm some time ago, surely those elites were still far weaker than the special forces recruits of Qi. And Zhang Lie hadn't even had a chance to acquire any gene fragments from the second realm! Did he have any hope of victory?

Zhou Liao suspected that Governor Xiao was overestimating Zhang Lie's skills. Indeed, Zhang Lie had no equal in the first realm of the dimensional world, and he had contributed dramatically to the view of mankind in the Milky Way at large, but this wasn't the first realm anymore—it was the second!

All the gene fragments that he had acquired in the first realm had been incorporated into his genetic code, so he would have to start collecting them from scratch from the lifeforms of the second realm.

Did Governor Xiao really think that, with nothing but his base strength from the first realm, Zhang Lie would be able to challenge seasoned veterans of the second?

Zhang Lie smiled again. "Please don't worry, Governor Xiao. Would you prefer that I simply take part in the selection process for joining the Qi special forces? It seems as though that would save quite a bit of trouble for both of us."

Chapter 287: In Search of Zhang Lie

Did Zhang Lie really think he would be able to pass the Qi special forces' selection process so easily? More shockingly, Governor Xiao even seemed to agree!

Governor Xiao immediately shook his head. "Don't, don't! I don't want you to ruin the selection process for everyone else. Enter the special forces troops directly!"

Zhang Lie chuckled bitterly. "Alright, I understand."

"In that case, what are you waiting for? Zhou Liao, leave with your new team member!" Xiao Zhengyang, relieved that Zhang Lie had given up on his plan to mess up the selection process, sighed in relief.

However, before Zhou Liao could say anything, Zhang Lie interjected, "Please wait a moment, Governor Xiao! I advanced to the second realm by accident, and my emergency transceiver has

been destroyed. It's been three months since my friends and family have heard from me, and I'd like to inform them of my safety if possible. It would only take half a day at most!"

Xiao Zhengyang cocked an eyebrow. "Advanced... by accident? I heard that there was some commotion in the Blacksteel settlement today. Was that related to your advancement, by any chance?"

"Somewhat related, Governor Xiao. I'm afraid it would take me too long to explain things fully at the moment..."

Xiao Zhengyang scrutinized Zhang Lie again from head to toe. "You've already left a teleportation marker behind, so return home and come back quickly."

"Thank you for understanding, Governor Xiao!"

"Enough, enough! This isn't a formal occasion, so there's no need to address me as governor this and governor that. Just Xiao's fine. To be honest, I was in the same battalion as Yan Long, and he's already told me a lot about you."

Zhang Lie bowed, then turned to leave with Zhou Liao, who was having a hard time processing just what Governor Xiao had said. He was known to be the most stubborn lord of the cities in the second realm—he couldn't recall a time when he had seen him so friendly, and to a newcomer, no less!

Given this unusual relationship between the governor and Zhang Lie, how was he supposed to act as Zhang Lie's troop leader? What, was he supposed to just let Zhang Lie do as he pleased?

While Zhou Liao was deep in thought, Zhang Lie entered the teleportation array and returned to Ning.

In a conference room within the Zenith Dojo, Zhang Hong, Lin Xiu, Zhang Hanxiang, the members of Team Zenith, and the established staff of the dojo were all gathered for an important meeting.

"It's already been three months! Where's my brother? Are you certain that he wasn't a victim of the disaster at the Blacksteel settlement?" Zhang Hanxiang's eyes were clouded with worry.

Ever since Zhang Lie entered secluded cultivation in the dimensional world, no one had seen him or managed to communicate with him. After his departure, there was news of a commotion that he had caused, followed by some sort of freak event that killed and injured quite a few hunters in the Blacksteel Inn.

Subsequently, Zhang Lie's genetic energy seemed to vanish into thin air, and the Blacksteel Inn's staff didn't find him within the inn in the aftermath. It was evident that Zhang Lie had chosen to head to some less populated region to avoid causing such unwanted mishaps, so none of them had been too concerned about his lack of communication.

Even a month without news had been bearable; they were all well aware of Zhang Lie's skill. They didn't think there was anything left in the first realm of the dimensional world that could challenge him. In other words, if he still hadn't reached out to them, he had to have been cultivating in solitude.

After two months, however, the members of Team Zenith and the Zenith Dojo couldn't sit still any longer. Zhang Lie had never lost contact with them for so long before, but in order to avoid a big commotion, they had chosen not to publicize his disappearance. Instead, they would conduct their own secret investigation.

That process had taken a month, and even after the members of Team Zenith searched through every possible location they could think of where Zhang Lie might be located, they were unable to find anything. Zhang Lie had vanished into thin air. As his disappearance dragged on, the hunters were becoming more and more worried.

They had had such a meeting thrice over the last ten days, and it was evident how worried they all were about Zhang Lie.

"I can confirm that there were quite a number of fans around the inn in the afternoon before his disappearance. With our captain's strength, no one would be able to kidnap him so silently and stealthily without his making a fuss, so he had to have chosen to leave the Blacksteel settlement himself. However, we simply don't know where he's gone. I don't think that there's anything we can do. Who's to say that our captain won't be back in the next day or two?" Fang Yi explained his perspective. As a member of Team Zenith, he was confident in Zhang Lie's abilities, and he was certain that Zhang Lie could handle whatever came his way.

"You're not wrong, but I simply feel that something has to be wrong if he hasn't communicated with us for so long. Let's continue trying to search for him—if nothing else, we can stand guard while he cultivates," Sun Mengmeng suggested.

She wanted to do something for her captain given how much he had done for them.

"Right, I agree with my sister! Surely we can't do nothing after our captain's been missing for so long? At the very least, I can't just sit here!" Sun Xiaowu added fervently.

"Right, it's already been three months. We've already searched in every location we could think of. Should we contact Commanders Su Feng and Yan Long to try to get their help?"

Lin Xiu, who had been one of Su Feng's subordinates, quickly interjected, "No, we can't inform them. They're commanders of the Chinese military, so they'd have to escalate the affair once they found out. If there really was a problem, then we'd have no choice, but it seems likely that Zhang Lie's just in secluded cultivation. If this were true, it would be a huge embarrassment for China if we mobilized our troops at this point."

Chapter 288: Return to the Zenith Dojo

Lin Xiu had been a hunter that Zhang Lie specifically requested from Su Feng, and he had been part of the dojo since even before its founding. It had taken Zhang Lie quite some time and effort to convince Su Feng to allow Lin Xiu to remain at the Zenith Dojo, and everyone in the dojo treated him with respect and awe.

As such, his words carried significant authority.

"Master Lin's right. It's best not to publicize this matter; Zhang Lie's simply such an important figure now that, if we act recklessly, things could easily spiral out of control," Zhang Hong murmured in assent.

"Three months without any news? Have you really tried your best? Look at all these missives we've been getting from the research teams of the starbeasts, aquatic, nightdemons, and night spirits! Is this something we'll be able to hide for much longer?"

Zhang Hanxiang buried her face in her hands. Where could her brother be? If he were still in the first realm, how could everyone's search have been fruitless?

Logically, she knew that the others' thoughts were reasonable, but her brother's disappearance had hit her hardest. After all, she was closer to Zhang Lie than everyone else present, and the uncertainty of Zhang Lie's disappearance clawed at her heart.

"Hanxiang, I know you're worried, and if it makes you feel any better, feel free to criticize us for it. To be frank, we're also quite anxious about our captain's disappearance, but as Fang Yi said, there's little we can do now. Even if we were to inform the military, I doubt their searches will bear any fruit—we've searched everywhere we think he could be, and if we haven't found anything..." Yang Ze leaned forward, consoling Zhang Hanxiang.

"Then what of the four alien races?" Zhang Hanxiang didn't want to give up quite yet.

"Kid, they're the ones begging us for a favor. They might be making a fuss now, but anything they do would just hurt themselves!" Lin Xiu replied gruffly.

Indeed, the four races' research teams had just arrived in China. The reason they were making a fuss was because they had yet to see Zhang Lie in person, but as Lin Xiu had stated, the humans had the advantage here.

"In that case, what are we going to do? Just sit here and wait for my brother's return? All of you are my brother's most trusted colleagues and advisors, so please, I'm begging you, think of something!"

Zhang Hanxiang broke down in tears, but before the mood in the conference room could devolve, Zhang Hong let out a shout.

"Ah, there's news! Something happened in the Blacksteel settlement today—and a nearby hunter felt the dojo leader's genetic energy!" Zhang Hong was staring at her transceiver.

"Is that information accurate? Just what happened in the Blacksteel settlement? The last I heard, everyone had evacuated in the aftermath of Zhang Lie's disappearance..." Lin Xiu questioned.

"Yes, absolutely. It's going to reach the media shortly. As for the Blacksteel settlement, there was a huge quake, large pieces of land simply... vanished, and the skies... split apart?" Zhang Hong's voice turned doubtful.

"Voided land and shattered skies? Are you sure this isn't fake news from some tabloid?" Lin Xiu questioned again. He had the most experience out of all the hunters present, and he knew full well just what sort of energy would be required to cause such a phenomenon.

Everyone turned toward Zhang Hong.

"This is a reliable source that I've personally vetted in the past, and it's never been wrong before," Zhang Hong replied, though even she had to admit it sounded outlandish.

"If this is really the case, then Zhang Lie must be out of secluded cultivation—he must have encountered some enemy or another!" Lin Xiu surmised.

"In that case, what are we waiting for? Let's head to the Blacksteel settlement immediately!" Sun Mengmeng stood up and made to rush toward the teleportation array.

Just as she did so, a familiar voice shouted from right outside the conference room, "There's no need—I've returned!"

The next moment, his figure appeared by the door.

"Brother!" Zhang Hanxiang shouted, rushing toward Zhang Lie.

"Captain!"

"Dojo Leader!"

Zhang Lie hugged his sister tightly, knowing how frightened and scared she had to be without him.

"Don't worry, I'm back!"

Zhang Hanxiang buried her face in the crook of his shoulder. "It's been three months! Just where were you—I was so scared I'd never see you again!"

"There was an incident, but it's over now. When we have more time later, I'll tell you the story. Alright, stop crying, won't you? I'm back now, and I promise I won't disappear for so long without any word ever again," Zhang Lie consoled her.

Zhang Hanxiang eventually calmed down and returned to her seat, at which point Zhang Lie faced the others. "I apologize for the lack of communication. An accident occurred while I was in cultivation."

Zhang Lie sincerely apologized to those present in the room, knowing just how much stress they had had to bear during his disappearance.

Chapter 289: Disaster

Lin Xiu was the first to speak up. "What's there to apologize for? The most important thing is that you're back. But didn't you head out in order to find a secluded spot to cultivate? What happened for the last three months, and how did you make such a big mess of the Blacksteel settlement?"

Even Lin Xiu was curious about just what Zhang Lie had experienced during this period of time.

"Right, we've gotten reports of indiscriminate black rays of annihilation, followed by the death of all nearby lifeforms, and now, even cracks in the sky! Just what sort of framework do you have, Captain?"

"And where did you ultimately end up hiding? We've searched all over the first realm in an attempt to find you, but to no avail." Fang Yi and Yang Ze continued peppering Zhang Lie with questions.

Given that everyone around was a close confidant, Zhang Lie didn't intend on hiding much from them. "I was in secluded cultivation three years ago, but while trying to absorb the energy from a strange treasure, an incident occurred. It was the most dangerous incident of my life, and if I had been any less lucky, I would have perished. Fortunately, the genetic energy running rampant throughout my body was so intense that it alerted the will of the world."

"The... will of the world? Is the will of the world conscious? I thought it was just an artificial intelligence!" Fang Yi interrupted, causing everyone else to ponder the matter.

"Right, it—"

"Everyone, calm down! Let's hear what our captain has to say." Sun Mengmeng broke everyone off.

"To be quite honest, I'm as confused as you are, and even I don't have an answer as to whether or not the will of the world actually possesses consciousness. However, regardless of whether it's just an artificial intelligence or a lifeform in its own right, I'm confident that it obeys a certain set of rules, one of which saved my life. You've all heard about how I accidentally injured and killed several hunters in the Blacksteel Inn, haven't you?"

Everyone nodded seriously.

"To be frank, at that point, I'd already lost control of my body. Those black rays of annihilation were shooting out of my body indiscriminately simply because I had so much excess that my body couldn't handle it anymore."

"Broke through your skin?!" Lin Xiu's brows were furrowed. "Just what sort of treasure did you absorb? If the genetic energy was already seeping through your skin so violently, how did you avoid exploding outright?"

"You're indeed knowledgeable, Master Lin. My body was on the verge of exploding, but just before it did, the will of the world teleported me into an extradimensional space for the transferral procedure into the second realm, warning me that I was brimming with so much energy that I was warping the natural law of the first realm, that I would be forcibly sent to the second.

"However, at that time, my body was wracked by the genetic energy which I had absorbed, and I spent an interminable period of time trying to reconstruct my body from the inside out. I suspect that the will of the world destroyed all lifeforms around the Blacksteel settlement in order to continue suppressing my body, and I barely held onto my consciousness during this period of time. By the time I managed to rein in all the genetic energy that had run rampant throughout my body and pass through the transferral procedure, three months had passed."

Zhang Lie explained what had happened to him, but the more details he divulged, the more shocked the others became. Just what sort of miraculous treasure had Zhang Lie absorbed? It had given off so much energy that even the will of the world had reacted to it!

Could he have developed a new concoction?

Even the imperturbable Lin Xiu seemed shocked by what Zhang Lie had relayed.

"Hold it! Just what sort of treasure did you absorb that would allow you to resist the refinement energy from the transferral procedure?!" Lin Xiu had experienced that procedure for himself, so he was well aware of just how impossible Zhang Lie's actions were.

As a result, he was very curious as to the origin of such a treasure.

"I won't hide this from you, but I can't have any of you spreading word of this. Do you understand?"

The existence of disaster-grade lifeforms was a novelty in this time and age, and the implications were massive. Zhang Lie didn't want anyone to know that he had been at the center of this discovery, given how much he hated being bothered by others.

If any word of these disaster-grade lifeforms were to leak out to the public, those in power would surely be able to trace the origin of the discovery back to Zhang Lie. The present hunters all nodded and swore to absolute secrecy, even Zhang Hanxiang.

"Very well. The miraculous treasure I absorbed was the genetic core of a certain type of lifeform."

"A... genetic core? Not flesh?" Yang Ze asked.

Everyone else leaned in closer. As far as they knew, extracting gene fragments was a matter of consuming a lifeform's flesh. Where did genetic cores come into play?

"Yes, a genetic core—from a lifeform more advanced than even the most advanced peak-grade lifeforms known. Their bodies have largely crystallized, and they don't possess any flesh at all. The only parts of their bodies you can consume is their heart. Because their existence caused an unparalleled disaster in the first realm of the dimensional world, I've named these new lifeforms disaster-grade lifeforms."

"Disaster-grade lifeforms!" Lin Xiu gasped.

"Yes, lifeforms whose very existence herald impending disaster. It was because I tried to absorb the genetic energy from a disaster-grade genetic core that I almost self-destructed!"

Chapter 290: A Grave Shock

Zhang Lie's words left the entire room in deathly silence. It was hard for the present hunters to digest the information that he had just presented. Disaster-grade lifeforms, who were one step above even peak-grade lifeforms, bringing disaster where they went...

The hunters of Team Zenith swiftly reconciled this information with the strange tasks that Zhang Lie had given them. Was that why Zhang Lie had assigned them to patrol in all those varied locations? Could they have been where a disaster-grade lifeform was about to appear? And the disaster that occurred shortly after... that had to be the work of the disaster-grade lifeform!

But in that case, how had Zhang Lie managed to take down the disaster-grade lifeform on his own? They had all struggled just to deal with the peak-grade moonlight wurm!

"Was the disaster in the first realm due to that disaster-grade lifeform, then?" Lin Xiu asked the question that everyone was wondering about.

"Of course!" Otherwise, I wouldn't have had Commander Su sound a red alert for the impending disaster."

How had Zhang Lie managed this? He had predicted the impending disaster, then killed the disaster-grade lifeform only as it appeared, then absorbed its genetic energy to advance to the second realm...

"No wonder I felt a difference in your life force when you walked in. You've advanced to the second realm, haven't you?" Lin Xiu continued. He was almost unwilling to ask; as one of the four sages of China, he had seen his fair share of geniuses, but none were at Zhang Lie's level. He had developed

limit fragments as a first-realm hunter, killed a peak-grade lifeform in the first realm, and even discovered and killed a disaster-grade lifeform there as well...

"Master Lin, I was planning on informing all of you and settling my affairs before advancing, but the will of the world insisted that I do so immediately! I initially rejected the demand, but then it tried to expel me from the first realm entirely. That's how the void and cracks in the sky around the Blacksteel settlement occurred..."

Everyone, including Lin Xiu, was dumbstruck. How had Zhang Lie gotten so strong that he could even contend with the will of the world itself? The hunters didn't know what to say.

In the end, it was Lin Xiu who spoke up once more. "Just what grade of lifeform are you now, if you're being so violently rejected by the first realm?"

"I was judged to be a peak-grade lifeform," Zhang Lie replied mildly.

"What?!" Lin Xiu was so shocked that he bolted up, his chair falling down and clattering behind him. "What did you say? The will of the world judged you to be a peak-grade lifeform?"

"Right, a peak-grade lifeform," Zhang Lie replied.

Lin Xiu cursed so violently that everyone else was surprised.

The only peak-grade lifeform they had seen was the peak-grade moonlight wyrm, and they didn't have a good sense for just how stark the boundary between superior-grade and peak-grade was. However, given Lin Xiu's response, it seemed as though something was very unusual.

Lin Xiu himself felt as though he had wasted decades of his life. It had taken him his third-realm advancement before he was finally judged a peak-grade lifeform, but Zhang Lie had achieved it in the second-realm advancement alone!

"Don't you know that the peak-grade designation is the highest possible within the dimensional realm? Of course, with your discovery of a disaster-grade lifeform, things might change, but..."

Lin Xiu took two deep breaths before continuing, "You've managed to transition into a peak-grade lifeform based on just your accomplishments in the first realm, so I can't even imagine what your growth will be like in the future. What happened after you ascended? Which city did you get teleported to?"

"I'm in Qi at the moment."

"Did you meet Xiao Zhengyang?"

"Yes, and he's even assigned me to the special forces of Qi."

"Not bad. Xiao Zhengyang's a good man, and you should be able to work well with him. Now that you're in the second realm, I'd better warn you that it's the most dangerous of the five realms, as well as the one that sees the highest casualty rates among the hunters of the Milky Way. We're just passersby, so if an incident occurs, don't be too prideful. That pride could well get you killed!"

There were simply too many strong hunters among the asura, and they would be able to beat Zhang Lie by sheer numbers alone if nothing else.

"Don't worry—I've always kept a low profile, haven't I?" Zhang Lie reassured Lin Xiu.

Lin Xiu rolled his eyes. "Really? A low-profile hunter who would divulge that he became a peak-grade lifeform in the first realm? I can't stand the look of you right now—it just makes me madder and madder!"

Huffing, Lin Xiu strode out of the room. He had thought becoming a peak-grade existence in the second realm was a notable accomplishment, but Zhang Lie had somehow managed it in the first realm alone!

The members of Team Zenith had been listening raptly to the conversation between Zhang Lie and Lin Xiu. They barely knew anything about the second realm, but none of them interrupted—they simply listened even more attentively.

After all, they too would have to advance in the near future, and it would serve them well to learn what they could in advance. With Lin Xiu gone, they quickly began to pester Zhang Lie with all sorts of questions.