

## U. Warlord 411

### Chapter 411: A Peak-Grade Plant

Zhang Lie was really quite worried that that peak-grade lifeform would go into hiding.

The worst-case scenario would be if it realized that it wasn't Zhang Lie's opponent and went into hiding until it consolidated enough power to strike once again. After all, Zhang Lie didn't have time to waste on playing hide-and-seek with a peak-grade lifeform.

The stampede of corrupted beasts had occurred because the peak-grade lifeform was confident of its own victory. This would be when it was least guarded, and hence the best time to strike.

Zhang Lie intended to kill it in one swift, decisive blow.

The peak-grade lifeform finally came into sight. It was a plant-based lifeform, with a gigantic body much like a cactus. Vines grew from its body like feelers, and at its very top was a vibrant flower with sharp teeth, from which black pollen was being exuded. The pollen was so dense that it seemed as though the plant were hidden behind black fog.

Zhang Lie didn't know what this creature was called, only that it had successfully killed most of the wood spirits in his past life. Only a small fraction had managed to escape from the forest.

Once the peak-grade lifeform evolved into disaster-grade, the effect of its pollen would be intensified. The pollen had the ability to corrode all life, though its effect on intelligent lifeforms was rather limited. Only after prolonged exposure would it cause the lifeforms to blacken and become corrupted. When those corrupted lifeforms themselves attacked other lifeforms, those other lifeforms would also become corrupted.

Essentially, these corrupted lifeforms were much like zombies. The only distinction was that even plant-based lifeforms could be corrupted.

Once the peak-grade lifeform evolved into disaster-grade, its pollen would apply equally well to intelligent lifeforms, and it would portend disaster for the second realm. The requirement for this peak-grade lifeform to evolve was to devour the majority of the wood spirits.

In his past life, Zhang Lie had seen quite a few analyses of the incident, and he was somewhat familiar with the pollen and the peak-grade lifeform that produced it.

In the end, the evolved disaster-grade lifeform had tried to extend its reach to the territory of the sura and offended someone it shouldn't have offended. One of the emperors of the sura themselves stepped forward and destroyed the disaster-grade lifeform in a battle that shook the entire realm.

Now, it was Zhang Lie's turn to take this peak-grade lifeform down.

When he approached the flower, it attacked with a few lashing tendrils. Zhang Lie activated his blood-red domain, red moonlight flaring by his feet. A black sun appeared behind his back, causing his aura to grow by an order of magnitude.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" He diced the tendrils to shreds and continued barreling onwards until he reached the plant's body.

Black spikes erupted from the flower's cactus-like flesh, which Zhang Lie dodged gracefully. In the blink of an eye, he struck anew.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Sword energy filled the air, tracing out a gigantic web that blocked all the spikes heading in his direction.

As he did so, ten corrupted superior-grade lifeforms came up to him from behind, surrounding him.

"Is this the source of your confidence? Unfortunately, you're still far too weak. [Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Zhang Lie threw out one lone punch, so strong it warped the space all around his fist. Ripples of energy spread out from him and formed into massive waves, destroying the corrupted lifeforms.

By then, the vines extending from the plant's body had regenerated. They struck from a few different locations, giving Zhang Lie no space to evade the blow.

"[Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!" A line of sword energy split the world in two. Instead of retreating, Zhang Lie attacked, taking advantage of the momentum from his strike to charge forward. His blow dispersed the pollen and sliced straight at the flower's body, causing green ichor to spray out from the cut.

The flower began to shriek so shrilly that even Zhang Lie was forced to clutch his ears tightly. It then tried to take that opportunity to burrow into the ground.

"I won't let you go! [Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!"

Ignoring the pain and tinnitus, Zhang Lie struck once more. The flower defended itself with flying tendrils to no avail.

The peak-grade flower's body shrunk down as it sprayed thick black fog into the air.

"This doesn't work against me!" Zhang Lie cut apart the fog itself, only to be pelted with a rain of spikes. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!"

His punch formed a whirlpool of energy in the air, destroying the spikes.

"You won't get away! [Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]!"

The image of a dragonturtle appeared before Zhang Lie as four runic tablets crashed into the rock floor, surrounding the flower from all four cardinal directions and forming a temporary seal on the flower itself.

"[Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!"

Zhang Lie's blade cut space itself as the attack landed squarely on the flower, severing its pistils. The peak-grade flower was in such pain that it couldn't even scream; it tried to struggle, but Zhang Lie's four runic tablets forced it down.

The petals closed in on Zhang Lie's blade as sharp teeth clamped down on his hand.

"[The Boundless Blade: Requiem of the End]!"

Glowing sword energy rippled over Venombane's surface, causing the flower to spray out large globs of green ichor. Crimson slashes flared from the peak-grade flower's main body, as though its body was being cut apart from the inside out.

Zhang Lie's sword energy tore apart the flower's body as the decomposing pieces fell to the ground.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade corpsevenom flower and obtained its soulshard. By consuming the flesh of the corpsevenom flower, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

The flower's soulshard was a pitch-black dagger, one that released black pollen with every attack. After storing the corpsevenom flower's flesh in his storage pouch, Zhang Lie returned to the wood spirits' clearing.

By then, the skirmish was nearing its end. Once the corpsevenom flower had perished, the corrupted lifeforms had turned on themselves. The members of Team Zenith and the hunters accompanying Zhang Lie were able to resolve the situation on their own easily without any help from Zhang Lie.

When they noticed him returning, the members of Team Zenith and Su Hong reported that there were no more than a thousand corrupted lifeforms left.

#### Chapter 412: The Unrepenting Elder

Zhang Lie had Su Hong clean up the remaining lifeforms as he walked up to the wood spirits.

"I've fulfilled my end of the promise. It's time for you to fulfill yours."

The shaman of the wood spirits was silent for a moment before they sighed. "Alright."

"There's no need to be so upset. Leaving with me will benefit your tribe as well: we're strong enough to protect you from any unforeseen circumstances, and it's not as though you'll be able to stay in this forest any longer."

The shaman of the wood spirits glanced at the remnants of the forest. After the corrupted beast stampede, over eighty percent of the forest had been corrupted; that corruption didn't vanish with the death of the corpsevenom flower.

The forest would only rejuvenate and return to its former vitality once these corrupted plants withered away.

Zhang Lie continued, "Sun Mengmeng, bring a few fire-attuned hunters with you to burn off all patches of corrupted forest. We need to prevent the remnant poison from mutating, and we can't give other hunters access to this corpse venom either."

Sun Mengmeng nodded. "I understand!"

It seemed as though Zhang Lie was just being prudent, but his actions were actually intended to force the wood spirits' hand.

The shaman knew that they didn't have a choice. "I understand. I'll inform the tribe of what has transpired." If Zhang Lie were able to slaughter the corrupted lifeforms so easily, he too would be able to destroy the wood spirits.

"We can't! The wood spirits are meant to be free, to be one with nature! We can't be enslaved by any other race!" the elder of the wood spirits suddenly shouted. A few trees around Zhang Lie moved up to and surrounded him, and they trapped him with their roots.

Zhang Lie smiled.

The shaman of the wood spirits cried out, "Elder, what are you doing?!"

"Shaman, shouldn't I be the one asking you that question? You sold us out to these humans in secret!"

"This was a transaction, as well as a promise."

"Shaman, it was a promise between you and that man, one that doesn't involve the rest of us. Don't drag the entire tribe down with you! If you want to finish this transaction, you can leave alone with those humans!"

The shaman gritted their teeth. "Your actions are going to ruin us all! Haven't you seen these humans' skills? We can't do anything against them!"

The elder of the wood spirits began to laugh. "I have seen his skills, but so what?"

Zhang Lie smirked. "It looks like you're quite confident, but I don't understand where that confidence comes from."

The elder replied conceitedly, "You must be somewhat exhausted after a fight of that magnitude. Now's the best time for us to strike back!"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Even if I were ten times weaker than I am now, and even if I were fully drained of genetic energy, you wouldn't be stronger than I am."

"Ha! You're still rather smug considering your situation, aren't you? Kneel on the ground now and beg, and I might let you go!" the elder commanded. "You're not one of those corrupted lifeforms. We wood spirits can control all manner of greenery within this forest, and we're undefeatable in our native habitat!"

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Zhang Lie threw out one lone punch, so strong it warped the space all around his fist. Ripples of energy spread out from him and disintegrated all the trees nearby.

"What did you say?" Zhang Lie picked at his ear. "I couldn't hear you properly. Repeat yourself."

The elder of the wood spirits began to panic. "How is this possible?! How could you still be so strong?"

Zhang Lie replied coolly, "This enemy of yours was barely a challenge."

"Even so, with our racial advantage, you wouldn't be able to find us if we were to go into hiding! Yes, with the forest around—"

The elder suddenly remembered that Zhang Lie was a special existence, one that would be able to detect their presence even if they were hiding in a tree. By then, however, it was already too late.

Zhang Lie had chopped apart the tree in which they were hiding and dragged out the recalcitrant elder.

In fear, the elder trembled, "Ah, I'm sorry! Don't kill me! I'll apologize properly and—"

Zhang Lie crushed the elder between his palms, causing him to pop with a puff of green smoke.

He turned to the wood spirits. "What will the rest of you do?"

The shaman and the other wood spirits began to tremble on the spot.

"Please give us some time to prepare to move," the shaman finally requested.

In the end, Zhang Lie succeeded in luring the wood spirits away, along with hundreds of trees from the forest.

The wood spirits were unable to get too far from their trees. In order to move from place to place, they would merge with trees, turning themselves into gigantic treemen which could clomp from place to place.

Zhang Lie was very curious if piloting these trees were much like piloting mechas.

Chu Feng was directing the rock spirits and the Yeluo to repair the city walls when he suddenly saw a group of large treemen making their way over to the city. "What's that? Quick, everyone, get ready for a fight!"

On the other hand, the Yeluo didn't seem particularly concerned. "Don't worry, it's possible that they're allies, not enemies. If it turns out that they're another alien race that our lord has brought back, we'd look like fools."

Chu Feng could hardly believe the Yeluo's words. "How could Zhang Lie have brought these treemen back?"

Yun Bing gasped, "That's impossible! Look at the tallest treemen—they're over three hundred meters tall! They have to be here to besiege our city!"

Chu Feng nodded. "There's no point for us to be repairing these walls when a battle is nigh. Quick, prepare for battle—no, we're already too late! Run!"

However, despite Chu Feng and Yun Bing's warnings, the treemen didn't attack the city at all. They stopped a few hundred meters outside the city and began to sequentially root themselves to the ground, turning into ordinary trees once again.

In surprise, Chu Feng murmured, "What are these treemen doing? Is this the prelude to some sort of novel attack?"

"You're running off even before the fight? Isn't that a little exaggerated?" Su Hong laughed as he and the hunters that had followed Zhang Lie got down from the trees.

Chu Feng gaped. "What were you all doing on top of those trees? Wait, is this another alien race that Zhang Lie has brought back?"

Yun Bing swallowed a gulp of saliva. Where had Zhang Lie found these treemen?

Su Hong laughed again. "Well? How do you like these small creatures?"

"Small?!"

"Ah, right. You'll find out in a moment or two—there are so many strange races out here in the second realm that I wouldn't have known about without Zhang Lie guiding us."

Chapter 413: In Search of Rare Herbs

As Su Hong spoke, the trees that had rooted themselves began to glow with soft green light as a number of small creatures floated out and wandered around the city to which they had moved.

"It looks like the two of you still need more practice and training—even if an alien race were to attack the city, you can't get this flustered." Zhang Lie flew down from the largest tree.

Chu Feng swallowed a gulp of saliva as he asked, "Zhang Lie, where did you find these creatures?"

"I kidnapped them from a nearby forest," Zhang Lie responded.

The shaman of the wood spirits extracted themselves from the largest tree and hovered by Zhang Lie's side. "Zhang Lie, we've finished rooting our trees again. Please give us our next command."

Zhang Lie nodded. "Your tribe can freely enter the city at will. Your task now is to take care of your tribe, as well as to build a forest surrounding this city."

That forest would become the first line of defense against any invaders.

"Subsequently, help us plant vegetables and all sorts of spiritual herbs nearby."

Chu Feng asked, "Zhang Lie, what's special about these green creatures and the rock spirits?"

"Why, are you interested in them?"

"Yes, I'm quite curious."

"These wood spirits can speed up the rate at which plants and herbs grow, as well as nourish and supplement the nutrients that spiritual herbs need in particular."

"That's some impressive talent!" Chu Feng exclaimed. Zhang Lie really was quite amazing—not only did he know of all these races' special abilities, he was bringing more and more of them into the city.

The wood spirits happily floated into the city, curious as they were about life outside their forest.

Once the wood spirits were settled in, Zhang Lie convened a meeting with the leader of the rock spirits and shaman of the wood spirits. He handed the two of them sketches of two ingredients he thought would be relevant for Potion #4.

The rock spirits had lived for many years, and it was plausible that they would have some information for him; the wood spirits were skilled at cultivating rare plants, and they too might know something.

The leader of the rock spirits shook its head. "We've lived in a rock forest all these years, and never have we ventured far from it. Neither of these herbs are familiar to us."

The shaman of the wood spirits said, "I haven't seen this herb before, but I've heard of the other."

The leader of the rock spirits was astounded. It knew a little of the wood spirits: both tribes of spirits were sedentary in nature, and in theory, neither should have known much of the outside world. In that case, how had the wood spirits come across this information?

A significant part of the reason was that the rock spirits largely focused on rocks, whereas the wood spirits paid close attention to rare plants and herbs from all over. As a result, the shaman was rather knowledgeable about even some of the rarest herbs around.

Zhang Lie's eyes widened in surprise. He hadn't expected either of the secluded tribes would know anything, but now he was very glad he had asked.

The shaman of the wood spirits elaborated, "The past shaman once told me about this herb. I don't remember just how long ago it was, but as far as I know, the crag eagles have a sprig of it in their eyrie. As for where these eagles are, I'm not too sure."

The leader of the rock spirits murmured, "Ah, the crag eagles..."

Zhang Lie turned to it in shock. "You know of this race?"

The rock spirit smiled. "Before our tribe found the rock forest which we made our home, we had been nomadic, roaming the land in order to find rock quarries which would allow us to sate our hunger. It was only when we discovered the astounding rock forest that we settled down."

Unlike the nomadic tribes of Earth, which remained in a location for perhaps a week or half a month, the rock spirits stayed at the same location for centuries or even millennia on end. What was to humans a few generations might feel like a glimpse of an eye to the long-lived rock spirits.

The leader of the rock spirits recalled its childhood proudly. "When I was little, I wandered the second realm with my elders. No one dared provoke us rock spirits, and we treated them in kind."

The shaman of the wood spirits murmured, "How times have changed, haven't they?"

The rock spirit suddenly felt a pang of disappointment. Indeed, they who had once been untouchable were now subordinate to a group of humans.

Zhang Lie consoled them, "No, I haven't enslaved you. You've just become residents of my city!"

Once the rock spirits settled down, their fighting ability had decreased generation by generation, so much so that Zhang Lie had easily managed to subdue them.

"Do you know where these crag eagles are located?"

The rock spirit suggested, "Unless they've moved away, their eyrie should be at Mt. Wanren. When I was very young, I remember that there was a rich rock vein by the foot of the mountain, and we fought with the crag eagles over it. The eagles were very strong, and neither party was able to overcome the other. In the end, we had to leave. I'm not sure if the crag eagles have grown stronger or weaker since."

The shaman of the wood spirits asked curiously, "How long ago was this?"

"Perhaps thirteen thousand years ago, give or take three thousand years? I can't quite remember."

Zhang Lie and the shaman of the wood spirits were speechless. Who knew what had happened to the crag eagles after so long? Zhang Lie fervently hoped that their clan had persisted even over ten millennia.

Unfortunately, he didn't have a map of the second realm, and the rock spirit was the only one who knew where Mt. Wanren was located. As a result, he and the rock spirit set off together toward Mt. Wanren.

The members of Team Zenith asked to accompany him, but Zhang Lie refused them. "There's a lot of tasks that need to be done in the city. Rebuild and wait for my return!"

Zhang Lie set off seated on the shoulder of the rock giant that the rock spirit leader had transformed into.

Once they were outside the perimeter of the city, the rock giant began to run, but its maximum speed was still far lower than when Zhang Lie was flying with the help of a soulshard.

The journey took them over thirty days, during which time Zhang Lie and the rock spirit barely rested. According to the rock spirit, if there were sufficient minerals and gemstones around, it would be able to continue running endlessly.

Zhang Lie, however, was skeptical of this claim. The rock giant had clearly slowed down after ten days or so, and it was unlikely that it would be able to remain at even this slower speed for much longer.

Zhang Lie asked, "Is Mt. Wanren straight ahead?"

The rock spirit replied confidently, "The surroundings have all changed, but I'm sure that it's straight along this direction."

"What does the mountain look like?"

Chapter 414: The Crag Eagles

The rock spirit replied, "Mt. Wanren reaches high into the clouds and stands over ten thousand meters tall. That's why it was called Mt. Wanren! [1]"

The crag eagles are a race of birdmen with human form. However, their wings don't sprout out from their back, but rather from where their arms would be, like bats. The eagles don't have arms, and their feet are like eagle claws. The males and females of the race look noticeably different."

Zhang Lie nodded and verified, "Are you sure the mountain pierces the sky, and is over ten thousand meters tall?"

"Of course! I've been to the mountain myself!"

Zhang Lie pointed straight ahead. "Could that be the Mt. Wanren you've mentioned?"

The mountain to which Zhang Lie pointed was hardly piercing the clouds; it had somehow grown slanted at a rather odd angle.

"I can't imagine they call that mountain Mt. Wanren any longer."

Because of how it had tilted, it wasn't more than seven thousand meters tall, if that.

Zhang Lie had long since guessed that something would have happened to the mountain in the intervening thirteen thousand years. Even an ocean on Earth could have dried up into an arid desert, let alone a mountain.

The rock giant scratched its head. "Let's see if there are any intelligent races in the vicinity who know what happened."

Zhang Lie folded his arms. "You were at the mountain thirteen thousand years ago! You know how rare long-lived races are, don't you? How do you expect to find one such race nearby?"

In general, long-lived races were those whose members lived for about five hundred years or more; the other races were considered short-lived. The sura and the humans were both short-lived races.

Despite his reservations, Zhang Lie had no better idea, and he went along with what the rock spirit had suggested. They wandered around the base of the mountain trying to find some intelligent life, only to see a few black shadows swooping down toward them.

Zhang Lie raised his head to see a few eagle-headed, human-bodied lifeforms. Their feet were eagle claws, and their arms were a pair of wings. Their feathers varied in color within a black-white spectrum: white, gray, dark gray, black. Ribbons of cloth were tied to their waist.

The largest of the lifeforms shouted, "Big blockhead, where do you come from? What are you doing here?"

The rock spirit whispered to Zhang Lie, "These are the crag eagles."

Beside the crag eagle who had spoken, his gray-feathered companion stared at the rock giant with piercing eyes before realizing something and panicking. "Brother, brother, something's very wrong! This is the rock monster our ancestors spoke of!"

"What?! A rock monster?!"

The crag eagles all began to panic when they heard the words "rock monster".

"Those rock monsters who eat us crag eagles whole?!"

"Those rock monsters who toppled Mt. Wanren?!"

"This is a catastrophe! The rock monsters are coming again!"

Zhang Lie asked the rock spirit by his side, "Just what did you do to these crag eagles all those years ago?"

The rock spirit scratched its head. "Nothing much, as far as I remember. We fought with them and left since they were stronger than we expected."

Zhang Lie's face was dark. "And yet you seem to have left an indelible expression on this clan."

The gray-feathered crag eagle shouted in panic, "Quick, we have to inform the clan head of the rock monsters' impending attack!"

The black-feathered crag eagle hollered over the cacophony, "Silence, all of you!"

The panicking crag eagles all calmed down as the black-feathered crag eagle turned back to Zhang Lie and the rock spirit. "Rock monster, I've heard too many tales about you ever since my childhood."

Zhang Lie whistled. "Looks like you're quite famous around here, eh?"

"I, Yu Huantian, don't believe that you rock monsters are so strong that you were able to topple Mt. Wanren!" He flapped his wings and generated what seemed to be a miniature hurricane, which he sent toward the rock giant.

However, that attack did nothing to the rock giant, not even leaving a scratch on the rocks that formed its surface.

## Chapter 415: The Eagles' Descent

"Interesting," Yu Huantian hissed, flapping his wings as he attacked from above, its claws striking the rock giant's body.

Again, it did nothing to the rock giant.

The rock giant scratched its head. "Just what are these fellows trying to do?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Trying to attack you, it looks like."

The rock giant reared back in shock. "What? This is an attack? I thought they were just helping me scratch an itch!"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Don't say that—it'll upset the poor fellows!"

Yu Huantian snarled in thunderous rage. He turned toward his trembling kin and shouted, "What are you waiting for? Can't you see I'm being attacked? Help!"

Zhang Lie turned his head and asked, "Did you attack him?"

The rock giant slowly replied, "Why would I attack him?"

A gray crag eagle mumbled feebly, "But that's a rock monster you're attacking!"

A white-gray crag eagle added, "Furthermore, it doesn't look like he's attacking you..."

Yu Huantian puffed up, and his beady eyes seemed to pierce through the other crag eagles. "Get down here and help me!"

As the crag eagles finally took the offensive, filling the sky with a flurry of wings and feathers, the rock giant raised its arms to shield Zhang Lie.

Now that they were indiscriminately attacking Zhang Lie as well, he wouldn't stand still any longer. Zhang Lie raised his arms to the sky, and the image of a dragon turtle appeared before him. The two gravity-controlling tablets appeared by either side of the flock of crag eagles, twisting the local effect of gravity around the flock.

The crag eagles who were swooping down from the air reacted to the changing gravity with panic.

"What's this?!" They were unable to maintain their balance and kept on crashing into each other in mid-air, until the entire flock seemed to drop to the ground dazed.

The rock giant praised Zhang Lie, "As expected of our lord, to be able to deal with an entire flock of crag eagles in one fell swoop!"

Yu Huantian thundered, "You vicious rock monster! How could you defeat all my companions at once!"

Zhang Lie pointed at the lone crag eagle remaining in the sky. "This fellow's like a mosquito. Can you knock him down?"

"Of course."

The rock giant picked up a rock on the ground and sent it flying toward the air, so quickly it could easily have been a projectile from a missile launcher. Yu Huantian barely avoided the attack thanks to his reflexes, but his eyes were filled with fear. Had he been just a bit slower to react, he would have been struck down.

Zhang Lie sighed. "You missed him by just a bit. Continue!"

Yu Huantian wasn't a complete fool. Knowing that he was no match for the rock giant, he flew higher up into the sky and let out a long screech, one which echoed throughout Mt. Wanren.

The rock giant asked, "Do I still need to strike him down?"

Zhang Lie reclaimed the two runic tablets from the sky. "There's no need. We just need to find people we can talk to and who will listen to us."

A flock of crag eagles again appeared in mid-air. In their midst was another black-winged crag eagle, a long ribbon of black cloth tethered to his waist. The black-winged crag eagle looked at Yu Huantian, then at the crag eagles that were lying dazed on the ground.

"How long has it been since the last rock monster was sighted here? For what reason have you approached Mt. Wanren once more? Do you want to kick us while we're down and destroy us once and for all?"

The rock giant called out, "First, I'm not a 'rock monster', and second, I'm not the one who has an interest in you. My lord is."

Zhang Lie leapt up to the head of the rock giant. "Everyone, I have a question for all of you!"

#### Chapter 416: Unwelcome Guests

When the crag eagles saw Zhang Lie, their eyes widened before they all began to laugh. They had expected that someone whom a rock giant would address as a lord would be magnificent indeed—but it turned out that he was a lifeform far smaller than the rock giant!

The disparity between their expectation and reality made the crag eagles unable to resist laughing.

The black-winged crag eagle, still smiling, asked, "Little one, for what reason have you come to Mt. Wanren?" His smile wasn't friendly; it was mocking and taunting.

"Size is hardly a reliable measure of strength." Zhang Lie frowned. He hated how the crag eagles were looking down on him, how supercilious they were being. It took him a concerted effort to avoid sending them all crashing down onto the ground.

"I'm here for the starcloud fruit!" Based on his research, the starcloud fruit would be an important ingredient for Potion #4.

The black-winged crag eagle narrowed his eyes. "Where did you hear that we were in possession of such an herb?"

"You don't need to know. Simply tell me: do you have the herb, or do you not?"

The black-winged crag eagle narrowed his eyes. "We have no such thing."

Zhang Lie snorted. "You've already exposed yourself. If the crag eagles truly weren't in possession of this herb, you should have been far more confused about what it was—but instead of asking me about this fruit, you asked me how I heard of the information!"

The black-winged crag eagle hadn't expected his deception to be seen through so easily.

Yu Huantian interjected, "So what if we do, and so what if we don't? We won't hand anything to the companion of a rock monster! If not for these rock monsters, Mt. Wanren wouldn't have been left in such a state!"

Zhang Lie twisted his head and asked once more, "Did the rock spirits really do nothing lasting to the crag eagles? Look at how angry they are at you!"

Zhang Lie finally realized that letting the leader of the rock spirits accompany him was a terrible mistake.

The rock giant scratched its head again. "What would I know? I don't recall us doing anything special compared to the last few times we fought with the crag eagles."

The rock giant's words drew the wrath of all the crag eagles.

"Damnable rock monster! Everyone, we're destroying this rock monster!"

As the crag eagles all fanned their wings, they formed a gigantic hurricane in mid-air, one filled with feathers whose edge was as sharp as a blade.

The rock spirit and Zhang Lie didn't panic. They were both accustomed to such large-scale attacks, especially Zhang Lie himself.

The rock giant stomped on the ground and raised a few pillars of spiritual rock behind which Zhang Lie and it could hunker down.

Despite the strength of the miniature hurricane, the rock giant received just the tiniest of scratches from the concerted attack.

The black-winged crag eagle was just about to strike again when the tips of the rock pillars suddenly disintegrated, and a strength that warped space headed straight for the flock of crag eagles.

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

The attack barrelled through the crag eagles, dispersing their incipient hurricane and sending a large fraction of them crashing toward the ground.

The black-winged crag eagle struck instantly, morphing into a beam of black light. His descent was soundless but filled with killing intent, and so rapid that Zhang Lie had barely unsheathed his sword before he was knocked back by the impact.

The rock spirit leapt high up into the air and caught him with his hands.

Zhang Lie had to admit that this particular crag eagle was extremely fast, so fast that Zhang Lie might not be able to match his speed.

The black-winged crag eagle again struck at Zhang Lie, his body morphing into a beam of black light.

The rock giant waved its fists to deter it, but the crag eagle was so agile that he somersaulted in mid-air and evaded the rock giant's fists before landing on its chest.

A metallic ring echoed in the aftermath of his attack; the rock giant touched its chest and found a claw scratch there.

The image of a dragonturtle again appeared before Zhang Lie as the gravity-augmenting tablet appeared noiselessly behind the crag eagle, causing his body to sink and his speed to slow.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Zhang Lie struck while his opponent was mired, sword energy gathering into a tall wave that would crash down on his opponent.

The black-winged crag eagle fanned his wings and sent a flurry of feathers shooting toward Zhang Lie, who twisted his body in mid-air and sent the feathers flying with his charged-up attack. The crag eagle's face paled as he tried to defend himself with his claws, but he was knocked back by its immensity. Blood beaded on his claws.

The crag eagles in the sky shouted in terror, "Even Chief Yu Xuanguang was injured!"

"How could a brat like that injure our chief himself? Could that little creature be another manner of rock monster?"

"It's very possible—only the rock monsters have such terrifying strength!"

Zhang Lie's mouth spasmed. Just what had the rock spirits done to engender such hatred from the crag eagles?"

Yu Xuanguan's eyes were piercing as he asked Zhang Lie, "Who are you?"

"I'm Zhang Lie, a human."

Yu Xuanguang's eyes widened. "You're not a rock monster? No, no—I see, you rock monsters must address yourself as humans!"

The rock giant patted its chest. "Exactly right! We're now part of the humans."

"Scram!" Zhang Lie yelled out.

"But isn't it true that we've become part of the humans after joining your city, lord?"

Zhang Lie:...

He wanted to retort, but found himself incapable of doing so.

Yu Xuanguang narrowed his eyes and reaffirmed his conclusion, "So you rock monsters are called 'humans'."

"No, no! He's a rock spirit, and I'm a human. The rock monsters you refer to are rock spirits, not humans."

Yu Xuanguang harrumphed. "I don't care what race you are. In defense of Mt. Wanren, I can hardly retreat."

Zhang Lie sighed. "I'd intended on resolving this matter peacefully, but it seems like I'll have to slaughter your clan to the last to get what I want."

Just then, a shrill piercing sound echoed in the air, so shrill that the crag eagles were all forced to cover their ears.

"Bad news—that fellow's here!" All the crag eagles began to panic, and even Yu Xuanguang seemed disturbed by the news. The crag eagles hurriedly rushed back to Mt. Wanren, but they were too late. A storm had risen out of nowhere, and large, golden wings blotted out the sun.

Chapter 417: Entering Mt. Wanren

Zhang Lie noticed that fear shone from the eyes of the crag eagles, as though some huge disaster was about to befall them.

After being rallied by the black-winged crag eagle, the rest of the flock had hardly panicked or been fearful when attacking the rock giant and Zhang Lie. After the sudden birdcall, however, the crag eagles all rushed back to their eyrie at their fastest speed.

Even then, it was already too late.

A huge gust of wind swept toward them as golden wings covered the sun. The birds' gigantic wings were at least thirty meters wide, and their beaks were sharp and cruel. They were able to create huge gusts with casual flaps of their wings, and their golden feathers glittered when backlit by the sun.

"How large these birds are," the rock spirit murmured.

There were two such birds around. The moment they saw the fleeing crag eagles, their eyes gleamed. They chased the crag eagles, gulping them down whole whenever they caught one.

Yu Xuanguang yelled out to his tribe, "Run! I'll deter them!" He morphed into a black beam of light that shot toward the golden birds.

"No, Father!" Yu Huantian called out.

A gray-winged crag eagle pulled him back. "Run! Don't waste the chief's sacrifice!"

Yu Xuanguang clearly wasn't a match for the two golden birds. He had been slightly injured after the fight with Zhang Lie, and all he could do was hold out against the two golden birds' attacks as they toyed with him.

Unable to watch on, Zhang Lie materialized a black bow, pulled it taut, and sent a corrosive arrow flying into the air, where it hit one of the golden birds' wings.

The injured golden bird shrieked; the corrosion created a gaping hole in one wing. The other golden bird swept toward Zhang Lie in rage. The rock giant leapt forward like a bullet, whooshing through the air as it met the golden bird's advance.

Rocks imbued with spiritual energy pelted the golden bird and slowed its advance, dizzying it in a matter of moments.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]! As Zhang Lie punched forward, his genetic energy manifested in the form of a magical serpent, one which wrapped around the golden bird's body.

It coiled around its neck and opened its maw, revealing sharp fangs. As it bit down, black energy assaulted the bird's body from the inside out, causing the bird to shriek in pain.

Zhang Lie leapt up, and a violet shortsword materialized in his hand.

"[The Boundless Blade: Requiem of the End]!"

He thrust the shortsword into the golden bird's brain, infusing his genetic energy into the blow until the golden bird's head burst open like a watermelon, and its huge body dropped from the skies.

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

The other golden bird shrieked in panic as it flew away, dodging a few attacks from the rock giant.

Yu Xuanguang fell from the skies in an unconscious heap. Zhang Lie caught him and put him down.

After the other peak-grade golden roc flew off, the crag eagles returned to the skies. Yu Huantian stared at his own father; it was clear that they wanted to take Yu Xuanguang back.

The rock giant blocked Zhang Lie with his body as he shouted, "What, do you still want to fight?"

Yu Huantian called back, "Return my father to me!"

The rock giant snorted. "If not for us, your father would have died long ago! Aren't you going to thank us at all? How thick-skinned you all are!"

Just as tensions were rising, a white-winged crag eagle flew toward the sky.

Zhang Lie wasn't certain if this were also a crag eagle, because she seemed far too different from the others. She had long legs covered with white, downy feathers. Her feet were claws and her arms were wings, just like the other eagles, but her head was a human's, and she had long, white hair.

"The elder would like to invite you into the eyrie," she called out, looking at Zhang Lie.

Yu Huantian turned to her. "Why is the elder allowing a rock monster into Mt. Wanren? Just because it sent a golden roc fleeing?"

The white-haired crag eagle replied, "I convey only the elder's will."

Yu Huantian lowered his head, gritting his teeth in dissatisfaction, as the crag eagles dispersed.

"Here." Zhang Lie tossed Yu Xuanguang's body up into the air, and Yu Huantian hurriedly caught him. He looked at Zhang Lie and the rock giant with a complicated expression on his face.

The two of them slowly approached Mt. Wanren, where they saw many crag eagles living on the sloping mountain. Most of them were human-faced, like the white-haired crag eagle they had just seen.

Zhang Lie asked, "Why are there so many human-faced crag eagles?"

The rock spirit asked, "Didn't I tell you?"

"Tell you what?"

"Male and female crag eagles are distinct in appearance. The males have a bird's head, and the females have a human's head."

"I see."

The crag eagles they saw along their way were very curious about them—or, more specifically, about the rock monster.

"So this is the rock monster! It's huge!"

"Apparently, the rock monsters of legends were over five hundred meters tall—I bet this one hasn't reached full maturity."

"I heard that it was a rock monster who toppled Mt. Wanren!"

"Don't look! Be careful of being eaten by a rock monster. I heard that crag eaglets were their favorite food!"

Zhang Lie's face turned dark as he twisted toward the rock giant again. "Are you hiding something from me? You have to be!"

The rock spirit blinked. "What do you mean, lord?"

"Don't you hear what these crag eagles are saying? Your clan's apparently a clan of monsters!"

The rock spirit chuckled. "I really don't know what's going on, lord. If I did, would I dare hide it from you?"

The rock giant and Zhang Lie were about to step onto Mt. Wanren when the white-haired crag eagle stopped them. "This rock monster cannot join us."

"That's racial discrimination!" the rock giant boomed.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him. "And where did you learn that phrase?"

"From Chu Feng, of course!"

Zhang Lie facepalmed.

The white-haired crag eagle smiled. "I hope you'll understand. I don't mean to discriminate, but you've all seen how Mt. Wanren is tilting. I fear that the mountain will not bear the weight of this rock monster."

Chapter 418: Rocs and Eagles

The rock spirit sighed; it wasn't as though it could just remove its rock armor at will. After all, it had only managed to obtain such fine armor after eating a truly incredible quantity of rock.

Upon hearing that it would have to 'disrobe' in order to ascend the mountain, the rock spirit reared back. "I apologize, but it doesn't look like I'll be able to accompany you up the mountain."

"Very well. Wait here for me and don't cause a disturbance." Zhang Lie sprouted a pair of wings from his back and turned to the white-haired crag eagle. "I'll head up with you."

The two of them flew toward the top of the peak as Zhang Lie murmured, "Your elder seems to hold a very important place in the tribe."

Smiling, the white-haired crag eagle replied politely, "The elder was the previous chief of the clan. When he retired, he gave his position to the current chief. Everyone listens to him."

At the top of the peak was a small wooden cottage where a male crag eagle was basking in the sun. His wings were made out of silvery-white feathers, and he looked both holy and ancient at the same time.

The white-haired crag eagle bowed down when she saw the silver-winged elder. "Elder, I've brought the guest here."

She flew off into the distance.

The elder flapped his wings as he descended from the rooftop. "Let me both apologize for the rudeness of my clan and thank you profusely for repelling our invaders. You've saved the crag eagles in a moment of crisis."

Zhang Lie let out a breath. "Finally, someone who's willing to talk to me."

The elder sighed even as he smiled. "Please don't blame the others. From a young age, they were inculcated with stories about the rock monsters, who they believed to be their mortal enemies. You would have garnered a much more positive reception otherwise."

"Just what did the rock spirits do in the past? I'm very curious."

"So they're called the rock spirits, not the rock monsters! I've always thought no clan would call itself monsters."

Zhang Lie's lips spasmed. "How can you be so sure they're your enemies when you don't even know the name of their race?"

The elder half-smiled again. "The appellation of 'rock monster' was passed down from our ancestors from long ago."

"It looks like you must have suffered greatly because of them."

"Our mountain wasn't always slanted, you know."

"I do know!"

"A long time ago, Mt. Wanren pierced the heavens like a dagger thrust straight up into the clouds. When a group of rock spirits suddenly attacked, the mountain tilted."

"Could the rock spirits really have been responsible for pushing the entire mountain sideways?"

How strong the rock spirits had to be when they were nomadic!

The elder asked, "What did this rock spirit tell you?"

Zhang Lie relayed the rock spirit's own accounting of events: "They came over here and had a fight with you. You were stronger than they thought, so they left."

"Indeed, that's more or less right. I heard the same story from my ancestors. A large fight broke out between our clan and the rock spirits, causing significant death on both sides. In the end, the rock spirits left."

"And then?"

What followed was surely the important part.

The elder sighed. "The rock spirits had, at one point, such an advantage that they were able to make their way to the foot of the mountain unopposed. They dug up part of the rock that made up the base

of the mountain. The elders were very happy that those malicious rock demons had finally been chased away, but their happiness didn't last long."

"So that was why the mountain ended up tilting..."

Of course, if the rock spirits were to dig away part of the mountain's foundations, it would naturally begin to tilt as it was weathered by age and time.

The elder shrugged. "The stories became more and more exaggerated with each retelling: the rock monsters pushed the mountain down, the rock monsters would eat unruly children, and so on. These embellishments naturally engendered more and more hate and fear toward the rock monsters with every successive generation."

"I see."

The elder beckoned to his residence. "Shall we head in for a cup of tea?"

Zhang Lie didn't refuse him; the two of them stepped inside.

The interior of the wooden cabin was as shabby as its exterior. The elder smiled. "I learned how to build these lodgings on my own, so I hope you won't laugh at me. Most of the crag eagles are perfectly fine outdoors, with the sky as their blanket and the earth their bed. I'm the oddball around here."

"It's not bad."

Zhang Lie found a place to sit down while the elder poured him a cup of tea with his feet. Glancing at that cup of tea, Zhang Lie was struck with a dilemma regarding whether to drink it or not. He couldn't help but feel as though the faint stink of feet had permeated the tea leaves, and he didn't dare pick up the cup of tea to try it for himself.

"Surely you haven't called me here just to thank me?"

The elder smiled again. "And surely you didn't come all the way over here in order to fight with us crag eagles. If you came in order to take even more of our mountain away, you'll make my life very difficult."

"There's no need. The rock spirits have a large quantity of rock at their disposal now, enough to last them a few centuries. Past that point, I'll continue finding them more deposits of rock."

Unlike the wood spirits, who could nurture the growth of treasures like spiritual herbs, the rock spirits were treasures in their own right. With a sufficient quantity of rock and gems, along with time for them to grow, they would again be the same rock spirit clan that had once terrorized the second realm.

These rock spirits would become the guardians of his city.

The elder turned and looked Zhang Lie in the eye. "What do you want?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "It looks as though you have a request for me, Elder."

It seemed as though the elder were about to propose a transaction.

"I do."

"Is it about the golden rocs?"

The elder nodded. "Indeed. What's your request?"

"I want the starcloud fruit. It's with you, isn't it?"

The elder blinked. "What a surprise. As far as I know, only three people even know that I possess such a rare herb. It looks like you have an interesting source of information."

"I heard about it from a departed spirit," Zhang Lie replied mysteriously.

"Who was that spirit? I should like to know. Indeed, we do have one starcloud fruit in our possession."

"In exchange, shall I get rid of the golden rocs for you?"

"You won't be sufficient—we'll have to work together to get rid of the menace."

"This sounds like a more serious problem than I had imagined."

"These golden rocs have only appeared within the last few years. Each one is about as strong as our current chief. They hunt for food in the vicinity, and the strongest among them is approaching the level of a sura king."

#### Chapter 419: A Whole Family

In other words, the strongest of the golden rocs was reaching the apex of a peak-grade lifeform: that was the level of strength a sura king possessed.

"It sounds like there are quite a number of golden rocs around, then!"

"As far as I know, there are five such rocs in total, and they're all from one big family. You killed the family head's daughter! These last few years, the golden rocs have killed quite a number of our kin while hunting in the vicinity. The crag eagles used to have four high-level fighters, but two fell to the golden rocs.

"The rocs' family head—the strongest of the golden rocs—hasn't been seen for quite some time, but the rocs have been going out hunting more and more often. I believe that he might be undergoing a breakthrough."

Zhang Lie thought for a moment as the appearance of a frightening lifeform appeared in his mind—the blazing roc!

In his past life, there had been a wave of evolution in which a number of peak-grade lifeforms almost simultaneously evolved into disaster-grade, causing a huge mess in the second realm and almost resulting in catastrophe. However, this was only something that Zhang Lie had heard, not witnessed for himself. Allegedly, all the hunters who had seen the blazing roc for themselves had died almost immediately.

The presence of a disaster-grade lifeform could easily portend doom. Once the blazing roc emerged, it had destroyed the nearby city of Ming, hurting and killing innumerable hunters.

"These golden rocs treat us crag eagles like nothing more than food, and quite a number of our kin have been consumed by them. In order for our clan to survive, we must kill off all the rocs. Help us do so, and we'll hand you the starcloud fruit in compensation."

"What's your plan?"

"Waiting for them to attack us is like waiting for death. The moment the strongest golden roc breaks through, we're all doomed. We have to take the initiative and attack them instead! Our clan has sacrificed countless scouts in order to find the rocs' nest. We'll launch a sneak attack and destroy their entire family!"

"Very well. I'll accompany you, but I need you to give me the fruit beforehand. Furthermore, if unforeseen circumstances cause us to deviate from this plan, or if the foe is clearly too strong for us to best, I have the right to choose to leave."

Zhang Lie had no intention of getting himself killed just for a spiritual herb, rare though it might be. The elder hesitated for a moment before replying resolutely, "I accept! Let's cooperate."

They headed back down the mountain and found the rock giant at its base. The rock giant was kneeling on the ground, curled up into a ball.

Zhang Lie flew over. "Not bad, you stayed still like you were supposed to!"

The rock giant hurriedly stood up. "How were the negotiations, lord?"

"The crag eagles weren't as stubborn as your tribe was. If I'm willing to help them slaughter the golden rocs, they'll hand me the starcloud fruit."

"Congratulations on a successful negotiation!"

Zhang Lie asked, "Did you rock spirits eat up a vein of rock from the foot of this mountain?"

"Probably. As you know, we rock spirits roamed around the land and devoured all the rock in our vicinity."

To be honest, over ten millennia of roaming the land, they had probably dug up around half the second realm by now.

Zhang Lie groaned. "Did you know that it was because you did that around the foot of this mountain that Mt. Wanren ended up slanted?"

The rock giant scratched its head. "Is that so?"

Zhang Lie clutched his face, speechless.

Instead of continuing to berate the rock giant, however, Zhang Lie just turned aside and retrieved the golden roc's carcass from his potbellied-toad pouch.

He pulled out the necessary kitchenware, spices, condiments, a large pot, and two racks on which to roast meat. As he boiled a pot of water, he dissected the roc's carcass, stripping its feathers in the hot water. Its two wings ended up on the two racks, one of which was seasoned to be slightly spicy, and the other to be ridiculously spicy.

As the scent of roast meat spread up the mountain, the crag eagles' salivating faces popped out from the mountainside.

When the meat was ready, Zhang Lie sliced off a chunk of the roast meat and bit down, making a pleased hum of satisfaction as he did so. The exterior was fragrant and crispy, the interior soft and tender. Upon biting down, a medley of meat juices and a pleasant aroma filled his mouth.

[For consuming the meat of a peak-grade golden roc, you received 1 peak gene fragment.]

[For consuming the meat of a peak-grade golden roc, you received 1 peak gene fragment.]

He took the lid off the pot and allowed the concentrated steam and aroma to rise before scooping up a spoonful of soup.

[For consuming the meat of a peak-grade golden roc, you received 1 peak gene fragment.]

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 (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), One Punch (novice), Ninesoul Dragonblade (novice), Syzygy (novice)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 50

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 Wyrn (peak)

The rock spirit seemed very envious of Zhang Lie as he dug in with gusto, but it was only able to consume rocks, minerals, and gems. It sat by one side of the mountain as it nibbled silently on a rock.

Yu Huantian suddenly walked by and sliced off a chunk of meat from the rack as Zhang Lie watched on. After gulping the meat down, he said coldly, "Thank you for saving my father."

Are you here to thank me or to steal my food? Don't use your father as an excuse! Instead of sending him away, however, Zhang Lie beckoned to the crag eagles whose heads he could make out from the mountain side. "Why don't you all come over and have some meat? I can't finish it all myself!"

Yu Huantian's eyes brightened as he sat down. "Thanks!"

He cut off a huge chunk of meat and gobbled it down so quickly that it startled even Zhang Lie.

The crag eagles glanced at each other before flapping their wings and heading over. They hardly had a choice; Zhang Lie's meal was so fragrant that none of them could stand missing out.

One golden roc carcass was hardly enough to feed the clan; they devoured the meat quickly and rubbed their stomachs as they looked for more.

Zhang Lie laughed. "Tomorrow, I'll kill all the rest of the rocs and we can have a large feast."

Chapter 420: One Lethal Strike

The crag eagles whooped with joy. In order to thank him for his generosity, a number of crag eagles handed him various spiritual herbs and gemstones that they had accumulated.

The crag eagles very much liked sparkling objects, so gemstones comprised the larger part of their gifts. The rock giant was overjoyed by the portion that Zhang Lie swept his way.

The next day, the rock spirit was startled to see that Yu Xuanguang was joining their stealth raid on the golden rocs' nest. "What are you doing here? Aren't you afraid of dying?"

Zhang Lie frowned. "You suffered serious injuries yesterday. Are you sure you're well enough to be coming with us?"

Yu Xuanguang shrugged. "My injuries are hardly as serious as they appear."

The rock spirit folded its arms. "Don't be stubborn! You were like a plaything to those two golden rocs from yesterday. If you insist on going, you'll only die!"

Yu Xuanguang countered, "I've mostly recovered after consuming some spiritual herbs."

The rock giant pointed at his chest. "In that case, what's with those bandages? Surely they're not decorations!"

"Go rest," Zhang Lie urged. "Leave the golden rocs to us."

Yu Xuanguang refused to back down. "As the chief of the crag eagles, how can I not be a part of such an important raid? Even if I were to die, I want to do it fighting an enemy of the clan!"

The elder added, "We're in need of manpower. You killed one roc yesterday, so now there are only four left. Zhang Lie and I can handle one each, but two more remain. Perhaps this rock giant can handle one, but that leaves one more roc unaccounted for. Any more help would be advantageous to us."

Seeing how stubborn the chief of the crag eagles seemed to be, neither Zhang Lie nor the rock spirit continued to dissuade him. The rock spirit folded its arms again. "Don't you be a burden to us!"

Yu Xuanguang snorted. "I won't lose to you rock monsters."

As they made their way to the golden rocs' nest, the rock spirit suddenly asked the elder, "Don't you want to kill me?"

Zhang Lie glanced in its direction in surprise.

The rock spirit continued, "Yesterday, my lord told me that the reason Mt. Wanren is leaning over is because my clan once dug up a deposit of rock by the foot of your mountain. I won't apologize for what happened, since we need rock to survive, but..."

The elder chuckled. "It's been so many years since then. What's there to argue about? Our kin who once battled the rock spirits have already perished. Furthermore, with Zhang Lie around, what could I do to you?"

To be honest, the fact that Mt. Wanren was leaning sideways didn't have much of an impact on the local ecosystem. After all, the crag eagles slept out in the open, and those who had taken part in the fight against the rock monsters had long since died. Furthermore, that fight had hardly been one-sided; both the crag eagles and rock giants had suffered casualties.

Suddenly, the elder announced, "We've arrived."

Zhang Lie glanced curiously around him.

They were high up a nearby mountain, one so tall that its peak was shrouded by clouds. The mountain wasn't as large as Mt. Wanren, and it seemed rather like a tree that had lost all its branches, leaving just the trunk behind. Zhang Lie flew up and saw a nest right by the peak of the mountain, likely the nest of the golden rocs.

Just then, they heard the golden rocs' caw as three of the rocs flew out from the nest and headed toward Zhang Lie's party.

Yu Xuanguang turned to the rock giant. "It's all your fault! Look at how large you are—they discovered us because of you!"

Zhang Lie mulled things over for a moment. "I don't think it was the rock spirit's fault. Look at where the rocs are headed—they didn't even look at the rock spirit. They're simply flying in the direction opposite ours."

Yu Xuanguang came to a realization. "The golden rocs are heading to Mt. Wanren."

The elder added, "If my guess is correct, the rocs are heading over there in order to seek revenge. After all, Zhang Lie slaughtered a golden roc yesterday. I expected they would do so sooner or later, but to think that we would end up meeting them halfway!"

Yu Xuanguang urged, "Elder, we have to stop the golden rocs, or Mt. Wanren will be in danger!"

The elder nodded. "Of course. We came here to prevent further tragedy!"

Zhang Lie beckoned to the rock spirit beside him, "Make a move!"

The rock spirit was already prepared to do so. It raised a huge boulder of spiritual rock high into the air and tossed it toward the golden rocs.

So immense was the force with which the rock spirit had flung it that it whooshed through the air like a missile, striking the unprepared rocs. As the rock spirit continued tossing boulder after boulder, the rocs turned around and swooped down on the rock giant.

Their piercing cries seemed to be announcing that they would destroy this rock monster that had been foolish enough to challenge them.

Yu Xuanguang was about to make a move when Zhang Lie held him back. "Wait. Now's not the time to strike yet."

Yu Xuanguang turned toward the elder, who nodded sagely.

As the rocs drew closer and closer, Zhang Lie placed a hand on Venombane's handle as he charged up genetic energy for one lethal blow.

The rocs drew even closer. Yu Xuanguang's forehead beaded with sweat. "Elder?"

The elder shook his head again: it wasn't yet the best time to strike.

Just as the three rocs were about to strike the rock giant, Zhang Lie raised his right arm high into the sky, and the image of a dragonturtle appeared before him. The two gravity-controlling tablets struck the ground, distorting the local gravity around them.

The three rocs lost control of their trajectory in mid-air, crashing against each other as their genetic energy frothed around them, their claws scraping by the top of the rock giant's head.

Zhang Lie made his move then. Activating his forest wolfman and blood ant soulshards simultaneously, Zhang Lie transformed into a blood-colored wolfman.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" A dragon of blood howled as it took to the skies, then swooped down on one of the three rocs.

Before it could react, its chest was pierced by the blood dragon, and it fell from the skies like a rock, tracing a long trail of blood behind it.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade golden roc and obtained its soulshard. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade golden roc, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie smiled—not only had he managed to get rid of his target in one blow, it had even dropped a soulshard!

The elder and Yu Xuanguang followed swiftly behind Zhang Lie, morphing into a black and a silvery-white beam of light as they struck at their respective targets.