

## U. Warlord 551

### Chapter 551: Untempered Growth

As the seaweed monster curled up into a ball, it bounced into the air, as though it were trying to flee. Right before it was about to escape, Zhang Lie somehow appeared before it. "Have I permitted you to leave?"

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" His fist landed on the ball, causing an eruption of water that shook the very air.

The black ball of seaweed fell to the ground, quivering as it barely clung on to life. It began waving its fronds of seaweed around, summoning hundreds of fronds that attacked Zhang Lie from every direction.

The seaweed monster didn't know why it was sensing such potent strength from the diminutive lifeform standing in front of it, but its intuition told it that if it did nothing, it would surely be torn apart.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" Waves of energy, so intense they warped space, radiated from Zhang Lie's arm. The ripples of energy spread from Zhang Lie and pulped the fronds of seaweed that spread out from the monster.

Zhang Lie leapt forward, raised his right leg up high, and then stomped down on the pulpy mass, cratering the ground and sending reverberations through the village. He dusted himself off and stepped aside.

There, the problem was resolved!

Huai Geng and the man stared at Zhang Lie in stupefied amazement. Zhang Lie had dealt with the lifeform that had wrecked their entire village in no time at all—and even the whole village working together had been no match for it!

Zhang Lie returned to Zhu's side. "Now that the lifeform's dealt with, it's time for us to leave."

Huai Geng called out, "Mister, please wait! How do I become strong quickly?"

Zhang Lie had no idea how alien races obtained their strength. Humanity's path was entirely different; they could assimilate soulshards to speed up their cultivation and improve their strength.

"There's no shortcut to becoming strong. Work hard daily, persevere daily, and find opponents you're able to overcome," Zhang Lie intoned.

Huai Geng nodded seriously. "Can I really become as strong as you, Mister?"

"Who knows? It depends on how long you can last." Honestly, he rather doubted that Huai Geng would be able to grow much stronger.

"How should I find you once I've become strong?"

"Head to the city of Renhuang." Renhuang was far, far away. Huai Geng wouldn't be able to make his way there without concerted effort and true strength; if he really were to do so, he would be deserving of Zhang Lie's time.

Zhang Lie tugged on Zhu's hand and vanished from sight. As he glanced at where Zhang Lie had disappeared, Huai Geng clenched his fists tightly and promised himself, "I'll certainly make it to Renhuang!"

The man asked, "Lad, do you want to grow stronger?"

Huai Geng nodded.

"Although I can't make you as strong as that mister, it should at least be acceptable for self-defense."

"Yes, please teach me!"

By then, Renhuang had just received news of the impending attack of the sura. That there were over a hundred million sura soldiers shocked everyone, but Yun Bing and the others were prepared for this eventuality.

Yun Bing glanced outside the window. "It's finally time."

The invasion of the sura was excellent news to Renhuang—yes, excellent news.

Over the last few days, more and more alien races had gathered in Renhuang in order to make a last stand against the sura. As the number of alien races in Renhuang increased, it was forced to expand. These alien races were given a place to stay and the ability to participate in Renhuang's bazaar, but Renhuang's accommodations were ultimately finite.

The alien races that arrived at Renhuang attracted more and more to Renhuang, some to participate in the ever-expanding trade network, others for safety in numbers, and even more for working opportunities. As the number of people in Renhuang grew, so did the business and employment opportunities within—and the problems and issues that arose.

One of the more serious issues was the inter-species fighting that was occurring on a daily basis. Each species had their own culture and customs, their own history and origin.

Initially, the alien races tried to be respectful of each other given their common foe, but as the days dragged on and Renhuang showed no sign of initiating an attack against the sura, the alien races' dissatisfaction and malcontent began to boil over.

In order to reduce the hostility between the alien races, Yun Bing announced that the battle against the sura would begin imminently, and that everyone had to prepare for battle at any time.

Furthermore, she announced the construction of an arena in Renhuang. The victor of each series of tournaments would be feted with prestige, fame, and honor, along with a set of lavish prizes that had the alien races roaring to participate in no time.

Ever since the start of the tournament, however, the tensions between the races had only grown more heated, as though there were a bomb embedded in the center of Renhuang that would explode sooner or later.

Yun Bing and the others had considered the possibility of initiating the war against the sura, but it was difficult to unite all the alien races as one, and, more importantly, Zhang Lie wasn't around.

The members of Team Zenith worked very hard to have Renhuang continue operating as a city, but the alien races tended only to be willing to listen to Zhang Lie for such major decisions. Unless the sura were to attack, except for Zhang Lie, no one would be able to mobilize Renhuang's forces.

In order to mollify the alien races, Yun Bing thought of a new idea: to introduce soccer to the second realm.

It was a huge hit. The alien races were immediately captivated by the sport, and soon they had begun forming teams. Yun Bing next announced a soccer tournament, the Renhuang Cup.

Given the martial prowess of the hunters and members of the alien races in the second realm, the sport grew significantly more dangerous. Soccer balls had to be made of the leather of peak-grade lifeforms; otherwise, they would immediately burst when kicked.

And these kicks were lethal—the soccer ball whizzed around the field like a bullet, with at least a casualty or severe injury during every instance of the Renhuang Cup. Even the spectators didn't go unscathed—the ball occasionally went out of bounds and struck an unwary target.

Even so, the sport was immensely popular, and every match was packed to the brim. Some of the more enterprising Renhuang hunters even began publishing periodicals and setting up betting stands nearby.

Yun Bing kept careful track of this unexpected development, worried that things seemed to be evolving out of her control.

#### Chapter 552: A Mysterious Ship

Next came professional soccer teams, fielding not just players from one race, but rather the top players from each race.

Yun Bing couldn't help but be impressed at the humans' ingenuity and creativity. She initially expected that it was a good thing for the alien races to be resolving their tensions on the field, but she had underestimated their ability to cause problems.

At the beginning, with the alien races dedicating all their effort to the soccer field, everything seemed to be progressing well, but there suddenly appeared huge flocks of soccer-crazed fans who would take to the streets and brawl if their beloved team lost a match.

At the very least, these brawls only ever took place outside the soccer stadium, unlike in the past, where they could break out at any time, at any place.

Yun Bing was worried that soccer would spike even more unrest, but she could hardly ban it given how much interest and dedication the alien races had shown toward it.

A positive side effect of these 'professional' teams was that the alien races were starting to mingle and understand each other, both on the level of soccer players and of their fans. If nothing else, soccer was a shared lingo and shared interest, and that similarity allowed these disparate races to connect.

The division between alien races had transmuted into the division between soccer fans.

Yun Bing, who had to supervise such affairs carefully day in and day out, felt a creeping sense of fatigue take over her. "Zhang Lie, when will you return?"

Almost as she was unable to hold out any longer, there was finally news that the sura were attacking. Their main force was a hundred million sura strong, and Yun Bing's eyes lit up with thankfulness.

This would be a battle on a scale large enough for all the alien races to need to cooperate, and the fights that broke out every now and then outside the soccer stadium would be gone once and for all.

Yun Bing never considered how strong these sura were, because from her perspective, no matter how strong they were, Renhuang was surely stronger.

By a deserted island on the sea of mists, the lapsed governor of Renhuang, was resting leisurely with Zhu around a campfire over which several large prawns were cooking.

Zhang Lie picked up a skewer of prawns and bit into it. "Zhu, are you sure there's a boat-type lifeform around here?"

"I don't know if it is a boat-type lifeform, but my father told me that we need to be traveling with one to get past the sea of mists."

"But we've been here for over half a month! Where's this supposed lifeform?"

Zhu had recounted that there were lifeforms that would appear around the sea of mists that were necessary to traverse it. If Zhang Lie and Zhu were to fly into the sea of mists, they would lose their sense of direction in the blink of an eye, never to emerge again.

That said, even after half a month, they hadn't seen a single hint of these supposed lifeforms. Zhu picked up another skewer, and her eyes brightened. "These prawns are so good!"

Zhang Lie folded his arms. "Don't just eat! When will these lifeforms appear?"

Zhu shrugged. "I can't say. At any rate, when my father came here for the first time, he found such a lifeform and got on it curiously. It brought him into the sea of mists, where he found a dazzling array of boats within. My father guessed that those were the boats that had gotten trapped within, never to emerge again."

"If we don't see this supposed lifeform by tomorrow, let's leave."

They had already wasted half a month on the island. Who knew when these lifeforms would show up? It might, in the worst-case scenario, be a decade or two. Zhang Lie didn't have that much time to waste.

As they were talking, fog rose into the air and enveloped them both. Zhang Lie frowned. "It's still early. Where did this fog come from?"

Suddenly, a huge shadow appeared before his eyes. Zhang Lie pulled Zhu back with him and glanced at the shadow in shock—it was a huge beast of steel, with a gigantic body and a hull studded with cannons.

This was, this was... a warship!

An old, deserted warship, slowly rusting away, the likes of which could only be seen in museums. It was surrounded by an aura of antiquity, of history long lost. Cannon fire pocked the hull of the warship, leaving indents and bullet holes behind.

If Zhang Lie hadn't been to a museum in his youth, he wouldn't have recognized it.

He glanced at the warship through the lens of his dragon's pupils, only to see no soul in sight. In other words, the warship had no trace of life. In the human world, that would have been obvious; how could a warship gain sentience? In the dimensional world, however, things were far less concrete.

That said, how could it be possible that a human-made warship could have found its way to the dimensional world? No technology that was brought in from the outside functioned here, but right before him was a massive warship.

After a momentary bout of shock, Zhang Lie smiled. "Interesting. Let me find out just what you are!"

Zhang Lie's aura rose. He was about to punch the boat when Zhu suddenly pulled him back. "What are you doing?!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "You can see that warship, right?"

"Of course! That's the boat I mentioned from earlier. Although it doesn't look much like what my father described, this should be a boat. If you destroy the boat, Mister, how will we enter the sea of mists?"

According to Zhu, the warship came from the sea of mists, so they would have to head within to uncover the truth.

"I'd like to see just who managed to send a warship from the human world here." Zhang Lie leapt up onto the deck, bringing Zhu with him.

There was no discernible change in the warship when they landed on it. It followed its set trajectory and slowly made its way into the sea of mists.

Zhang Lie took the opportunity to go through the entire warship, only to find everything exactly as it should be, at least in reference to the warship he had once seen in a museum.

How could a warship from the human world have appeared in the sea of mists? Most importantly, there was absolutely no one on the ship.

"Could this be a ghost ship?" Zhang Lie murmured to himself.

Chapter 553: The Sea of Mists

He turned to Zhu. "Was this the boat your father saw?"

"No, it's somewhat different. I'm certain my father told me the boat he was on was made of wood, whereas this one is made entirely of steel."

"Interesting, very interesting!" Zhang Lie became even more curious. Just what lay hidden in this sea of mists? Where did these ghost ships come from, and what secret did they harbor?

As they entered the sea of mists, a dense layer of mist shrouded them, so thick they could barely see an arm's length away.

Just then, a song could be heard over the distance, the voices thrumming with mysterious power. Zhu's eyes widened. "Quick, cover your ears! These are sirens. You'll be charmed by their songs, fall into a daze and swim over to be eaten by them!"

"Oh? I have to meet such interesting lifeforms for myself."

Zhang Lie's eyes lit up. Might the soulshards that dropped from these lifeforms be able to attract other lifeforms nearby? If he were lucky enough to get one or two siren soulshards, Renhuang would be able to make full use of them to hunt down large quantities of genetic lifeforms.

"I'll kill them and return quickly." Zhang Lie spread his wings and flew out of the warship.

Zhu cried out, "Please, don't go! I'm scared!"

Zhang Lie ignored Zhu and followed the sound toward its origin, toward these supposed sirens.

It turned out that there was only one siren, a ghastly creature that floated on the sea, so large it had to weigh almost a ton. From this grotesque creature came a lovely melody, so loud it was almost frightening.

As Zhang Lie came closer, the siren began to sing even more eagerly, the song echoing throughout the air. Zhang Lie was entirely unaffected by the song; with his strength, he was more or less immune to mental compulsion.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" His fist caused a geyser of water to erupt. The sea and the sky shook. Without understanding what had happened, the siren was disintegrated whole.

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

Unfortunately for him, no soulshard had dropped. Zhang Lie sighed, then turned back and activated his dragon's pupils, trying to sense Zhu's soul in order to return to the warship.

However, no matter how he flapped his wings, he found that he was unable to make any noticeable progress. It was as though he were flying in place while the warship grew farther and farther away.

Zhang Lie frowned. With his strength, with his willpower, nothing should have been able to mislead his sensory organs.

He swung an arm through the mist.

"So this is it—the power of space!" Not only could these mists block his vision, they even introduced spatial distortions above the sea of mists.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" Waves of energy, so intense they warped space, radiated from his arm. Ripples of energy spread from Zhang Lie and dissipated the mists, revealing a patch of clear sea. Zhu's warship was within sight.

With a leap, Zhang Lie vanished from his original location and appeared on the warship in the next.

Zhu pounced on him. "I thought you were going to desert me!"

"Don't be afraid. You know so much about these seas that I could hardly discard you now—I just went to kill that annoying siren."

Zhu's brows furrowed. "That was dangerous! No living creature has ever made it out of the mists safely."

"Didn't I return?"

Zhu looked him up and down. "Are you sure you're classified as a living creature?"

Zhang Lie kneaded her head, causing her to scream and giggle.

"There are plenty of sirens in the sea of mists. Even if you kill one, there'll be lots more nearby. After all, this is their home."

"Oh? That's a great sign!" In that case, he was much more likely to be able to acquire a siren soul shard.

Suddenly, he heard the creaking of wood around him. Turning to the source of the noise, Zhang Lie found an even more ancient wooden ship floating to their side. The wood was so weathered that Zhang Lie was surprised that it was still seaworthy. Half its mast had broken off, and its sails were tattered.

When Zhu saw the ship that had appeared out of nowhere, she suddenly jumped up in fright and darted behind Zhang Lie.

"What's this?" On the ship, he could almost see a number of illusory figures crewing it. "It looks like a ghost ship..."

Zhu stuck even tighter to Zhang Lie. "What? How could there be ghosts in this world?!"

Zhang Lie seemed unperturbed. "What's there to be worried about? Calm down. I think our ship is a ghost ship too."

"What?!" Zhu's face turned white.

Zhang Lie hollered at the ancient ghost ship, hoping for a response, but he never received any. His dragon's pupils revealed not a single soul in the vicinity; it was as if the entire ship was a mirage.

"A punch will reveal what exactly you are, won't it? [Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

A black serpent shot out of Zhang Lie's fist toward the ghost ship, smashing a hole in its hull. The serpent continued to make a mess of the ship. The ghostly crew tried to prevent its destruction, but it was no match for the serpent, and the ship slowly sank to the sea.

Zhu poked her head out from behind him. "Do you know what it is now?"

Zhang Lie glanced at the sea. After the ghost ship fell apart, the logs that had made it up had disappeared completely.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "No, I don't. If we want an answer, I think it'll lie deeper within the sea."

After being told that their warship was likewise a ghost ship, Zhu began glancing surreptitiously all around her, and she refused to let go of Zhang Lie's hand.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at her. "There's no need to be so frightened. If these ghosts wanted to attack us, they would have done so already. Even when I left you to hunt down a siren, nothing from the ship attacked you. We're safe, at least temporarily."

Zhu's brows furrowed again. "Mister, you weren't trying to use me as bait when you left the ship, were you?"

"Nonsense! I inspected the ship beforehand, and I knew that there was nothing hiding aboard. Otherwise, I wouldn't have left you behind," Zhang Lie replied. "What did your father say about the sea of mists?"

Zhu thought back to her father's words. What he had recounted to her were essentially bedtime stories, and Zhu wasn't confident she remembered all the details.

"Exploring the sea of mists is an endeavor that claims nine lives in ten," she began.

Chapter 554: Surrounded by Mist

"My father saw many unusual and strange lifeforms within the sea of mists, along with all sorts of mysterious existences."

"Like?"

Zhu's body curled up. "My father told me that ghosts really existed within the sea of mists."

"Oh? In what sense?" After realizing that ghosts were just spiritual lifeforms, Zhang Lie had lost all fear he had of them.

Zhu replied, "Father was alone on the boat on which he sailed into the sea of mists, but a number of people appeared on it as he went deeper and deeper within. However, these people died all of a sudden, all from seemingly random causes."

"Seemingly random?"

"Not long after Father got onto the boat, it became very lively. There was even a banquet that was hosted on deck, at which point he met an alien explorer from a hundred years ago. My father told me he recounted a large number of tales. Without these tales, he might never have escaped from the sea of mists."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Just what did he say?"

Zhu pursed her lips. "He said that they were in a cycle of reincarnation, that they had all died and were simply phantoms passing through time, living within the cracks of the sea of mists, that he was the only living person there. He warned my father that, if he were to die within the sea of mists, he too would become part of the ship, swallowed up by the sea and inserted into the same cycle of reincarnation."

"It sounds like a fantasy," Zhang Lie replied.

"Isn't that so? My father wouldn't believe it, either, but he had heard of that very explorer before. He should have died a hundred years before, and there was no way he could have been within the sea of mists! My father cautiously and curiously prodded further, but just then, a murder unfolded on the boat. All the passengers went crazy."

They recognized that there was a murderer on board, and if they couldn't find that murderer, they might be the next one to die. Everyone tried to search for the killer, but none were able to succeed. Absurdly, they descended into a frenzy—someone suggested that they had to kill everyone else in order to avoid dying themselves.

"Furthermore, the boat traversed through siren-infested waters, and it was even attacked by humongous lifeforms. It started out with a hundred or so passengers, but only a scant few escaped the massacre."

"How did your father survive?"

"That explorer seemed to have a limited ability to predict the future—according to him, his necklace allowed him to preserve his memories between each cycle of reincarnation. The two of them worked together and ultimately managed to survive the onslaught. Just as my father thought he was safe, however, the next reincarnation began."

Zhang Lie paid Zhu rapt attention.

"The second time around, my father killed the murderer before he could strike, but he was branded as a killer instead. The third time around, he pointed out the murderer as soon as the murder happened, but the passengers on the boat began to vanish."

Zhu continued, "The actions my father took led to unexpected changes in the cycle of events that took place, and he almost died quite a few times."

By then, Zhang Lie was even more curious about how Zhu's father had made it out of the sea of mists.

According to Zhu's description, the sea of mists was a place of significant spatial and temporal distortion. Dying within the sea would lock a person's soul within, pulling them into a cycle of infinite reincarnations.

In the end, after repeating these cycles for what seemed like an eternity, the boat sailed out of the sea of mists, with my father still on it. He never dared to head back within."

"Did he do anything special?"

"Nothing more than persevering through each scenario until the boat had passed through the mists."

Zhang Lie fell into deep thought. He would be willing to believe that the sea of mists possessed temporal distortions, but not this 'infinite reincarnation' that Zhu had described. His reasoning was simple: they had gone within the sea of mists, and nothing of the like had happened to them.

They hadn't seen a single person on their warship, let alone a murder.

"This sea of mists could very well be an agglomeration of different and mysterious forces, including that of space and time, but..."

There was still something wrong. Zhang Lie had destroyed a ship he had seen in the distance. Its passengers should have been the ghosts that Zhu had described, but the shadowy passengers certainly weren't ghosts according to his dragon's eye soulshard.

In that case, what were they? Could they simply be a mirage? Mirages were possible in the oceans and seas, just like in deserts—but no, these mirages were caused by sunlight, and the mists blocked all sunlight from filtering within.

Could it have been a temporal distortion, one in which a horrifying scene had been preserved like a memory? Surely not—no person in such a scene would have the agency to talk to Zhu's father.

Zhang Lie didn't think that Zhu was lying, but rather that there was something wrong with Zhu's father's account of events.

There were three possibilities. The first, and which Zhang Lie privately found the most likely, was that he had spiced up his narrative with fantastic and mysterious elements to make more of an impact on Zhu. The second was that even Zhu's father had no idea what was going on; this was also a very likely situation. The third and final possibility was that Zhu's father's experience in the sea of mists had been different from theirs.

According to Zhu, the sea of mists would consume people whole. Those boats and ships that sailed the sea of mists, along with their passengers, were once living historical figures who had perished within the sea and hence become part of the sea.

Zhang Lie thought this impossible, and a vital part of his reasoning was the warship they were on. How could this understanding of events explain the warship on which they were standing? No human could have brought such a warship into the second realm, and yet...

There were simply too many possibilities and too few hints for the truth to be deduced immediately.

"It feels like this situation is getting more and more interesting."

Just as Zhang Lie smiled to himself, something finally happened on the warship.

The rusted cannons suddenly fired. Many soldiers appeared on the warship out of thin air.

"We're being attacked—prepare for counter-fire!"

Each soldier—each sailor—was wearing a dated navy uniform.

Zhu shrieked. "Ghosts!"

She attracted the attention of a commander, who walked toward them with a frown. "What are all of you doing here? Return to your positions!"

Zhang Lie punched the commander in the head, killing him instantly. He wasn't going to participate in this strange re-enactment, and the simplest way to break free was with brute force.

The remaining soldiers on the boat glanced at Zhang Lie in shock, but they quickly perished to Zhang Lie's attacks. They were each only as strong as a regular human, and Zhang Lie dealt with them easily with a snap of his fingers. After the soldiers died, they vanished with a puff of mist.

"Mister, are these ghosts?"

Zhang Lie chuckled. "Ghosts are the manifestation of people's souls. These apparitions don't even have any souls—how can they be considered ghosts?"

"In that case, what are they? No, wait, Mister! Didn't they say they were being attacked?"

As if waiting for Zhu's words, a huge beam of light shot toward them, as bright as the midday sun—a laser cannon!

Chapter 555: A Galactic Battleship

Zhang Lie summoned his pair of twin blades, then slashed the beam of light apart. His eyes widened. "How could this appear here? This level of technology can't be replicated in the second realm!"

This was the first time since entering the sea of mists that Zhang Lie had been so shocked. Something that he should never have been able to see in the second realm had somehow entered his vision.

On the other end of the beam was a gigantic battleship made of steel and titanium.

Zhang Lie's face crumpled. Zhu might not have been able to recognize what lay before them, but Zhang Lie certainly did. It was the key fighting force in interstellar warfare—a galactic battleship.

No high-tech equipment could appear within the second realm, let alone something like a galactic battleship.

And even if such technology were somehow able to work in the second realm, no teleportation apparatus was large or stable enough to transport it over. Even if it were dismantled and put back together piece by piece, it would have taken millions of hours of manpower, and news would certainly have spread to the human world.

As Zhang Lie thought about just what could be going on, the galactic battleship attacked. Another blinding laser shot toward Zhang Lie, so large it looked like a dragon of light.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Zhang Lie waved his twin blades in the air, forming a web of sword energy that caused the beam to dissipate. Subsequently, hundreds of missiles shot toward him, tracing arcs of light and energy through the air.

Zhang Lie would have to take care of them all alone.

It was too difficult for him to protect the warship, and too passive an approach for him to take. Zhang Lie summoned Whitey and had it take Zhu away. Wings sprouted behind his back and sent him careening toward the battleship. By the battleship's hull, a gigantic cannon had appeared, and flecks of energy were gathering about its mouth.

This was a cannon powered by nuclear fission! This type of cannon was known by a common nickname—a starbreak annihilator. One shot from the cannon was able to pierce through a small-scale planet, and it would cause irreparable damage to a large one.

Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards simultaneously. Thick fur grew from his skin, followed by scales and a dragon's claws, as he transformed into a draconic wolfman.

As the starbreak annihilator activated, the mists around them and the surface of the sea turned to plasma. Even Zhang Lie didn't dare contend directly against the attack; he chose to flee. It was the smart move, and the only move he could have made. Strong though he was, he surely didn't have the strength to contend with the starbreak annihilator. Even the scorching heat that resulted in the aftermath of the attack was more than Zhang Lie could stand.

The beam pierced through the surface of the sea and vaporized a hole through it, forming a whirlpool as water sought to flow into the gap it had left.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but shudder as he glanced at the aftermath of the attack. Fortunately, he and Zhu had left before it could strike them; otherwise, they would surely have died.

The starbreak annihilator would take some time to recharge after each shot, and this was Zhang Lie's chance to counterattack. He couldn't let the cannon cast another time.

"[Shadow and Light]!" Zhang Lie morphed into a black shadow as he dashed forward. His swords slashed against the energy shield gleaming over the surface of the battleship to no avail.

"[Rune: Control]!" Zhang Lie raised both his arms into the sky, and the image of a dragonturtle appeared behind him. The two gravity-controlling tablets dropped toward the battleship. Black ripples emanated from the two gravity-altering tablets, forming a localized region of distorted gravity.

The abrupt change in gravity caused a pressure differential that destabilized the battleship's energy source. The lights flickered, as did its energy barrier.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" An underworld river hurtled into existence. The haunted souls of the underworld could almost be seen in the darkness, piercing through the shield and tearing a hole in the battleship's exterior. Zhang Lie rushed within.

As expected, it was another ghost ship. Not a single figure stood within.

Red light began to blare, and an electronic voice droned, "Self-destruct sequence initiated."

Zhang Lie wouldn't give the spaceship the chance to self-destruct.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" A blood-red dragon tore apart the battleship from the inside out as Zhang Lie swung his blades all around him.

"[Blade of the Heavens: the Sea Swells]!" Energy poured out of him in waves, honing the edge of his blade. The pulses of energy struck the realm like a tsunami, devouring everything within. The battleship split in two, causing a gigantic explosion that resounded within the sea of mists.

The battleship exploded into a flurry of fragments, each of which vanished in a puff of mist just as they were about to hit the surface of the sea.

Whitey flew back, and Zhu asked worriedly, "What was that just now?!"

"Something called a galactic battleship."

"A galactic battleship?!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "It's not something that should have been able to appear in this realm."

Despite Zhu's curiosity, she knew not to press further. If Zhang Lie wanted to explain things to her, he would—and if she wanted his continued protection, she would follow his rules.

"What do we do now? Without the warship around, we won't know how to get out."

"Leaving won't be a problem." He was able to break through the spatial distortions above the sea with his sword techniques, so his escape route was certainly secured. That said, his curiosity had been piqued by the battleship that he had seen, and he had no intention of leaving the sea of mists just yet...

## Chapter 556: Elusive Illusions

In his quest for the truth, Zhang Lie took the most direct, the simplest, and the most effective approach.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" His fist caused a geyser of water to erupt. The sea and the sky shook. Mist dissipated in a large area around them, and he brought Zhu charging forward.

Zhu asked, "Will this sort of method really work?"

"I don't know, either."

Zhu seemed flummoxed.

"It's precisely because I don't know that it needs to be tested. Staying still is also an option, but I prefer to search for opportunities rather than to let them come for me."

By that point, Zhang Lie had returned to peak condition. He continuously used his fists to shatter the spatial distortions in his way as he proceeded forward.

The way forward was calm and peaceful, and he didn't encounter anything unusual. Just as Zhang Lie was expecting that he would leave the sea of mists safely, a huge rumbling sound sent tremors through the sea and sky as a gigantic cruise ship came within sight.

The cruise ship's hull had all but rusted away, and a huge bloodstain covered its prow. Zhang Lie landed on the ship and Zhu stared anxiously around them. "Mister, I'm scared! I feel like something bad's about to happen..."

Ghosts of all races appeared on the ship, including those from the sea, humans, and even those that had recently appeared in Renhuang. The cruise ship seemed to be hosting a magnificent party.

Some of the figures were dancing on deck, others were guzzling down alcohol and wine, and yet others were holding hands and watching the sea from a distance. Zhang Lie activated his dragon's eye soulshard and confirmed that none of these figures had souls.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" Zhang Lie threw out one lone punch, so strong it warped the space all around his fist. Ripples of energy spread out from him, destroying whatever figures they encountered. Zhang Lie stepped below deck and repeated his actions, killing everyone on board as though he were a mass murderer.

Zhang Lie thought that the situation had been resolved, but suddenly, music began to play. As ancient lyrics filtered across the cruise ship, the figures appeared once more.

Zhang Lie walked up to the gramophone and smashed it to pieces, causing the music to come to an abrupt halt. All the figures glanced toward him in shock.

"Brother, what are you doing?" Zhang Hanxiang pushed aside the spectators and walked up to him.

Zhang Lie's eyes widened in shock before he smiled. "You're finally revealing yourself, are you?"

Zhang Lie's fist met her face, and Zhang Hanxiang's head exploded. The lower half of her body fell to the ground, causing everyone on the ship to scream.

"Zhang Lie, what are you doing? Why did you kill your sister?!" His mother rushed out of the crowd and glanced at Zhang Lie in disbelief.

"Sorry, my mother has been gone for a long time now!" Zhang Lie activated his dragon's eye soulshard and confirmed that she didn't have a soul.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" A black serpent shot out of Zhang Lie's fist and swallowed the facsimile of his mother whole. It ran rampant about the ship, devouring each figure it encountered. Zhang Lie's face distorted; anger thrummed through his body.

Real or not, illusion or not, he had a hard time killing his family. The bulk of that anger was directed at the mastermind behind these events, who had dared to toy with his emotions.

Zhang Lie's eyes filled with killing intent.

He was certain that he was quickly approaching his mysterious opponent, who had no choice but to come up with more and more ludicrous scenarios.

Suddenly, a figure leapt up into the air and grabbed the serpent.

"You bastard, you killed your mother and your sister!"

Zhang Lie glanced at the figure—his father.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Using his finger as a sword, Zhang Lie thrust forward, sending a wave of sword energy toward his father. Zhang Lie's father blocked the attack with a sword that came out of nowhere.

"Enough!" Zhang Lie's aura flared with his anger. Flames that carried the potency of the sun swept over the entire ship, disintegrating each figure.

The gramophone began to spin once more. Zhang Lie frowned. Something was wrong; these figures seemed to be able to respawn endlessly.

Zhang Lie felt as though he could understand what Zhu's father had felt now—as though his fist had landed on a bed of cotton, able to absorb whatever force he threw its way.

While he was thinking about how to progress onward, Zhu vanished from the ship.

Zhang Lie frowned, but he didn't panic. Zhu was with Whitey, and there wouldn't be a problem.

As he activated his dragon's eye soulshard, he found that Zhu's soul was still on the cruise ship. He sent a probing fist slightly off-center in the direction she was in, smashing apart a spatial distortion and revealing her within. Zhu, trapped amidst the mists, was being attacked by another Zhang Lie.

"What?!" This fake Zhang Lie was in the middle of attacking Zhu and was being blocked by the moonlight wyrm. Except for his appearance, the fake Zhang Lie was nothing like the real one. It was far weaker; the real Zhang Lie would be able to take down the wyrm with nothing more than a finger.

The moonlight wyrm and Zhang Lie's dragon's eye soulshard shared a similar set of abilities. They both granted a spiritual sense permitting the detection of the soul. However, much of Whitey's abilities targeted the soul, and the fake Zhang Lie didn't have a soul.

The fake Zhang Lie's face turned cruel as he yelled out, "Useless piece of trash! You're a waste of resources. Go jump into the sea and die!"

Zhu's eyes filled with tears. "No, Mister wouldn't say something like that!"

"You can't even bring me out of the sea of mists! What use are you? Why should I keep you around?!"

Zhang Lie shuddered in disgust at his clone's antics before smashing it apart.

When Zhu saw the real Zhang Lie, she was overjoyed. She pounced toward him, hugging his waist. "Mister, I really don't know much about the sea of mists. You aren't going to discard me, are you?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "If you have time to think about such pointless matters, why don't you help me figure out what we should do next?"

Zhu hugged him even more tightly. "You're the true mister, you really are!"

"Let go of me."

"No, never!"

Zhang Lie sighed in exasperation. "We're close to uncovering the truth."

"Why do you say that?"

Zhang Lie's face turned serious. "It's using techniques that are more and more underhanded, as though it has nothing better to resort to."

Zhu asked, "What do you think this opponent is, and where is it located?"

"We might have misled ourselves," Zhang Lie began slowly. "I always thought that our mysterious opponent was hidden among the mists, that we would be able to uncover the truth by heading deeper within, but who's to say that our opponent isn't right by our sides? Or, perhaps, that our opponent's been right by our sides all along..."

#### Chapter 557: Another Disaster-Grade Lifeform

A dense curtain of mist pervaded the sky above the sea. Zhang Lie had cleared all the figures off the rusty cruise ship. He and Zhu stood above deck.

Zhang Lie asked, "What does the sea have the most of?"

"Water and salt."

"And except for those?"

Zhu cocked her head. "In the sea of mists, it's mist, in the sea in general, it's fish and genetic lifeforms... Mister, do you think our opponent's in the sea?"

"More accurately, at the bottom of the sea."

Zhang Lie jumped into the sea and activated his dragon's eye soulshard as he swept his gaze over the seabed. There were barely any lifeforms active by the surface of the sea, but countless deep within.

This wasn't particularly unusual—there was no reason that oceanic lifeforms would want to make their way to the surface.

How was he supposed to find the culprit among this mess? There were far too many lifeforms living in the sea that had gone uncatalogued, and Zhang Lie hardly knew them all. He killed everything in sight, but nothing changed. The lifeform that was creating these illusions seemed nowhere to be seen.

When he noticed that the cruise ship was turning away, Zhang Lie immediately returned to the surface of the sea. "Zhu, did you discover anything?"

Zhu shook her head. "No. Nothing happened!"

It was very unusual that the cruise ship was changing its course.

"Perhaps I've found it." Zhang Lie glanced in the direction at which the cruise ship was headed with his dragon's eye soulshard and found a small flame—so far away it seemed almost invisible, but Zhang Lie was certain that a soul lay in that direction.

He scooped up Zhu and shot forward like a loosed arrow, his anger propelling him forward. Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards simultaneously. Thick fur grew from his skin, followed by scales and a dragon's claws, as he transformed into a draconic wolfman.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" With a punch, he summoned a blood dragon that tore apart the mist and spatial distortions ahead and flew straight toward his target.

Just then, something unusual happened again. An entire fleet of galactic battleships emerged from the sea, sending laser beams shooting toward Zhang Lie like raindrops in a thunderstorm.

His body covered with a blood-red aura, Zhang Lie escaped the bombardment by brute force, piercing through all the cruisers in his way.

"Finally!" The truth behind the sea of mists had finally been revealed to him. All that mist was being sprayed out of a gigantic clam, the mastermind behind the sea of mists.

Initially, he was quite flummoxed. When he saw his sister and parents, however, Zhang Lie was almost certain that the sea of mists revealed only illusions, though these illusions boasted an attack power close to what they would have in reality.

All these illusions were courtesy of the giant clam in front of him. They had been extracted from his memories and formed out of the mist that surrounded them—or, more accurately, not his memories but rather his brain waves.

Without his dragon's eye soulshard, Zhang Lie might have been mired deeper and deeper within the illusions. The warship that had emerged from the sea of mists was exactly like the one he had seen in a museum.

If not for the subsequent appearance of his parents and sister, Zhang Lie might never have found the truth.

The fleet of battleships surrounded Zhang Lie and Zhu.

"Remember: you were the one who started this. [Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Zhang Lie punched forward with his left arm, sending a torrent of dragons flooding outward.

Keening like peals of thunder, the horde of dragons smashed into the battleships that had gathered about Zhang Lie.

The battleships exploded in the sky like fireballs, vaporizing the mist around them.

The dragons fought against the battleships in what seemed to be an apocalyptic battle. Some of the dragons were pierced through by the battleships' lasers, while some battleships were smashed apart by the dragons. Fire and light filled the air.

The gigantic clam shut its shell and tried to retreat back underwater, aware that Zhang Lie was a dangerous target to provoke.

"It's far too late!" Zhang Lie sent a dazzling streak of sword energy toward the clam.

"[Rune: Control]!" He raised an arm into the air and sent the two sealing tablets crashing down. They began to resonate as one, sending ripples that melded with sea and sky, suppressing the clam's unique ability.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" An underworld river hurtled into existence, and the haunted souls of the underworld could almost be seen in the dark water. The river smashed toward the gigantic clam, destroying it whole.

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

By that time, the battle between the dragon horde and the fleet of galactic battleships had likewise come to an end. With the destruction of the clam, the battleships puffed into mist.

Zhang Lie drew a long breath. He swept over the surface of the sea with his dragon's eye soulshard, observing to his satisfaction that the mist was slowly beginning to dissipate.

Sunlight shone down over the sea of mists once more, and the sea breeze sent the last few patches of fog drifting into the distance. The world regained its usual color.

Zhang Lie stretched. "Problem solved."

Zhu exhaled. "So this was the truth behind the sea of mists!"

"There are countless mysteries in this world, and some have a very simple resolution—" Zhang Lie suddenly whirled around, his eyes gleaming with cold light. "—or is that just what you'd like me to believe?"

He was glancing at a specific spot in the sea. He drew his blade.

"[First Form: Parting the River]!" An incredible wave of energy tore a trench in the sea.

Zhu shrieked. "What's going on?!"

Others might not have noticed it, but Zhang Lie's dragon's eye soulshard easily identified a massive spiritual flare from underneath the surface of the sea— a disaster-grade soul.

Zhang Lie's attack revealed part of the lifeform that lay hidden beneath the surface, a massive shell even larger than the clam that they had vanquished, a lacquered gold shell studded with gems and jewels and brimming with light.

## Chapter 558: A Disaster-Grade Clam

No one would have expected the gleaming shell to be just under the surface of the ocean, neither above the surface or deep below it.

It was shrouded by a thick layer of mist, one that seemed perfectly normal even after the mists high above the surface had cleared up. If not for his dragon's eyes, Zhang Lie wouldn't have discovered it.

Even with his dragon's eyes, all he could sense was a layer of soul of incredible extent—not a single soul, but a whole layer of them—and traces of a spatial power that constrained it.

Zhang Lie was certain that this soul was the true culprit behind the sea of mists. The gigantic clam could only create illusions that could pass off as reality, but it didn't have the ability to control space.

However, the sea of mists was filled with spatial distortions. Without following the ship's path, the unfortunate stragglers who had ended up within the sea of mists would die trapped within a spatial distortion, whereas those that did get on board would be forced to endure the illusions that the clam brought them through.

Considering that Zhang Lie already had 21 disaster gene fragments, he should hardly have been affected by the peak-grade clam. Although he still couldn't be considered a disaster-grade lifeform proper, he was largely immune to the machinations of peak-grade lifeforms.

Nevertheless, his senses had clearly been affected—and the only lifeforms that could accomplish such a feat were disaster-grade lifeforms.

In other words, what had affected Zhang Lie wasn't the peak-grade clam, but rather the disaster-grade clam that lay hidden right beneath the surface of the sea.

"Haha, I've finally found another disaster-grade lifeform! You're not getting away!" Zhang Lie threw out one lone punch, so strong it warped the space all around his fist. Ripples of energy spread out from him.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" An underworld river hurtled into existence, roaring into the sea. The sword energy roiled like black waves as it spread out around the clam, locking up the surrounding space and causing it to vibrate.

"[Blade of the Heavens: the Sea Swells]!" Energy poured out of him in waves, honing the edge of his blade. The pulses of energy struck the sea like a tsunami, devouring everything within.

The energy of [Fists of the Silent Sea] melded into Zhang Lie's sword technique and strengthened the tsunami even further. Suddenly, the remnant mist in the air began to congregate, surrounding Zhang Lie in a thick layer of fog.

The jewel-studded clam appeared above the surface of the sea. As it opened up, a primordial aura filled the air, and a five-colored fog drifted out from within the shell.

Zhang Lie felt a sudden bout of dizziness overtake him as his surroundings morphed. A gray fog covered his eyes, so thick he wouldn't be able to see his fingers if he stretched out his arm. Space contracted around him.

"Mister! Mister! Mister!" Zhu's voice suddenly came from close by.

Startled, Zhang Lie glanced all around him. They had returned again to the warship. "Where's the shell?!"

Zhu frowned as she waved a hand over Zhang Lie's face. "Mister, are you alright?"

"Where did the clams go?"

Zhu frowned. "What clams, Mister? We just entered the sea of mists!"

"What?!"

Zhang Lie shook his head vehemently. "No, that can't be right. We were deep within the sea of mists, where we discovered two clams. One was a disaster-grade lifeform, a humongous clam whose shell was studded with jewels."

Zhu frowned as she held her palm over Zhang Lie's forehead. "Mister, you haven't gone crazy after being isolated for so long, have you?"

We've just entered the sea of mists, and we haven't seen anything besides the warship at our feet, let alone these clams. Mister, you were in a daze just now, and it took me a very long time to wake you up."

Zhang Lie's eyes widened. He glanced at Zhu, then at the warship where he stood. From what lay before him, Zhu clearly seemed to be right. Could he have been dreaming all this time?

Zhu's face turned serious. "Mister, could you have encountered a mystery as soon as you entered the sea of mists?"

"It... seems like that might be the case."

Zhu frowned. "Mister, you have to be more careful. The sea of mists is exceptionally mysterious, and nine adventurers out of ten die within it. My father barely escaped with his life."

Zhang Lie smiled. "I know that much. Your father got on a wooden boat and was trapped in what seemed like a time loop, wasn't he?"

Zhu's eyes widened. "How did you know, Mister?!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "Maybe I can predict the future. We'll likely hear a siren's voice soon."

"That's what my father told me, Mister!"

"Not only that, this siren will die very quickly."

"By what?"

"By me!"

Wings sprouted from Zhang Lie's back as he shot off the warship, leaving Zhu behind. "Don't go!"

After killing the siren with one activation of [Fists of the Silent Sea], he headed back to the warship by breaking through the spatial distortions in his way.

Zhu pounced on him as she cried, just like before.

Subsequently, when the ghost ship appeared, Zhang Lie struck immediately. Since he didn't waste time thinking like he had the last time around, there was some time left before the next mysterious event.

Zhang Lie walked around the warship. Although he hadn't found anything the first time, he wanted to see if there might be any clues that he had missed the first time.

What he hadn't expected was to find a whole room of corpses, dead from all sorts of causes natural and otherwise. Some bled to death from all their orifices, some were sliced in two, others were charred, their bodies blackened, and quite a few had rotted all the way through. A human head rolled to Zhang Lie's side.

Zhang Lie leaned down and picked it up to see his own face facing him. The entire room of corpses was all his own, showing him a multitude of gruesome deaths.

"Distasteful and pointless," he criticized. Zhang Lie threw the human head back into the room and punched forward.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" A black serpent shot out of Zhang Lie's fist, swallowing up the corpses within and leaving nothing behind.

Unable to confirm what was going on, Zhang Lie began jotting possibilities on a pad of paper.

First, he might be within a dream.

Second, what happened previously might have been the dream, and he was currently in reality.

Third, he might have suddenly gained the power to predict the future, a wholly implausible event.

Fourth, he might have entered a time loop the moment he entered the sea of mists.

Fifth, this might be an illusory realm that was created by the disaster-grade lifeform, one which wasn't real at all.

Sixth, the disaster-grade lifeform might have forcibly sent him back in time.

Zhang Lie had six possible hypotheses in all.

While he was thinking, the ghost ship appeared before him.

"Don't bother me! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" His fist caused a geyser of water to erupt, swallowing the ghost ship whole.

Next was the galactic battleship; this time, instead of reacting passively, Zhang Lie chose to attack it head-on...

#### Chapter 559: A Bewildering Truth

Zhang Lie's blades flashed as he attacked the energy shield surrounding a galactic battleship.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Sword energy filled the air, overloading the shield in just an instant. The burgeoning energy tore a hole in the exterior of the battleship. The starbreak annihilator protruded out of the battleship's exterior as it prepared to fire—but Zhang Lie attacked first.

"[Shadow and Light]!" He whizzed into the interior of the battleship, which flashed with red light.

"Warning! An intruder has been detected. Warning! An intruder has been detected." The automated self-defense system activated, and the laser guns that emerged from hidden crevices pointed their reticles at Zhang Lie.

As Zhang Lie destroyed the guns, he headed toward the interior of the battleship, toward its engine room.

"Warning! An intruder has been detected in the engine room. Self-destruct sequence activated!"

"Warning! An intruder has been detected in the engine room. Self-destruct sequence activated!"

Zhang Lie asked, "Where are you from? How did you get here?"

"Self-destruct sequence activated. Ten-second countdown initiating..."

"I'm Zhang Lie, a hunter of the world federation!"

"Nine!"

"Is it truly an illusion, then? Very well. [The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!"

An underworld river hurtled into existence. The haunted souls of the underworld smashed apart the battleship from the inside out.

As black sword energy tore the interior of the battleship apart, Zhang Lie flew out. He frowned. He was unable to communicate with the artificial intelligence present within the battleship, so he had no choice but to keep exploring the sea of mists.

This time, thanks to Zhang Lie's foresight, the warship hadn't been destroyed by the battleship's starbreak annihilator.

Zhu shivered as she asked, "What was that just now?"

"Something called a galactic battleship."

"A galactic battleship?!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "It's not something that should have been able to appear in this realm."

The reason Zhang Lie was frowning wasn't because of the galactic battleship, but rather because he felt that he had had the exact same conversation before.

Following its original route, the warship steered into siren-infested waters, which Zhang Lie handily took care of.

Next, the same cruise ship as before appeared. This time, rather than getting on board, Zhang Lie smashed it apart from where he stood on the warship.

The warship suddenly changed course, causing Zhang Lie to snort. "Just like before..."

Again, it seemed like the mastermind behind the sea of mists was fearful of Zhang Lie's strength and was trying to send him out of the sea of mists.

Everything that had happened seemed to be a perfect duplicate of what had happened in the past. If nothing else, Zhang Lie was able to confirm that none of that had been a dream.

"Do you think you can bend me to your whim so easily? I'm not going to stay or leave just because you want me to!" Zhang Lie shouted, flying off into the distance with Zhu.

Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and dragonwolf soulshards simultaneously. Thick fur grew from his skin, followed by scales and a dragon's claws, as he transformed into a draconic wolfman.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" With a punch, he summoned a blood dragon that tore apart the mist and spatial distortions ahead and flew straight toward his target.

Suddenly, an entire fleet of galactic battleships emerged from the sea, sending laser beams shooting toward Zhang Lie like raindrops in a thunderstorm.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Zhang Lie punched forward with his left arm, sending a torrent of dragons flooding outward.

Keening like peals of thunder, the horde of dragons smashed into the battleships that had gathered about Zhang Lie.

The battleships exploded in the sky like fireballs, vaporizing the mist around them.

The dragons fought against the battleships in what seemed to be an apocalyptic battle. Some of the dragons were pierced through by the battleships' lasers, while some battleships were smashed apart by the dragons. Fire and light filled the air.

As Zhang Lie punched forward, his fists summoned black dragon after black dragon, smashing the battleships around him apart.

At the center of the sea of mists was a gigantic clam that exuded mist from within its shell. This clam was the root cause behind the mist that pervaded the sea.

Zhu's eyes widened. "My father told me about such clams before! Their mists can all but replicate reality."

The gigantic clam shut its shell and tried to retreat back underwater, aware that Zhang Lie was a dangerous target to provoke.

"It's far too late!" Zhang Lie sent a dazzling streak of sword energy toward the clam. "[Rune: Control]!"

The image of a dragonturtle appeared before Zhang Lie as he raised his hand. Ripples spread out from the two tablets. They began to resonate as one, sending ripples that melded with sea and sky, suppressing the clam's unique ability.

As he was about to strike, Zhang Lie suddenly seemed to wake from a stupor. The reality before his eyes was no different from that which had happened in the past.

The clam shuddered as it suddenly broke free from Zhang Lie's seal. Zhang Lie activated his dragon's eye soulshard and scanned the surface of the sea, allowing him to spot the massive soul hidden right beneath the surface of the sea.

A pillar of genetic energy rose from Zhang Lie's body.

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

A blood-red dragon's roar shook the skies. Zhang Lie's sword energy caused the entire sea to tremble. It smashed apart whatever spatial distortions stood in its way and tore a furrow in the sky as it swept past the clam and struck the surface of the sea where the disaster-grade clam was located. A primordial aura rose into the air along with a multicolored mist.

The jewel-studded clam slowly appeared above the surface of the sea and made to open up.

This time, Zhang Lie didn't stand around waiting.

"[First Form: Parting the River]!" Gleaming light honed the edge of Zhang Lie's sword, and a beam of sword energy rose into the air.

Just then, a dragon's claw emerged from within the center of the clam and gently touched the center of the attack, dissipating it with seemingly no effort at all. As the rainbow-colored mist diffused into the air, Zhang Lie stumbled back before hitting something.

He turned back to see his father, whose face suddenly burst apart. Flesh bulged from within, expanding until Zhang Lie had no choice but to retreat. As he swung his sword at the mass of flesh, another face appeared— that of the monarch of stars.

The monarch of stars' fist thumped against Zhang Lie's body, sending him flying backward until he came in contact with the rainbow-colored mist.

His surroundings faded again to gray mist, so thick he could barely see his fingers.

"Mister! Mister! Mister!" Zhu's voice suddenly came from close by.

Startled, Zhang Lie glanced all around him. They had returned again to the warship.

"Where's the shell?!"

Chapter 560: Sheng's Sudden Appearance

Zhu frowned as she waved a hand over Zhang Lie's face. "Mister, are you alright?"

"Where did the clams go?"

Zhu frowned. "What clams, Mister? We just entered the sea of mists!"

Zhang Lie calmed down, closed his eyes, and found his memory returning. He touched his face gingerly and felt a sensation of pain.

The monarch of stars that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere certainly wasn't real; it simply came out of his memories.

Zhang Lie was certain that that disaster-grade lifeform possessed the ability to read through his memories. The five-colored mist that it had produced seemed to have the ability to reverse time, but only within the vicinity of the mist.

Zhang Lie's dragon's eye soulshard was able to confirm that Zhu was truly there, but Zhu didn't retain her memories of what had happened. Could that be a matter of strength, or of the disaster gene fragments that he possessed? If the clam could edit his memories too, that would be far too frightening.

Having restarted his journey through the sea of mists twice over, Zhang Lie was certain that the disaster-grade clam wasn't infallible. As long as he didn't come into contact with the five-colored mist, he wouldn't be forced back to the beginning.

In some sense, it was like going toward a bad ending in a visual novel.

"What sort of trash game would come up with such a nasty boss?" Zhang Lie muttered to himself as he thought about how to deal with the clam when a voice rang out by his side.

"What did you say?"

Zhang Lie jumped up in fright as he turned to see a third person on the warship, someone who wasn't him or Zhu. It was a merman with a solid, sturdy stature, his eyes sharp and piercing, who looked a little like Zhu.

"Father!" Zhu leapt forward to hug the man before her.

Zhang Lie raised a hand.

Zhu turned back and glanced at his cold eyes, emotionless and blank. Zhang Lie only looked like that when he was planning to kill someone.

Zhu hurriedly stood in front of her father, pulling him behind her. "What do you want, Mister?!"

Zhu's father smiled as he pushed Zhu aside. "Haha, Zhu, this is normal behavior. Wouldn't you be surprised if a stranger were suddenly to appear on your ship?" Zhu's father explained.

To Zhang Lie, he bowed politely. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Sheng, and I'm a ghost."

Zhang Lie had kept his dragon's eye soulshard activated all this time, and the man in front of him didn't have a soul.

"You must think my appearance very strange. I felt the same way when I first came to the sea of mists, and only when I saw Zhu could I confirm that I was actually dead."

Zhu said, "When I found my father on a boat, he told me that he had been trapped within the sea of mists for a few years, unable to leave."

Sheng slowly continued, "I had hypothesized this possibility given my experience in the sea. I saw an adventurer from over a century ago, who had passed away in the recent decades. I had traveled to his grave before seeing him within the sea of mists..."

Seeing the desire in Zhu's eyes, seeing the silent plea writ through all the lines of her body, Zhang Lie sighed and didn't strike at Sheng.

"Zhu has already mentioned all of this." Zhang Lie was a little exasperated. He had smashed apart everything the clam threw his way with force, but here was a problem he couldn't resolve with brute force alone.

Sheng continued, "When I returned to the sea of mists once more, I finally understood something. All those who perished within the sea of mists can never leave, but not only that—anyone who has entered the sea of mists will return to it in death to become one of the ghosts within."

Zhu cried out in shock, "In that case, if I or the mister were to die, we'd become ghosts ourselves?!"

"Definitely. The moment you step foot within the sea of mists, you'll be affected by the mysterious power within." His face suddenly turned bleak as he sighed. "I didn't think you would enter the sea of mists, but here you are."

Zhu smiled. "If I hadn't come, I would never have been able to speak with you again."

Sheng suddenly grabbed Zhu's ear. "Now, who's this man by your side and what're you doing with him? Where's your mother?"

Zhu yelped as she ducked. "Ow, ow! Dad, what are you doing? We've been separated for so long, and you're going to interrogate me right away?"

"Of course I have to! I can't let you walk away with a strange man, can I? Where's your mother?"

Zhu pouted and pushed Sheng aside. "After you left without any word for a few years, Mom was so distraught that she died of heartbreak! She's been gone for years now."

Sheng took a step back, stumbling as though he had just been struck by lightning. "I-Is that so?" Sheng clutched his head. "It's all my fault, it's all my fault!"

Only after a long moment of silence did Sheng finally look up. "How did your mother die?"

"After learning of your death, she slowly wasted away."

"Didn't the village take care of you?"

Zhu frowned. "Take care of me? Well, if this mister hadn't shown up when he did, I would have been in our sea god's belly by now!"

Sheng gritted his teeth. "These fellows—they told me that they'd take proper care of you when they sent me out searching for a new place to live! I swear, I—"

Zhu waved her hand, motioning for her father to stop. "Dad, there's nothing we can do about this now. Can you tell us more about the sea of mists?"

Sheng nodded. "I was never able to explore the sea of mists properly as a living adventurer, and it's all I've been doing since my death. First, the gray mists of the sea of mists are produced by a gigantic clam at its very center. I'm not sure of the origins behind the spatial distortion, but there are all sorts of strange and unusual phenomena that take place within."

Zhang Lie frowned. "In other words, it's not just the clam that's responsible for the mists?"

"From my perspective, the clam is only part of an ecosystem. All it shows us are illusions, but what manifests these illusions into reality? This is a special property of the sea of mists."

Zhang Lie wondered to himself, "In that case, if there are other races that can come up with illusions, wouldn't they be undefeatable within the sea of mists?"

"In theory, certainly, but any food produced within this sea will turn into mist. Only certain lifeforms and technological devices remain unaffected by this restriction, for reasons unknown."

Indeed, Zhang Lie had hardly seen anything else in the sea of mists except lifeforms, boats, and ships.

Sheng continued, "The clam at the center of the sea of mists makes use of this unusual phenomenon to hunt for prey, but that's not all that's special about the sea of mists. In addition..."