

## U. Warlord 561

### Chapter 561: The Mystery Deepens

"Hold on, I have a question!" Zhang Lie declared. "How can you prove that you're not just an illusion the clam made up to mislead us?"

Sheng smiled. "In that case, you're starting to believe my words, aren't you? Or rather, you'd like to believe that what I'm saying is right."

"If Zhu weren't around, I wouldn't believe a word of what you said."

Sheng smiled. "I apologize for the burden of my identity, then. I can't prove that I'm not an illusion; I can't say whether or not I'm an illusion myself. To date, I haven't been able to discover all the mysteries at the heart of the sea of mists. I roughly know that these illusions are created based on one's memories—ah! If there's something I can tell you that neither of you know about, I should be able to confirm whether I'm an illusion or not."

Zhang Lie considered his words. "What do you propose?"

Sheng turned to Zhu. "Zhu, did I tell you about how I met your mother?"

Zhu rolled her eyes at him. "Yes, multiple times, in fact."

"How about the story of your mother's birthday?"

"Yes."

"The story of your birth?"

"Yes."

Sheng rubbed his head. "Ah, what if I really am an illusion...?"

He mulled things over for a bit. "Let me tell you how I died, then. Surely you don't know about that?"

Zhu had only received secondhand information about her father's death when her uncle brought her the possessions Sheng had had on him in death.

Sheng rubbed his head again. "I didn't expect I would die at the time. It was my second time entering the sea of storms."

Zhu's eyes widened. "The sea of storms—wait, the second time? Isn't the sea of storms a forbidden region? Why would you enter such a dangerous place twice?"

"I barely escaped from the sea of storms the first time around. I didn't want to return, but I had no choice—I left something important behind."

"What's so important that you would be willing to risk your life to head back in?"

"A companion of mine."

"A companion?"

"To be honest, the first time I entered the sea of storms, I was with two other people. One of them died within the sea of storms, and the other was left behind. I thought that that person had already died, but he managed to contact me through unusual means. For my companion, I braved the sea of storms once more."

"But you died this time around?" Zhang Lie questioned.

Sheng's face fell. "That's right. That was my last adventure. I saved my companion, but I was forever trapped within the sea of mists, soul and all. I expect my companion was the one who brought all my belongings back to the village."

Zhang Lie frowned and began, "It's true that Zhu hasn't heard this story before, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you're the real Sheng. After all, how can Zhu verify the legitimacy of this story?"

"In that case, I can't prove my own identity."

Zhang Lie continued, "There's another piece of information I should tell you. You're not a soul, since souls would possess spiritual essence. You don't have a trace of spiritual essence on you."

"Oh? I suppose that's a good sign—my soul has been laid to rest deep within the ocean, then."

The merpeople believed that, in death, their souls would return to the god of the seas. Sheng didn't believe in sea deities; instead, he believed that everyone's souls would be reclaimed by the sea.

He smiled bitterly. "I apologize. As a human, it must be difficult for you to believe me."

"No, I'm willing to trust you for now."

Sheng seemed rather surprised. "Really? Why?"

"Because believing you doesn't cost me anything. Even if something unusual were to happen, I have the strength to handle it."

Sheng smiled gratefully at him. "Thank you for your trust."

"Enough of that. Please, keep telling us about your investigation into the sea of mists."

"Not only do these mists boast the ability to make the illusory real, they can even allow for time loops."

"Just like the story you told Zhu about the ship you were on?"

"Right. After I left the sea of mists, I thought that what I had witnessed was nothing but an illusion. Ever since becoming part of the sea myself, however, I learned that ghosts would take part in these time loops themselves."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Speaking of that, how are you able to leave your own ship as a ghost? I haven't seen any other ghost who was able to do the same."

"I don't understand myself. It does seem to be a unique ability that allows me to wander from ship to ship, unrestrained as the other ghosts are. It's only because of this ability and my ethereal connection to Zhu that I was able to find my way to this warship. Perhaps I was stronger than these other ghosts while I was alive?"

"Can you pass through space?"

The sea of mists was filled with spatial distortions.

"I can't, which is why it took me so long."

Finally, Zhang Lie asked a question he had been intending to ask for quite some time. "Have you ever experienced a time loop from the very start of entering the sea of mists? Not while you were on a ship, but even before it."

Sheng seemed a little surprised at Zhang Lie's words. "It looks as though you've already discovered one of the subtler features of the sea of mists!"

Zhang Lie explained what he had experienced twice by now. Sheng was only a ghost, and the clam would already know this information by reading his memories, so Zhang Lie didn't mind sharing at least this information with Sheng.

If Sheng were a true ghost, he might be able to provide Zhang Lie with some guidance.

Sheng murmured, "Disaster-grade lifeforms, you say... so that's how you humans address these major sea gods."

The marine and seafaring races thought of peak- or higher-grade lifeforms uniformly as sea gods or sea deities, and the strongest among them as major sea gods. These corresponded to the humans' disaster-grade lifeforms.

To be frank, except for Zhang Lie, few were well aware of the distinction between peak- and disaster-grade lifeforms in this era. Even the monarch of stars wasn't aware of the distinction; all those who had fought a disaster-grade lifeform had perished without being able to pass on their newfound information.

Sheng suddenly seemed to think of something. "Have you ever heard of a phrase like 'the ocean isn't the only ocean, the sun isn't the only sun'?"

"What?"

"Multiple worlds coexist simultaneously."

Zhang Lie didn't seem shocked. He nodded.

"It looks like you've heard of the like, have you?" Sheng was impressed.

"Tell me more, please."

Sheng continued, "Parallel worlds exist in our universe, all of which are joined by the sea. These worlds progress along the same timeline as ours, but each with subtle differences."

"Parallel worlds, you say..."

Chapter 562: Approaching the Truth

Sheng exclaimed, "Indeed, you know about parallel worlds! During my travels, I learned of a legend of ten suns and twenty worlds. The sun you see daily might look the same to you, but they actually rotate from world to world. Similarly, these worlds look the same from the outside, but they're each different and independent."

"This is a little different from the parallel worlds theory that I've heard of. In my version, each choice you make can spawn two different worlds—for instance, a world in which I encounter you, and a world in which I don't—and perhaps even a world in which you're still alive. There's not just one world, but uncountably many worlds."

In this analogy, the universe was like a tree, every branch and every leaf its own world. Closer worlds were closer on the tree; farther worlds were farther apart.

Zhu raised her hand. "Mister, you said that there might be worlds where you met my father and worlds where you didn't?"

Zhu wasn't fully able to follow the conversation between the two men, but she did get the gist of it.

Zhang Lie's brows furrowed. "In other words, could the disaster-grade clam have sent me from world to parallel world?"

That would be truly disastrous.

Zhang Lie's main hypothesis was that all he had encountered was an illusion, but Sheng's words went completely against that notion.

Zhang Lie believed that the clam had forced him to restart his journey through the sea of mists three different times, but if it had truly moved him from timeline to timeline, if that room of corpses he had found truly contained hundreds of his own corpses from different timelines...

Zhang Lie trembled. He could hardly entertain such notions.

And what if this weren't his third attempt in the loop? What if he had looped again and again, thousands of times, but only three of those attempts were preserved in his memories? What if he began each loop anew but only managed to reach the clam three times out of countless tries, and were killed all other times...?

Given his strength, the only existences in the second realm that could kill him was the asura— or himself. No other lifeform could threaten his life.

Could it be that another him was trying to kill all the other copies of him that existed in the parallel worlds so that the worlds would collapse into one?

Zhang Lie asked, "Could multiple copies of me exist in this world?"

Sheng shook his head. "That's not likely."

"Why not?"

"Because of Zhu."

Zhang Lie understood Sheng's meaning within moments. Zhu had always been by his side; in some sense, Zhu was a marker for him within the sea of mists. Anything else in the sea of mists might have been an illusion, but not Zhu, for she had a soul.

"Indeed, there's only one Zhu..."

In that case, was there the possibility that even his dragon's eye soulshard was affected as well? Likely not—these soulshards' effects weren't limited to the second realm, so they wouldn't be so easily subverted.

Sheng continued, "Of course, there's another reason. These 'disaster-grade lifeforms', as you call them, are all very strong; according to your description, even the whirlpool strait was a result of one such lifeform. But no matter how strong they are, they're still bound by the rules of this realm. Being able to move a lifeform from timeline to timeline is beyond those constraints."

If the clam really were able to do so, why didn't it drag its corresponding branched selves into this world with it?

Sheng continued, "My other hypothesis is that the clam somehow makes use of these time loops to send its memories to another parallel world—but that it's only a side effect, not a desired consequence."

"That sounds plausible."

Sheng shrugged. "Regardless of what the clam's abilities are, we need only accomplish two tasks. The first is to leave the sea of mists."

As expected of a former explorer, Sheng was calm and collected despite the unusual nature of the predicament they found themselves in.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I won't leave so easily."

The disaster-grade clam was a treasure beyond treasure; could he really leave it behind? Furthermore, after the clam had caused him so much trouble, he had to kill it at any cost.

"This is only ever going to end with my killing the disaster-grade clam," Zhang Lie announced.

Sheng nodded in agreement.

Zhang Lie continued, "I don't think that the clam can transport my memories to parallel worlds, but rather that it forces me to undergo a time loop. It can probably only achieve this effect by forcing me to come into contact with the five-colored mist that it expels—perhaps because of my own strength."

Zhang Lie possessed 21 disaster gene fragments, which gave him significant resistance to the abilities of disaster-grade lifeforms. Each time the loop reset, Zhu would lose her memories, but Zhang Lie himself didn't seem to be affected.

The warship was being dragged along close to the rim of a whirlpool. Zhang Lie flew to the prow and tried to push the warship away with his bare hands. This time, the warship didn't encounter the cruise ship; it had taken a different path entirely.

Sheng said, "I know where the clam is located. Let me be your guide."

With a seasoned guide around, Zhang Lie, Zhu, and Sheng found the clam much more quickly. A fleet of galactic battleships emerged arrayed around the clam, along with countless people—no, countless ghosts who should long since have perished: the monarch of stars, Shouta, Xueju, Xuechi, Musi Yu...

Figures who had been killed by Zhang Lie himself rose out of the water and stood by the galactic battleships.

The monarch of stars held his compass in his hands. "Zhang Lie, we meet again."

Xueju licked his lips. "I bet you have a beautiful body. Not being able to obtain it for myself was a pity for me in life, but it won't be one in death!"

Musi Yu shouted in rage, "Zhang Lie, I'm going to kill you!"

These revived figures shared one thing in common—none of them had eyes, only empty sockets where their eyes would have been.

Zhang Lie snorted. "The dead should remain dead."

The galactic battleships opened fire on Zhang Lie, sending laser beams shooting toward Zhang Lie like raindrops in a thunderstorm.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" A black serpent shot out of Zhang Lie's fist toward the beams of light.

"Don't forget about us!" Xueju, Xuechi, Musi Yu, and all of Zhang Lie's erstwhile opponents shot their own techniques at him.

"You've all lost to me once, and you'll lose to me again!" His blades swept through the entire battlefield like a hurricane, tearing the figures of his enemies to shreds.

The galactic battleships fell from the skies, crashing and burning; the only one who managed to block Zhang Lie's attack was the monarch of stars. Even so, his body was filled with wounds, from which mist continuously dissipated.

Zhang Lie had long since evolved in power and strength; the monarch of stars, with whom he had fought on equal footing, was no longer his opponent...

#### Chapter 563: The Dragon of the Clam

The compass in the monarch of stars' hands began to spin, causing thousands of stars to drop from the sky.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Zhang Lie's sword technique drew on the boundless nature of the sea. A tidal wave rose up into the sky and smashed the starlight to fragments. The monarch of stars shielded himself with his compass, which formed a translucent barrier around him.

As Zhang Lie's sword energy clashed with the shield, a thick scar appeared on the compass before it broke into two.

Darkness erupted from the monarch of stars, and eyes and mouths appeared all over his body. The pupils of those eyes were darker than the abyss, darker than the night, filled with corruption and chaos.

"[Rune: Resonate]!" Zhang Lie sent all four runic tablets crashing down on the monarch. They began to resonate as one, sending ripples that melded with the space and forming an absolute domain over all things within and without.

Before the array could reach maximum strength, however, the tablets ground to a halt. Countless tentacles, so thick they seemed like molasses, had filled the space the tablets created.

"[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. Waves of sword aura poured from Zhang Lie.

The bright sword energy rushed toward the sky before falling back down like brilliant rays of sunlight, dissipating the darkness in a wave of energy so intense that the remaining galactic battleships began to sputter and fall.

An incredible wave of energy tore a trench in the sea.

Zhang Lie waved the blades in his hands, cutting the darkness to pieces. The silver sword energy formed a hurricane in mid-air, batting the battleships aside.

After considerable effort, the battleships finally stabilized. Some shot ballistic missiles toward Zhang Lie, other laser beams, and a few even employed their starbreak annihilators directly.

"[Shadow and Light]!" In the blink of an eye, Zhang Lie flashed away. He darted from battleship to battleship, tracing out afterimages in the sky, before appearing in front of the gigantic clam. Behind him, the battleships burst apart in spectacular explosions, almost as though there were hundreds of suns in the sky.

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

Zhang Lie activated his blood-ant and dragonwolf soulshards, smashing the clam apart in mere moments. His eyes turned to the surface of the sea. His pupils gleamed; he had found his true target, the disaster-grade clam that lay hidden.

"[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.

In conjunction with [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar], Zhang Lie tore the surface of the sea apart, unleashing a primordial aura. The jewel-studded clam slowly appeared above the surface of the sea and opened up, causing multicolored mist to seep into the air.

His sword energy was countered by a bout of sword energy from within the clam, one that was an exact copy of his own.

As the mists cleared, Zhang Lie glanced at his new enemy with wide eyes. Standing in front of him was none other than... himself.

"I'd considered the possibility that I would become my own opponent, but it still shocks me to see it happen."

The other Zhang Lie raised the blade in his hand. "Your struggles are futile. You'll simply perish, just like all the corpses in that room in the warship!"

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" Two blood-red dragons howled and tussled simultaneously in the air.

"Take this! [Second Form: Piercing the Soul]!" Zhang Lie infused spiritual energy into his blade, and the blade gleamed more and more brightly as he charged up his technique.

His ghostly counterpart, which boasted no spiritual energy of its own, was incapable of using this technique. The sword sliced into the fake Zhang Lie's shoulder, but he only laughed. "And how do you intend to pierce my soul, a soul that doesn't exist?"

Energy poured out of the fake Zhang Lie in waves, honing the edge of his blade.

"[Blade of the Heavens: the Sea Swells]!" The pulses of energy struck the realm like a tsunami, devouring everything within.

Zhang Lie used the same technique simultaneously, triggering yet another cataclysmic explosion which tore apart the sea and sky, shattering the spatial distortions that lay above the sea of mists and snuffing out the mist.

The fake Zhang Lie's body began to destabilize.

The sea of mists was able to impart form and function to an illusion, but even it had a limit. Zhang Lie's abilities were far too strong for it to emulate in whole.

Upon realizing this fact, Zhang Lie used his strongest technique.

"[Blades, Reverberate]!" A blood dragon revolved around Zhang Lie. 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.

A dragon of blood rushed out of the tide accompanied by a series of dark, black waves.

The fake Zhang Lie tried to use the same technique, but it was simply beyond his capabilities. The dragon of blood roared toward him, causing even the multicolored mist to dissipate, when a dragon's claw emerged from within the clam to block the devastating blow.

The sea calmed down. Sunlight shone brightly from above, and the sea turned a deep, sapphire blue. The jewel-studded disaster-grade clam opened up more fully, causing more multicolored mist to seep into the air and revealing an ornate, baroque palace.

Within the palace was a dragon, one with deer's antlers on its head, a dark red mane trailing down its neck, deep blue scales, sharp, fierce teeth, emerald-green eyes, and a fearsome aura. At times real, at times illusory, it looked simultaneously a creature out of this world and one fully steeped in reality...

Chapter 564: The Clam's True Form

"This should be the base form of the disaster-grade clam—no, I suppose it's the disaster-grade clamshell dragon now."

The dragon sprayed out multicolored mist all around its body. As it tapped on the air with its golden claw, a ray of golden light shot toward Zhang Lie, which he deftly avoided.

The golden light shot out of the sea of mists into the high heavens.

"[Blades, Extinguish]!" Spiritual energy condensed into shining waves. Like a tsunami, the waves rushed toward the clamshell dragon.

The clamshell dragon evaded the attack and teleported to Zhang Lie's back in the blink of an eye, then swiped down with a golden claw.

Zhang Lie turned. He blocked with a blade in one hand and struck with the blade in the other.

The clamshell dragon's tail whipped toward that hand and curled around the blade, trying to wrest it from Zhang Lie, but its tail began to decay with the irrepressible aura of time.

"[Time's Passing]!"

Unfortunately, disaster-grade lifeforms were halfway out of time themselves.

"[Shadow and Light]!" Zhang Lie made use of his understanding of the sword to depict the movement of time through space. Time was a fixed quantity, but it flowed through different spaces and different places at different rates.

As Zhang Lie shot forward, he increased his own flow of time to an exceptional degree, sending a flurry of attacks toward the clamshell dragon in what seemed like no time at all to the outside world.

Zhang Lie's application of the technique was similar to that used by the monarch of stars, but Zhang Lie's version was less utilitarian. The monarch of stars' technique could be used even outside of combat: the reason the monarch of stars had been able to carry out so many research projects simultaneously while maintaining his combat power was precisely because of his time-manipulation technique.

Everyone else only had twenty-four hours in a day, but the monarch of stars was able to stretch twelve hours of work a day into sixty. As a result, he was able to maintain both his research output and cultivation.

Zhang Lie's sword technique was only usable in battle, though it did give him incredible strength for a short period of time.

The clamshell dragon was beaten to such an extent that it couldn't retaliate. Its body was full of wounds, and it was hard-pressed to even back away, let alone morph into mist and fly away.

Gusts of rainbow-colored mist sprayed from the clamshell dragon's wounds. Zhang Lie, rather worried about the mist, immediately stepped back. He attempted to attack from another angle, but a massive shadow appeared behind him right then and there, so large it was taller than a mountain, so large it covered up the sun and all else.

An ancient and aged hum, one that had experienced all the ups and downs of countless eras, rang out through the air. It sounded like the baying of a whale, the keening of a dragon.

The shadow opened its maw wide, sucking in the air with such force that a tornado formed in the sky. Zhang Lie turned back and beheld the whirlpool tyrant in all its majesty.

He was astounded that the clamshell dragon had been able to replicate a disaster-grade lifeform. The whirlpool tyrant shone with gleaming red light, like a luminous, glowing sun whose rays shone red as they pierced through the clouds. The sky looked as though it were burning up. Beneath the sun was an idyllic patch of crystal-clear sea, one which seemed to turn red from the evening sunlight.

"Scram!" Zhang Lie slashed at the whirlpool tyrant with his sword, cutting it in half.

Ever since absorbing the whirlpool tyrant's disaster gene fragments, Zhang Lie's combat prowess had risen sharply. He had expended great effort to take down the whirlpool tyrant initially, but at this point it was hardly a threat to him.

As Zhang Lie activated his golden qilin transformation, the red tint to the sky vanished and was replaced by great arcs of gold. Golden armor covered his body; antlers grew out of his head. Golden flames burned all around him, releasing a holy aura. The black sun to his back and bloody moon beneath his feet made him look like a god that had descended from the heavens.

The sea continued to surge and froth, its surface gleaming gold. The golden sky and golden sea met at the horizon. The gray mists dissipated, leaving nothing behind to block the splendor of gold. The entire world seemed to revolve around the sun called Zhang Lie.

Sheng thought that he was an experienced traveler, having traveled to many places and surviving numerous encounters with unusual and varied lifeforms, but Zhang Lie shocked him once and again.

"What in the world...?"

Zhang Lie's gaze landed on the clamshell dragon. As he stared at the dragon with his own dragon's pupils, the clamshell dragon began to quiver, as though it were on the verge of running away. The next moment, however, it found Zhang Lie standing before itself, blocking its way. Zhang Lie was now so fast that it couldn't even see him move from place to place.

The clamshell dragon breathed out multicolored mist as a sword slash cut it in two—but the will of the world's voice didn't ring out. Zhang Lie's face turned cold. His gaze swept over the sea and sky, and he noticed that the clamshell had vanished from sight. In other words, that clamshell dragon hadn't been the clam's true form—it was only an illusion created by the clam itself!

The clam was far too naive to think that it could escape Zhang Lie's clutches. Zhang Lie didn't even need to see where it had gone; he simply swung his blade down.

"[Ninesoul Dragonblade—Third Form: Separating Earth and Sky]!" Zhang Lie's blade made a horizontal slash.

White light split the sea and the sky, cutting apart the horizon. The skies split; the black- and white-colored energy that went into the slash erupted like a volcano. White energy drifted toward the skies, and black energy caused the sea to quake.

The whole world quaked. A patch of void and chaos expanded where the horizon had been, tearing apart the sea of mists.

The spatial distortions all throughout the sea of mists were cut apart and smashed to pieces, and the clam fell out into the air.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Found you."

He had made use of his fearsome strength to shatter the sea of mists, dragging the clam out of its hiding spot by brute force.

A thick scar marred the clam's shell, deep and jarring amidst its jewel-studded exterior. Had Zhang Lie struck at the clam and the clam alone, the strike would surely have split the clam in two.

The clam quivered as multicolored mist erupted from the shell. With another horizontal slash, Zhang Lie prised the clam shell open...

#### Chapter 565: Another Soulshard

This time around, Zhang Lie finally saw the true form of the disaster-grade lifeform.

The ornate palace appeared once again within the shell, revealing just a single lifeform within. Rainbow mist covered its translucent body, which had the texture of jelly. It was without scales and without claws.

Clams developed strong defenses to protect against a weak, fragile interior. The disaster-grade clam's ability to manufacture illusions had misled Zhang Lie into thinking that it had lost that weakness upon its evolution into a disaster-grade lifeform.

After all, disaster-grade lifeforms didn't have obvious weaknesses, so Zhang Lie had naturally thought that the illusory clamshell dragon was the disaster-grade clam's true form. Only now did he uncover the truth.

In retrospect, this should have been obvious; the evolution to disaster-grade was a dramatic one, but not so dramatic that a clam would discard its shell completely.

This was another reason the disaster-grade clam had been continuously taking advantage of the sea of mists' unusual characteristics to avoid a head-on clash with Zhang Lie once and again.

Its ingrained instincts told it to pick on weaker lifeforms, killing them with its illusions. The somewhat stronger ones could be exhausted through these loops and killed once they had been exhausted; the ones that were far too strong would be sent out of the sea of mists on a ship. The spatial distortions that pervaded the sea of mists were the disaster-grade clam's best protection.

In some sense, this weak disaster-grade clam was even more annoying than the disaster-grade whirlpool tyrant that Zhang Lie had faced; in some sense, it was stronger than the entire sura race itself.

The clam refused to allow a direct confrontation, where it would be at an absolute disadvantage. Against Zhang Lie, whom it couldn't defeat, it simply ran away again and again.

The first time Zhang Lie showed up, it tried to run off by sacrificing its peak-grade counterpart. Only when Zhang Lie pierced the deception did it finally release its multicolored mist.

The second time, it tried to bewitch Zhang Lie by means of the mist once more.

The third time, the clam finally had no recourse but to fight.

The illusory clamshell dragon was the disaster-grade clam's ideal self. It wanted claws so sharp they could pierce the heavens, a body so agile and adroit it could soar through the sky. Potent offenses, a strong physical body, impressive speed, immunity to physical attacks—this was the clam's ideal.

The clam had been trying to sculpt a perfect body based on the power it had accumulated all these years, only to encounter the even stronger Zhang Lie.

The disaster-grade clam shook as it asked, "Just what do you want?!"

Zhang Lie was a little surprised. He knew that disaster-grade lifeforms were as intelligent as humans, but he had never seen one that could speak. Given the nature of its abilities, however, Zhang Lie was easily able to understand what was going on.

"You're speaking to me through an illusion, aren't you?"

This was an illusion that the clam wanted to show him, but it was no different from the clam speaking in reality.

The clam begged, "I won't do something like this in the future! Please forgive me."

"Ha! If I were weak, you wouldn't allow me to leave unscathed, would you?"

He had come here to kill disaster-grade lifeforms, and he had no intention of giving up his prey.

With a single slash of his sword, the clam was no more.

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

Zhang Lie's eyes lit up. How lucky he had been recently! Upon activating its soulshard, his dragon's pupils turned into rings of multicolored light, enticing and mysterious, as though anyone who looked at him would immediately fall into a trance.

Multicolored mist wisped out of his body as he unsheathed his twin blades.

He had more or less grasped the utility of this soulshard, which gave him the ability to put others in a trance and to generate the clam's signature multicolored mist.

Zhang Lie sliced apart the clam's body to find a glowing jewel giving off radiant light. The mist within the jewel moved in a particularly pleasing pattern, and it was so beautiful Zhang Lie would swear it came from the very heavens. Just one glance left Zhang Lie somewhat bewildered, as though his mind was being sucked into the orb.

Nevertheless, Zhang Lie's willpower was sufficiently strong that he snapped out of his stupor within moments, but the encounter left him rattled. An ordinary person's mind would almost surely be trapped within the core with just a look.

He drew a long breath, kept the orb, and canceled his golden qilin transformation.

The fight against the disaster-grade clam wasn't the usual battle of strength that Zhang Lie had expected, but rather one of wills and willpower. If he had relaxed for even the barest of moments, he might have died.

Although he knew that all that lay before him were illusions, he had no choice. Without having killed the whirlpool tyrant and undergone the disaster-grade evolution, Zhang Lie estimated that he would have already died to the disaster-grade clam.

Because of his [Ninesoul Dragonblade—Third Form: Separating Earth and Sky], all the mist in the sea of mists had dissipated in its entirety, and the clams that had been responsible were both dead. No longer would the sea of mists be dangerous territory. The sun shone radiantly down on the sea, which glittered with golden light.

The water was a crystal-clear blue, just like the clear sky, without even a single cloud in sight. Zhang Lie stared at the sky with joy, having missed the sun amidst the dreary, perennial mists.

"Don't leave, Dad!" a tremulous voice called out.

Zhang Lie turned back to see Zhu trying to grab ahold of Sheng's body, which was gradually fading into transparency.

As Zhang Lie expelled all the mist from the sea of mists, he simultaneously stripped the sea of its mysterious strength. No longer could Sheng maintain his body.

He reached out and rubbed his daughter's head. "Don't cry. I'm very glad I was able to see you again, even after my death. It has truly been a blessing. Don't you think it best for my soul to go free, rather than to be trapped within the mists for eternity, too?"

Zhang Lie was a little upset, not because of Sheng's disappearance, but rather because he still hadn't gained a full understanding of the mysterious power that pervaded the sea of mists. In the future, he would have to slowly explore that power using the disaster-grade clam's soul shard.

"Alright, I'm going to go meet your mother now. I wonder how she'll lecture me? To be honest, I'm kind of looking forward to it..."

Sheng smiled as he hugged his daughter one last time, whispering in her ear, "Take good care of yourself, and be mindful of the men around you. This fellow you're traveling with might be strong, but you can't just hand your body over like that, you hear?"

Zhu lowered her head, blushing.

Sheng turned to Zhang Lie. "Can I leave my daughter in your care?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "Don't worry. She won't have to worry about anything within the sura realm."

Zhu's face turned redder.

Sheng smiled blissfully as his body vanished for good.

Back within Renhuang, preparations for war were underway. After all, the alien races had gathered there not to play soccer, but rather to mount a cohesive defense against the sura.

When they heard that the sura were finally attacking with an army a hundred million strong, none of the races backed down. They had gotten to know each other after some time, catalyzed by the soccer craze that had caught Renhuang by storm, and had at least a basic understanding of each other's struggles.

They mobilized rapidly and were ready to fend off the sura army in no time.

Although there were still conflicts that broke out between races, they would be able to fight side by side without a problem.

Of course, the members of Team Zenith would take part as well. Their intention was to work together with the elites of the four prime races.

Despite the fact that their opponents numbered a hundred million, the fighters of Renhuang were confident of their success. They had the Yeluo poison, after all, and numbers weren't an impediment to them.

Renhuang had long since prepared for a major confrontation against the sura, and they had whole warehouses of the Yeluo poison prepared.

Sun Mengmeng walked on stage to address the crowd. "We might all come from different backgrounds and different races, but now we have a common identity—we are those who oppose the sura, the citizens of Renhuang! Let us destroy this tyrannical race and restore peace to this realm!"

The alien races gathered around the stage began to cheer.

Sun Mengmeng wasn't as good an orator as Zhang Lie, but it was hardly a problem for her to whip up the spirits of the audience.

Her speech was short but direct, and it got directly to the heart of the matter. The alien fighters' morale hadn't been low to begin with; if Zhang Lie had been here, he might have gotten them worked up to such a frenzy that they would charge out of the city immediately.

Sun Mengmeng continued seriously, "We of Renhuang have faced the sura many times by now. Each time, we were considered the underdog, but each time, we overcame the sura! How did we succeed?"

"We had the strength, and we had the Yeluo poison! A hundred million sura does sound like a daunting number, but look all around you—it's not as though we're lacking in fighters, either! Just like the last time and all the times before, Renhuang will win against the sura!"

Sun Mengmeng raised her arm into the air. The members of Team Zenith followed suit, as did the rest of the crowd. Subsequently, the members of Team Zenith led the fighters out of Renhuang in preparation for their confrontation against the sura.

Meanwhile, Zhang Lie left the sea of mists, found a quiet spot, and took out the disaster-grade clam's core.

Multicolored light revolved within the core, causing all else to fade and lose their luster. It was smaller than the whirlpool tyrant's, but it seemed to boast a mysterious power.

This was the genetic core of a disaster-grade lifeform, the source of all their energy—their heart. Just a single glimpse was enough to unravel Zhang Lie's rationality, let alone that of a common man.

Zhang Lie cut his palm with his sword, then dripped blood onto the core. The moment it touched the core, the blood was quickly absorbed into its interior. It sucked up more and more of Zhang Lie's blood until it turned blood-red.

Zhang Lie had to reopen the wound five times before the transformation was complete. Then, he closed his eyes and began pouring concentrated, black genetic energy from his body into the core. It took him an entire hour before he felt the core start to soften, before the mysterious light began to fade away...

Chapter 566: A Psychedelic Reality

After another ten minutes or so, the entire core had softened completely.

Zhang Lie clutched the crystalline, multicolored orb in his hands that glowed like a piece of art. He felt a sense of unusual familiarity with the core, as though it were only an extension of his body.

Once he felt such a sensation, Zhang Lie couldn't resist his impulses any longer, and he swallowed the core whole.

As the core slid down his throat, Zhang Lie felt a huge lump of energy settle in his stomach.. Subsequently, all that energy contained within the core burst apart.

Almost immediately, Zhang Lie took on the color of a boiled prawn, and his blood began to froth and boil. His body burst with multicolored light, which erupted from all his orifices. The light remained around Zhang Lie's body, turning him into a glowing jewel that would have dazzled all those around him.

Like an aurora, the mists around him continuously shifted colors, gleaming green and purple, white and gold, blue and silver. Solar energy swelled within his body, gushing out of his eyes and mouth and melding with the rainbow-colored mist.

The two sources of energy clashed once and again, fighting for dominance as they merged irrevocably with each other. The energy seeped into Zhang Lie's body through every pore and into every cell.

The mists surrounding Zhang Lie spun, burned, puffed up, and hissed. If Zhang Lie were the sun, then these colored mists were a corona that augmented his light.

The mists moved like ribbons fluttering in the sky, dyed with all the colors of the rainbow. They spun around Zhang Lie like skeins of thread, soft as silk, in an explosion of color that was at once captivating and bewitching, as though all of life's mysteries could be captured in that glowing, resplendent light.

The light augmented and accentuated the solar energy radiating from Zhang Lie, tangling and merging with it as Zhang Lie assimilated the new disaster gene fragments into his body.

His mind on the verge of giving out, Zhang Lie circulated his [Ninecarp Transformation] desperately. Filled with energy, each revolution of the framework took mere moments— just over half a minute, an incredible and previously unimaginable speed.

Even Zhang Lie himself could barely believe it, considering that this had previously been an hour-long process that required his full concentration. Even more shockingly, this speed was increasing moment by moment. His new 'blood' proved to be incredibly conductive to his genetic energy, and his evolution was spurred further and further onward by the energy of the disaster-grade clam's core.

Unlike before, having already absorbed 21 disaster gene fragments, Zhang Lie's body was barely strong enough to handle the strain of the absorption, but this time around, the disaster gene fragments affected not just his body, but also his mind and mental energy.

The multicolored light drifted toward his head and soulspace, seeping into a different dimension entirely. Zhang Lie's head pulsed as though it were about to explode. He clutched his head and keened as he rolled on the ground, barely able to retain a sliver of consciousness.

As the disaster gene fragments forever changed his mind, they sapped at his consciousness.

Were it not for Zhang Lie's expanded soulspace and soul refined for two mortal lives, his consciousness might have winked out from this blow alone. Who knew what would happen then? Perhaps his mind would be replaced by something alien or other; perhaps he would no longer be himself.

Zhang Lie tried to suppress the disaster-grade energy with the strength of his soul, but even that had startlingly little effect. After all, the weakest part of a human body was the brain. As his brain swelled with energy, Zhang Lie's thoughts turned to mush; he was unable to string together a train of thoughts. He felt as though his brain was like a balloon, which had been forcibly inflated to twice its maximum capacity.

His brain cells gorged themselves on the energy, knowing that they would be destroyed if they didn't, evolving as they approached a threshold. This was a slow, arduous, grueling process, one that Zhang Lie gritted his teeth and struggled through.

His skull and bones might have been fortified, but what of his brain? Mists, illusions, and hallucinations appeared before Zhang Lie's eyes as his will was dragged into layers of dream. He thought he could see different worlds, different skies, in just the blink of an eye. His body was surrounded by a mysterious energy that translated him between reality and illusion.

Zhang Lie journeyed into many different worlds. One was his past life, an alternate reality in which he hadn't died and was continuing to struggle under adversity; another was a world without genetic lifeforms, an Earth that hadn't been invaded by aliens. Yet another was a pile of ruins and rubble.

With each blink of his eyes, he took on a different identity in a different place.

In time, he learned to break out of these illusions, to distinguish truth from reality. With enough willpower, he could remind himself that he was trapped in an illusion, no matter how relaxing or calm that illusion might appear at first glance.

And each time he escaped from a world of dreams, his headache grew more subdued, and the multicolored mist around him diminished. As he kept honing his willpower, his soul and soulspace absorbed the mist and grew larger.

As the mist around him vanished and seeped into his body, perfectly intertwined with the solar energy that formed his own core, Zhang Lie felt his body's condition improve bit by bit.

When at long last the pain vanished in its entirety, Zhang Lie sat up and opened his eyes. Multicolored light shone within, as splendid as fireworks in the night sky, as radiant as a bonfire, causing the sea and sky's natural beauty to pale in comparison..

Chapter 567: The Swan Slaver

The colors of all four seasons seemed to swirl in Zhang Lie's pupils, so beautiful they entranced those around him.

Zhang Lie's eyes were the most beautiful pair of jewels in the world; nothing else could even compare.

He had found a cave and taken shelter there to undergo the absorption process. He stepped outside to see Zhu roasting some fish she had caught. When she heard his footsteps, she turned to him in surprise, only to fall into a daze as she looked at him.

Zhang Lie had grown quite a bit more handsome than before. After consuming so many disaster-grade cores, his genes had taken on their most ideal form, and he was well past the stage of an ordinary human.

Such evolution took place both within and without.

What the monarch of stars and Fenghe had done was to grant themselves the speed of a leopard, the explosive power of a lion, and the strength of an elephant by directly splicing those characteristics into their bodies, but this could hardly be considered an evolution; these characteristics weren't innate or natural to their bodies, and they were nothing more than tools, comparable to a sword or blade.

True evolution built on one's foundations, just like how smaller and smaller transistors ultimately led to cheaper, faster, and more lightweight phones and computers. It would hardly make sense to splice a smartphone with a television in order to get a larger screen, or to equip it with a ten-pound battery to have longer battery life. That wasn't evolution; it was horror.

Zhang Lie's recent evolution had adapted both his body from the inside and the outside.

He had grown stronger, his muscles more compact, his looks more handsome, endowing him with the classical beauty of Grecian statues. Most important, however, were his eyes that seemed to captivate the soul.

Zhang Lie knew that his features might change as a result of absorbing these disaster gene fragments, but he didn't realize the change would be quite so potent. Even Zhu seemed to be attracted to him now...

The fish in Zhu's hands dropped to the ground. Heaven and earth seemed to turn black and white; Zhang Lie was the only source of color in the world.

The light gleaming from his eyes, with irrepressible charm, like the first rays of sunlight in winter, a gentle breeze in spring, were enough to befuddle one's mind. The sun, the moon, and the stars lost their luster in comparison to the twinkling of his eyes.

Zhang Lie walked forward and waved a hand in front of Zhu's face. "Hey, are you alright?"

Zhu stood dazed, saliva dripping out of one corner of her mouth...

Zhang Lie took two steps forward before all the birds in the sky began falling to the ground before him, before the fish in the sea leapt ashore, waving their tails about madly as if hoping that Zhang Lie would eat them...

Zhang Lie clutched his head. "This will be troublesome..."

He had just absorbed the clam's disaster gene fragments, and it would take him some time to rein in his newfound strength. The mistmeld clam's signature ability was in its potent mental strength,

which manifested as irresistible charm. Once he fully digested the new fragments, however, this side effect would thankfully vanish.

After his third absorption of disaster gene fragments, the increase in Zhang Lie's strength was immense. Although he didn't undergo as significant an evolution as the previous absorption, he had grown stronger across the board.

His bones had crystallized completely, and his soulspace had grown one size larger. His soul, on the other hand, had compressed and grown more refined. His [Ninesoul Dragonblade—Second Form: Piercing the Soul] would be far more potent than before.

His brain was faster and more efficient; he felt impressively alert and able to notice even the smallest of details.

Whitey received a fraction of his rewards as well, considering it was harbored in Zhang Lie's soul. Currently, it was in an egg-like state within Zhang Lie's soulspace, having reverted into that form during the process of Zhang Lie's evolution. It had originally been a peak-grade soulbeast, so Zhang Lie was very interested in seeing just what its evolution would look like.

It took Zhu embarrassingly long to recover, but she was clearly still unused to Zhang Lie's transformation. She would stare at him in the day and at night, and sometimes she even crept closer while asleep.

Zhang Lie spent the better part of the week on the island. Only when he could repress his charm and prevent it from affecting his surroundings did he finally prepare to set off again.

Zhu asked, "Where are we going next, Mister?"

"My intention is to head back to land, to a kingdom governed by a genetic lifeform."

"A genetic lifeform's kingdom?" Zhu frowned. Zhang Lie had told her what these genetic lifeforms were, but as far as she knew, such lifeforms had no culture they could call their own. Despite the fact that they were about as intelligent as humans, their nature meant that they would hardly form kingdoms of their own.

As Zhang Lie traveled the realm, the world federation again turned in earnest to the upcoming sura invasion.

[A hundred million sura are on their way to attack Renhuang!]

Just like every other time before, there were those who felt that Renhuang was at the end of the line, that it would surely fall to this calamity.

"A hundred million sura? The sura are going to kill Renhuang—there's no way Renhuang can survive!"

"Is that so? You must be truly naive!"

"What did you say the last few times Renhuang encountered such calamities? Renhuang's much stronger than you give it credit for. Don't you know that just about all the races hostile to the sura have gathered at Renhuang for a last stand?"

"Right! The ones who will truly decide Renhuang's fate aren't we commenters sitting idly by, nor the alien races who have gathered at Renhuang, but rather Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith!"

"I'm in Renhuang myself, and I haven't seen any sign of Zhang Lie around. Preparations for the battle are being organized by the members of Team Zenith. In truth, Zhang Lie seems to have left Renhuang quite some time ago."

There were more than fighters in Renhuang; some of the civilians were businessmen and merchants, and they had no intention of participating in the fight against the sura.

"Zhang Lie isn't there? In that case, surely Renhuang is doomed!"

Many believed that Renhuang wouldn't be able to create another miracle without Zhang Lie, that he was the only reason Renhuang had survived this long.

"Where is he? Doesn't he care about his own city?"

Unfortunately, no one was able to answer that question.

Zhang Lie was, at that moment, heading toward the kingdom of genetic lifeforms that the monarch of stars had carefully marked in his notes.

Genetic lifeforms weren't much less intelligent than members of an alien race. Some, like the mistmeld clam Zhang Lie had encountered, were even equally intelligent, if not more so. The mistmeld clam possessed far more intellect than a typical human, but even so, it had yet to create a culture of its own.

Genetic lifeforms didn't have an understanding or concept of culture and tradition; their strength lay in evolution, adaptation, and survival.

As a result, Zhang Lie's claim of a kingdom of genetic lifeforms left Zhu very confused.

Didn't genetic lifeforms not have any ability to maintain a culture of their own?

How could they have created a kingdom, then?

Zhu had heard many tales from her father, but she had never heard of the like.

In truth, Zhang Lie was rather surprised as well.

Many genetic lifeforms boasted the requisite intelligence for culture and heritage, and yet they had never seen evidence of such culture from these lifeforms. This had prompted some scientists to suggest that genetic lifeforms were artificial in one way or another, as though their brains had been limited in some fashion that prevented them from creating cultures of their own.

When Zhang Lie saw what the monarch of stars had written, he had idly wondered whether these lifeforms could one day develop to become like humans, but that thought had been dashed by what he subsequently read.

Apparently, the genetic lifeforms had created a kingdom of their own, but no accompanying culture. This kingdom did comprise multiple species of genetic lifeforms, but their relationship was one of master and slave, not equals.

The ruler of this kingdom was a black-and-white swan. Unlike other genetic lifeforms, this swan had the special and potent ability of granting other species and lifeforms strength.

This strength came in the form of a seed, one that would grow stronger with the lifeform and impart it with commensurate strength, but the swan could reclaim this seed at any time. Once the swan reclaimed it, the lifeform would quickly shrivel up and die.

Every so often, the swan would have the lifeforms to which it had given its strength take half the strength their seeds had stored up back to the swan. In truth, it was more like 80%, but the swan claimed that it was only half.

In order to keep the lifeforms docile and obedient, the swan would occasionally give the lifeforms under its sway some benefits, like free food. This food came in the form of genetic lifeforms that were shepherded by a rather intelligent lifeform under the swan's control. As a result, the swan didn't need to do anything at all on its own; it simply went about its own business and happily claimed some of its slaves' strength once in a while.

In order to amass more strength, the seeded lifeforms would all work hard to hunt down stronger and stronger prey, and they would even fight among themselves. If they were able to kill each other and consume their seeds, they would receive a dramatic increase in strength.

The kingdom of the swan had been built on such unstable principles, and it was better termed an arena rather than a kingdom. Perhaps because the monarch of stars was interested in these seeds or in the swan itself, he had described the kingdom in great detail...

#### Chapter 568: Energy from the Masses

An interesting tidbit of information from the monarch of stars' files was that the strength in these seeds could be distributed from one lifeform to another, and these seeds essentially behaved like currency.

If the one who controlled these seeds hadn't been the swan, but rather an alien race or some more intelligent species, a kingdom of genetic lifeforms might truly be a reality.

"So even genetic lifeforms have developed to such an extent where they know of slavery..."

With this sort of ability, it was likely that the swan had experienced rapid growth, and it might well be a disaster-grade lifeform by now—a perfect target for Zhang Lie.

Given the monarch of stars' extensive notes, Zhang Lie quickly found this supposed kingdom.

To be honest, it seemed rather destitute. It was surrounded by dense forests and tall mountains, but there were far more lifeforms, and of a far higher caliber, than he expected within the kingdom. Peak-grade lifeforms were commonplace, and superior-grade lifeforms formed the majority of the populace.

All sorts of genetic lifeforms could be seen within, much like all sorts of alien races could be seen in Renhuang.

Zhu tugged at Zhang Lie worriedly. "Mister, will we be discovered?"

Zhang Lie turned around. "Discovered by what?"

"Genetic lifeforms...?"

"Oh, we were discovered a while ago."

"What?!"

A lifeform leapt out before Zhang Lie and roared, sending a burst of wind toward him and Zhu. Zhang Lie's eyes flashed. The lifeform instantly prostrated itself like a little kitty before Zhang Lie kicked it aside.

"So what if we've been discovered? It hardly affects us."

Zhu stared, her mouth agape. She thought she had grown used to Zhang Lie's surprises, but the sight of a peak-grade lifeform cowering before Zhang Lie from just a single glance was still too shocking a sight for her to bear.

Zhang Lie continued calmly, "Don't worry, the lifeforms around won't be able to see us."

Indeed, despite the commotion the peak-grade lifeform had caused, none of the other lifeforms around seemed to notice a thing.

All those lifeforms who had turned to Zhang Lie found themselves mired in an illusion.

Zhang Lie and Zhu had become all but transparent, and they wouldn't be noticed by any lifeform nearby. In fact, the peak-grade lifeform that had jumped out at them had been controlled by Zhang Lie, with the intention of reassuring Zhu that all was well.

Unlike regular lifeforms, these genetic lifeforms all exuded a bloody scent. The center of their foreheads bulged with purplish-black veins, as though their capillaries were the roots of a flower that grew out of their heads.

As they walked deeper within the kingdom, the lifeforms only grew more and more numerous. Zhang Lie saw the traces of an ancient city left behind by some other civilization.

It was very likely that the swan had built its kingdom atop these ruins, and the only remaining structure from this ancient civilization was the castle that stood in the middle of the city.

Zhang Lie found a secluded location where Zhu could hide, warded that location for safety, and headed into the castle himself. He walked around the interior of the castle, where he heard the howling of a beast and what sounded like a duck's quack. He followed the source of the noises to a large chamber where several genetic lifeforms seemed to be having... an orgy.

At the very center of the crowd was a swan with black and white striations across its body.

The other lifeforms stayed well away from the swan. When Zhang Lie walked into the room, the genetic lifeforms seemed to notice him immediately. They stopped what they were doing and raised their heads, only to be caught unawares by his multicolored eyes.

Subsequently, almost as though they were in a daze, they returned to what they had been doing.

Zhang Lie walked up to the swan, raised a fist, and made to punch it.

Suddenly, the swan's eyes gleamed. It made a huge honk, and its wings shot toward Zhang Lie like the sharpest of blades.

Zhang Lie took half a step back, tilted his head, and punched forward.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" His fist caused a geyser of water to erupt, exploding the bodies of all the lifeforms around him except for the swan.

The swan barely dodged the attack. It spun rapidly in the air, taking advantage of the momentum of the attack to evade it in full. It cawed loudly, and its aura instantly grew to that of a peak-grade lifeform. It seemed to be at the boundary between peak- and disaster-grade.

The discordant sound was particularly loud and jarring, and it shook the genetic lifeforms within the kingdom awake. Unexpectedly, however, none of those lifeforms rushed to aid the swan.

"[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 as the swan threw the nearest lifeform within reach at him—a lifeform that looked like a top hat, with sharp, vicious teeth where the interior of the hat was.

Ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, pulping everything in its wake.

The bowl of the hat-like lifeform was a pocket dimension, much like the whirlpool tyrant's belly or the potbellied toad's pouch. Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar] was fully sucked within, and it proceeded to wreak havoc throughout the lifeform's body.

As the hat-like lifeform moaned and whined, the swan's black-and-white body turned a pale white. The hat-like lifeform had been unable to resist even a single blow from Zhang Lie.

Knowing that it had encountered a truly dangerous existence, the swan tried to escape, but Zhang Lie appeared in its path before it could do so. He sent another punch toward the swan, space distorting and reforming in the aftermath of his attack.

Ripples of energy crossed each other in mid-air, and the frightening burst of wind that heralded the attack seemed poised to destroy heaven and earth.

The swan ducked behind the hat-like lifeform, which absorbed the second of Zhang Lie's punches and exploded with a bang, unable to withstand the potency of Zhang Lie's attacks.

The destruction that resulted was harrowing. The entire room bore thick scars from the explosion, and all the lifeforms' carcasses had been disintegrated. The swan had been caught near the center of the explosion, and its body was marred with layers of wounds. The fact that it hadn't been torn apart was testament to its own strength.

Zhang Lie punched forward once more with [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]. He moved so rapidly that he was by the swan's side before it could recover from the attack. It had no time to dodge; it was forced to defend itself with its two wings as force exploded from Zhang Lie like a tsunami.

The swan was thrown back like a bullet. It smashed against the wall, cracks propagating from the point of impact. Its two wings had broken, and blood trailed down its body.

Zhang Lie was just about to kill it with one last blow when a figure pounced toward him and met him fist for fist. Zhang Lie marveled at the strength of the silver chimpanzee that stood before him, his fur glowing silver, his arms gleaming with the luster of gold.

That the chimpanzee hadn't died was shocking. Zhang Lie hadn't used any specific technique, but 31 disaster gene fragments afforded him a shocking level of strength.

That said, the chimpanzee hadn't gone unharmed, either. Its body was partially caved in, but there was no flesh or bone to be seen, only translucent crystal.

Zhang Lie had seen the likes of this before—this was a pseudodisaster-grade lifeform! This silver chimpanzee's arms had crystallized! Although he had never seen a peak-grade lifeform evolve to disaster-grade, he had seen a pseudodisaster-grade lifeform before.

There were countless genetic lifeforms in the second realm, and it was reasonable that they all had different routes to evolution.

"[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 smashed into the ground, blocking the exit from the chamber. Black ripples emanated from the two gravity-altering tablets, forming a localized region of distorted gravity.

Zhang Lie's intention was to disrupt the two lifeforms from fleeing, as well as to block the most obvious exit.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" A black serpent shot out of Zhang Lie's fist toward the two movement-impaired lifeforms, who were unable to dodge the attack.

The chimpanzee sucked in a deep breath and blocked the blow for the swan. As the serpent bit into it, its body quickly began to corrode away.

Zhang Lie clenched his fists tightly. "It's all over now."

Just as he was about to take down the swan, however, the entire castle seemed to quake, and the cries of all sorts of genetic lifeforms could be heard in the distance. They poured in like the tide, breaking the walls of the castle down in their urgency. The swan's cries had finally had an effect...

#### Chapter 569: The Swan's Reckoning

The beast tide was frightening in size.

Zhang Lie twisted his head, his eyes gleaming with a rainbow sheen. Multicolored mist rose from the ground, stupefying the genetic lifeforms at the head of the pack. As they reached Zhang Lie, they stopped short.

The genetic lifeforms' eyes all took on a rainbow sheen. Zhang Lie pointed at the swan, and they all looked toward it.

The swan shivered and honked, but it had already lost control of all its genetic lifeforms. A horde of lifeforms yelled, screeched, and howled as they swarmed the swan. Zhang Lie's mistmeld clam soulshard had trapped all these lifeforms in an illusion; he had swapped their perception of the swan and Zhang Lie.

The swan had no choice but to trigger the seeds embedded in each lifeform's forehead. Their hearts thumped loudly as black capillaries spread all over their skin.

The genetic lifeforms rushing toward the swan keened in pain as they fell to the ground.

A black flower grew over their heads as black energy was extracted from their bodies.

Some of the genetic lifeforms had beads of black energy as large as watermelons, whereas others were small like green beans. Once all the energy had been extracted from the lifeforms, their bodies quickly became thin and emaciated, nothing more than skin and bones.

All that energy gathered on the swan's body, which expanded like a balloon.

Zhang Lie watched on with interest, curious how much stronger the swan would get. It was right at the border of peak- and disaster-grade, but this was a known bottleneck that stymied countless lifeforms. At the very least, Zhang Lie had seen three such lifeforms, two at the pinnacle of peak-grade and a third that had almost crossed into disaster-grade, die at his hand.

At this point, Zhang Lie had no interest in peak-grade lifeforms. They had to be at least pseudodisaster-grade in order to augment Zhang Lie's strength.

Now that the swan's lifeforms had been controlled by Zhang Lie, it was reclaiming its strength through the seeds embedded in their bodies.

The swan's body grew larger and larger. Its head broke through the roof of the chamber as it transformed from a 1.5-meter tall swan to a 15-meter tall one. Muscles bulged all over its body.

It had taken in too much energy, so much its body couldn't handle it. Its skin began to crack; its eyes had turned blood-red. Blood-red tendrils quivered around its body like little snakes. Those tendrils twisted and twined against each other before finally coalescing around the swan's neck.

Zhang Lie considered the swan carefully. Based on the fluctuations in its aura, it had certainly reached disaster-grade, but its body was nowhere near crystallizing.

"Indeed, the transformation to disaster-grade isn't straightforward."

There were no shortcuts to such an evolution. Even if it boasted energy and power commensurate with that of a disaster-grade lifeform, it would still need a suitably strong body to match that power.

The swan roared. Waves of energy spread out around it like a tsunami. Its voice was filled with notes of anger and pain. A crazed madness seemed to have taken hold of it.

The walls of the castle, whose foundations had grown more and more unsteady as the fight progressed, crumbled. Given the amount of energy at its disposal, the swan could almost be considered a pseudodisaster-grade lifeform.

Blood-red tendrils flew around it as Zhang Lie unsheathed his blades and cut them apart.

The swan unfurled its wing at Zhang Lie, boundless energy filling its body to such an extent that it felt it was about to explode. It was a miracle that it hadn't. It charged at Zhang Lie, trying to expend its reserves of energy before it could wreak more damage on its own body.

Zhang Lie leapt high in the air and struck with [The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave].

A tall wave of sword energy clashed against the swan's wing, drowning it in a massive explosion and wounding its body.

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]! The swan's wing, draped in inky-black liquid energy, caused heaven and earth to shudder.

Zhang Lie watched on with wide eyes—the swan had somehow managed to replicate his technique! The swan's latent ability, magnified in times of stress and strife, had somehow enabled it to copy Zhang Lie's technique whole. As it fought an uphill battle, as it tried to slough off the energy that filled its body, it was slowly evolving to disaster-grade.

Zhang Lie sliced apart the swan's attack, tearing space as he cut a narrow path to safety.

"[Shadow and Light]!" He dashed toward the swan and appeared right above its head, where he thrust his blade into the swan's forehead. However, the swan's body had grown so large that his thrust was almost as effective as pricking himself with a needle.

The tendrils on the swan's neck exploded, morphing into thousands of spikes that shot toward Zhang Lie.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" With another slash from Zhang Lie, an underworld river hurtled into existence. The haunted souls of the underworld could almost be seen in the darkness, tearing the spikes apart.

The swan reared back. It attacked Zhang Lie once again with its stolen technique. [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]! Waves of energy, so intense they warped space, spread out from the swan's wings, crushing all resistance in its way.

With its life on the line, the swan's latent potential erupted. Given the energy it had just absorbed, the strength and range of its blows were even greater than Zhang Lie's own.

"Size doesn't determine everything! [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. Waves of sword aura poured from Zhang Lie.

The bright sword energy rushed toward the sky before falling back down like brilliant rays of sunlight, dissipating the darkness in a wave of energy so intense it was forced to shield its eyes.

Just because the swan could imbue its techniques with more energy didn't necessarily make them more potent.

To Zhang Lie, the swan's [Fists of the Silent Sea] was essentially a novice's. Although it looked impressively intimidating, it had hardly managed to capture the essence of the technique, a level of mastery born of repetition and experience.

In the end, Zhang Lie only cut off one of the swan's wings without killing it completely. He wanted to see whether the swan could evolve into disaster-grade, furnishing Zhang Lie with even more rewards...

Chapter 570: Zhu's Metamorphosis

Unfortunately, the swan proved to be a disappointment. Sensing the enormity of Zhang Lie's strength, the swan waddled off cradling its injured wing, without the strength or courage to keep fighting.

"Die!" Zhang Lie activated his dragonwolf and blood ant soulshards, then sent a frightening blow of sword energy down toward the swan.

The injured swan was bisected cleanly. Zhang Lie poked around the swan's corpse until he found its heart, which had already blackened. Countless black roots trailed around the connected arteries and veins.

Despite the fact that the swan's body had been bisected, its heart continued to beat, filled with a tremendous amount of energy. The swan might not have fully become a disaster-grade lifeform, but its heart was already turning into a disaster-grade core—it wouldn't be able to contain so much energy otherwise.

Had the swan continued to fight, it would likely have turned into a true disaster-grade lifeform.

In that case, would it be possible that other peak-grade lifeforms might evolve with their lives on the line when pushed to the limit? Perhaps Zhang Lie might be able to farm disaster-grade lifeforms in such a fashion...

He retrieved the swan's blackened heart and stored it away before leaving the chamber in search of Zhu.

Zhu sighed in relief when she saw Zhang Lie leave the ruined chamber. "You scared me to no end! I saw a whole bunch of lifeforms rush into the chamber, and I was so worried!"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at her. "They were nothing more than small fry, no matter their quantity. Let's go find somewhere quiet."

"Won't this do?"

The lifeforms had rushed into the castle following the swan's cries. Either they had died, or they had morphed into Zhang Lie's most loyal guards. Indeed, this was the safest location around.

Zhang Lie found a comfortable spot, warned Zhu to stay away, and began absorbing the swan's core. He cut his palm with his sword, then dripped blood onto the core. The moment it touched the core, the blood was quickly absorbed into its interior. It sucked up more and more of Zhang Lie's blood until it turned blood-red.

Then, Zhang Lie closed his eyes and began pouring concentrated, black genetic energy from his body into the core.

After he swallowed the core, Zhang Lie's skin turned red. Steam hissed from his body, and black pricks of energy dotted his skin. His capillaries turned black, but only for a split second. Soon, he seemed perfectly normal.

After all, the swan wasn't yet fully a disaster-grade lifeform, and it only ended up providing five disaster gene fragments. Zhang Lie absorbed all that potency within a few moments.

However, the encounter with the swan had been particularly important to Zhang Lie.

The disaster gene fragments were vital for his advancement, of course, but more important was the strategy he had stumbled on that would allow him to quickly amass such fragments. No longer did he have to search the entire world for pre-formed disaster-grade lifeforms—he could just make them himself!

Zhang Lie found Zhu sitting in front of a firepit, cooking part of the giant mistmeld clam he had slain.

While she was with him, they never lacked for food. Zhu had a rich diet of peak-grade lifeforms. Initially, she was too weak to consume much of the rich fare, but her body and appetite had grown considerably since then.

The thin, skinny girl who was barely able to avoid being blown away by a gust of wind had grown strong and healthy.

"Are you done so quickly this time around?" Zhu asked curiously. "I didn't notice anything unusual, either. Have you finished the absorption?"

"It wasn't a full disaster-grade lifeform, so the absorption was more or less trivial."

"Well, I'm almost done cooking, so you're just in time!" Zhu waved a hand at him, beckoning him closer.

Half the clam was roasting above the fire, steam hissing as it left the clam meat. Zhang Lie sniffed as he approached the fire. "You added some alcohol?"

Zhu nodded. "Just a little bit."

Seeing that the clam was just about ready, Zhang Lie reached for it with a hand. It wasn't particularly hot to him; with his current strength, he was impervious to regular flame. He cut apart the clam meat into small pieces, and a fragrant odor wafted into the air.

Zhu picked up a pair of chopsticks and had a bite, sighing in enjoyment.

Zhang Lie ate some of the meat as well. Zhu's cooking was quite good. She had added a few spices—he tasted the notes of garlic, chili, and pepper, as well as the alcohol she had mentioned.

Seafood was best when hot and piping, with a freshness unique to its kind. The garlic, chili, and pepper blended seamlessly with the taste and mouthfeel of the clam meat, leading to a veritable explosion of flavor when ingested.

Zhu dug in with gusto.

"Zhu?" Zhang Lie noticed the problem rather quickly. Zhu's strength had improved, but she still shouldn't have been able to consume so much peak-grade meat. If she ate too much, she would turn red like a boiled prawn, a reflection of the fact that her body wasn't well equipped to handle so much rampant energy.

As she continued to eat, however, her eyes took on the sheen of a rainbow, an enticing fragrance emanated from her body, and her sea-blue hair seemed to be wreathed in colored mist.

Zhu was evolving, bit by bit.

Zhang Lie had seen this sort of evolution before on Mt. Wanren, when the crag eagles consumed some golden roc meat and began turning golden themselves. However, their evolution was far less intense and immediate than what Zhu seemed to be undergoing now.

This sort of evolution had only been reported to occur for alien races, whose evolution was linked to consuming particularly compatible flesh. Most alien races could only grow stronger by cultivation and training, but they were limited by the fundamental restrictions of their race. Only a rare few could hope to overcome those barriers.

Of course, there were some exceptional alien races, such as the sura and the rock spirits, who boasted different routes to evolution of their own.

Many alien races, however, were unable to find such routes to evolution—or rather, for whom such routes didn't exist. As a result, they had to grow stronger only incrementally, battle after battle.

As a result, growing stronger was much harder for them than for humans.

Humans started at a lower baseline, but as long as they didn't die, they could keep amassing gene fragments, progress through the realms, and ultimately reach the level of a sura king after a few decades.

However, members of the alien races were largely incapable of realizing such a feat, considering that the flesh of genetic lifeforms was of little more use to them than ordinary food. It wasn't completely useless to them, but trying to get stronger by eating the flesh of genetic lifeforms was a much slower and much less efficient process than extracting gene fragments outright, as humans did—unless these alien races could find the flesh of particularly compatible lifeforms to consume.

Doing so would allow them to augment their genes and strengthen their body from a genetic level, allowing them a straightforward route toward evolution. However, there were millions of species in the second realm, and perhaps only a hundred of those at most would provide such an effect.

This route to strength was a perilous and highly variable one, which required persistence and no small amount of luck. One generation—even a hundred generations—might not be sufficient to find a suitable match.

However, once that match was found, these alien races would have a chance to undergo a massive evolution in strength, unlocking newfound talents that would herald the rise of their race...