

U. Warlord 621

Chapter 621: A Long-Delayed Ascension

Zhang Lie instructed, "Once Hong Xi wakes up, relay what I said to her."

Overall, he was quite satisfied with the results of his impromptu examination. Everyone in Team Zenith had a near-disaster-grade strength, and it would be trivial for them to protect and guard the kingdom of Limit. In addition, despite his criticism, both Zhang Hanxiang and Hong Xi had grown greatly as hunters.

Given their combat ability, Zhang Lie was comfortable allowing them access to disaster gene fragments without having to worry about whether he was stunting their growth.

The members of Team Zenith had finished their training, and he had already worked out the governance of Limit with Yun Bing and the others. Once they assimilated the various alien races into the kingdom, it would prosper as a whole.

Yun Bing was an excellent prime minister, and she managed the kingdom effectively. There was little that he would have to worry about in the second realm.

Zhang Lie considered leaving behind some of his soulshards for Zhang Hanxiang; it was past time to clean up his inventory, after all.

His superior-grade forest wolfman, windborne eagle, and runic salamander soulshards from the first realm were no longer able to match his strength, but even Zhang Hanxiang might be a little disdainful of them. After all, there were plenty of soulshards available for sale or trade in Limit, and Zhang Hanxiang was using peak-grade soulshards herself.

Zhang Lie laughed. "If nothing else, these are the soulshards that the king of Limit, Zhang Lie, once used in the first and second realms. Give me some face, won't you?"

Zhang Hanxiang nodded. "Indeed. They do have historical value, and I'm certain I'll be able to get a high price for them if I put them up for auction."

Zhang Lie intended to leave the disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard for Zhang Hanxiang to manage; it was originally intended for her and the members of Team Zenith, after all.

When Zhang Lie passed her the soulshard, Zhang Hanxiang's eyes widened. She understood what Zhang Lie was about to do. "You're going to leave me again, Brother, aren't you?"

"I'm not leaving—just ascending into a higher realm. It's a natural thing to do as hunters and cultivators, after all. In fact, I've already overstayed my welcome in order to help you all build a better foundation here."

Zhang Hanxiang was a little dejected and upset.

"There's no need to worry. In a little more time, Ye Xianchen, Jun Jiuxiao, and Hong Xiao will be arriving in the second realm, along with other members of Team Zenith. By that point, the Zenith Dojo will have a solid foundation here.

"I've already informed Yun Bing to build a replica of the Zenith Dojo within Renhuang once everyone from the Zenith Dojo gets here, and you can draw in new recruits then—aliens and humans alike."

Zhang Hanxiang asked, "Brother, can't you do it?"

Zhang Lie rubbed his sister's head. "It's a task for you, as well as a trial."

With the members of Team Zenith and the Zenith Dojo around, along with her status as princess of Limit, it would be trivial for Zhang Hanxiang to accomplish this task. It wasn't a true trial at all—just a means by which he could help his sister secure her own forces.

Limit belonged to him, and problems would eventually arise once he left. The incorporation and assimilation of all the alien races into Limit would be a breeding ground for trouble. Zhang Lie was able to suppress that trouble on the basis of his raw strength, but once he left, who could say?

Would Zhang Hanxiang be ready to ascend to the third realm within a decade or two? Zhang Lie didn't know. Just in case, he would have her establish the Zenith Dojo within the second realm so as to safeguard herself. Zhang Lie would be able to mobilize this strength, and the forces within would be loyal to her and her alone.

Before his departure, Zhang Lie had planned out everything.

Except for his disaster-grade mistmeld clam soulshard, he left almost everything else to Zhang Hanxiang in hopes that she would be able to defend herself well.

The superior-grade white grub and blood ant soulshards would hurt him to give up. The first had taken him over half a year to obtain; the second boasted frequent utility. They were starting to get dated, but they had sentimental value to him.

The superior-grade eternalspring cocoon soulshard was still valuable to him, so he would keep that as well.

He couldn't bring himself to give up his peak-grade moonlight wyrm soulshard. He had raised the wyrm from the very beginning and cultivated a deep enough relationship with it for it to be worth keeping.

The others all had their own extra-dimensional storage, so there was no reason for him to leave his potbellied-toad soulshard behind.

His peak-grade dragonwolf and golden roc soulshards were still usable; the latter was the source of his twin blades Guicang and Hanguang.

Zhang Lie: a disaster-grade lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX; Ninecarp Transformation, Sixth Form: River Dragon
Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (advanced), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (advanced),...

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 150; Disaster, 100

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wyrn (peak), Golden Roc (peak)

Zhang Lie smiled at having all his affairs settled. With a burst of mental energy, he called out, "Will of the world, I'm ready!"

Space cracked around him, and the ground began to tremble. The release of Zhang Lie's strength was impossible for the will of the world to ignore.

The will of the world's voice rose in his mind. [Your status exceeds that permissible within the second realm. Please advance to the third realm immediately!]

Zhang Lie's entire body, wrapped up in rainbow-colored light, was transported to the extradimensional space that had been used for the refinement ceremony. Despite the fact that he had already passed through the process once, the will of the world ran him through it again—a big boon.

His strength consolidated once more, and the refinement energy seeped throughout his body. As a pillar of light rose into the air, Zhang Lie floated up with it into the third realm.

What he didn't notice was that, as he ascended, the will of the world's voice seemed to take on a malicious tinge.

The third realm was known as the meru realm. Zhang Lie had ascended to it in his past life, and he had some understanding of it. [1] It was composed of thousands of smaller worlds.

As the light descended, Zhang Lie glanced at his surroundings in shock.

He had been dropped among a number of aliens who looked startlingly like humans, except for the fact that their arms were jade-green. If Zhang Lie hadn't been able to distinguish between the aura of a human and that of an alien, he might have gotten confused himself.

The will of the world should have sent him to a human settlement; how had he ended up in what seemed to be a small non-human village?

He politely asked the old man in front of him, "Excuse me, sir, where am I?"

The old man scanned him up and down. "You don't look familiar to me. I'm sure I've never seen you before. Who are you?"

Just as Zhang Lie was about to respond, a bell from somewhere nearby began to toll. Someone from within the village shouted, "The demon bats are here, the demon bats are here!"

Zhang Lie sensed a huge wave of incoming lifeforms, but by the time he lifted his head, everything had already grown dark. The darkness even seemed to be... rapidly spreading? Frowning, Zhang Lie had a closer look—the darkness was actually a swarm of bats, thousands of bats of humongous size...

Chapter 622: The Third Realm

The black bats were each as large as a human, but their wingspan made them seem multiple times larger. There were so many of them that they covered heaven and earth, screeching in the evening light that was now completely obscured from sight. Their eyes were blood-red.

Zhang Lie frowned. "Are these genetic lifeforms?"

The old man tugged on Zhang Lie with a hand. "Follow me."

Zhang Lie discovered that the residents of the village had all returned to their houses. With his dragon's pupils, he saw that they were all sheltering in underground cellars.

"What's going on?"

"There's no time to talk—the demonic bats are almost here!" The old man was surprisingly strong; he dragged Zhang Lie into his house.

"Help me!" he shouted, motioning to the other side of the stove. Zhang Lie lifted it up and moved it aside to reveal a wooden trapdoor. "Quick, hurry and go on in!" The old man beckoned.

The two of them headed into the narrow and cramped cellar, which was about five people wide. It was filled with stockpiled food.

The old man sighed in relief. "Lad, you look thin, but you're surprisingly strong!"

Zhang Lie asked, "Sir, just what's happening outside?"

"From time to time, those demonic bats will fly out of their caves in the evening to attack nearby settlements. They're very strong, and they seek out prey not by relying on their eyes.

"Unless you hide in an underground cellar, they'll be able to find you. I used to have a kid around your age, but his ankle was wounded and he was too slow to join me in the cellar. In the end, he was captured by the bats." The old man's voice suddenly became upset.

Zhang Lie was just about to ask where he was again when crying noises could be heard from outside.

"Let me go!"

The old man's body shuddered. "That brat—it's that brat's voice! He must have been out playing when the bats came!"

The boy's cries were heartwrenching; they pierced through the walls of the cellar. The old man fretted. No one in the village could take down such a large swarm of beasts—no one in the past, that was.

As Zhang Lie made to rush outside, the old man held him back. He cried out, "Lad, what are you doing?!"

"Stay here. I'll have a look at how strong these bats are for myself."

The old man tried to drag him back. "No, don't! You'll just lose your life like this!"

"There's nothing to worry about—I don't believe there are any genetic lifeforms that can kill me around here!"

Zhang Lie strode boldly outward to see a monkey-like alien child whose shoulders were clamped tightly by a bat's claws. As he was dragged up into the sky, he shouted, "Let go of me! Save me, please!"

The boy continued to struggle, but he was unable to overcome the bat's strength.

Zhang Lie noted to his surprise that the bats were intelligent enough to use such a tactic rather than to eat him up immediately. They were trying to take advantage of his cries to lure his relatives and kin into helping him, the most effective bait they could come up with.

However, none of the villagers from the village rushed out to help. Clearly, this wasn't the first time this tactic had been tried on them.

Unfortunately for the bats, their opponent was Zhang Lie.

The moment they discovered Zhang Lie, they pounced on him with mocking laughter, as though they were surprised that someone was still falling for their trap after so long. The bats whirled around him like a tornado.

With a snap of his fingers, Zhang Lie caused heaven and earth to shake. A wave of energy emanated from him and shredded the black tornado, sending a rain of blood toward the ground.

A barrier of genetic energy protected Zhang Lie from any of the remnants of his attack. Standing in the blood, he looked like a demonic god who had descended onto the realm.

The third realm was far more stable than the second, as though its structural integrity were reinforced with some formless strength. In the second realm, if he needed to, Zhang Lie could crack the sky with a snap of his fingers, but in the third, all it had done was clear out an entire wave of bats.

It wasn't that Zhang Lie had gotten weaker; the world had simply gotten stronger, as had the lifeforms within. If the second realm were a piece of wood, then the third was a bar of steel. Zhang Lie could easily smash apart a piece of wood with a hammer, but not a bar of steel.

Zhang Lie had appeared to be stronger in the second realm because he could manipulate space and time within it. In the third realm, however, these options were currently locked to him.

Another wave of bats approached. Zhang Lie leapt up toward the sky like a loosed arrow.

This time, he punched forward with a fist.

The bats disintegrated before they could draw close, exploding in showers of blood in mid-air. Zhang Lie's gaze landed on the child still struggling and shouting. A gigantic bat suddenly flew before Zhang Lie, blocking his path forward.

It was two or three times larger than the other bats. Its eyes shone with a purplish-red glow. It let out a shrill screech that hurt Zhang Lie's head.

Was this how strong a mutated-grade lifeform in the third realm was? A regular human would have burst from the inside out if they were in close proximity to the bat.

"Scram!" Zhang Lie thundered, roaring like a black dragon. The bat, struck dumb by his aura, suddenly went mute in mid-air.

As Zhang Lie approached, the bat tried to run off.

"[Rune: Gravity]!" With a manifestation of his will, Zhang Lie summoned a dragonturtle tablet, one that crashed down on the bats still in the air.

They fell like rain, thudding on the huts and houses of the village. They screeched as they landed on the ground, but were unable to break free due to the massively increased force of gravity.

Zhang Lie caught the alien boy in his arms. He landed on the ground and released him, but the boy seemed so afraid of the bats still lying and screeching on the ground that he clutched onto Zhang Lie tightly, unwilling to let go.

Zhang Lie's eyes glimmered with rainbow mist, creating a fog that spread throughout the village, and the bats' eyes glazed over with a rainbow sheen.

With a snap of his fingers, the tablet vanished. The bats began to fly into the sky and beyond the horizon.

Zhang Lie clapped his palms. "I've taken care of the bats. You can all come out now!"

His voice resounded for quite a while throughout the village before there was any movement. The first to emerge was the old man who had been with him...

Chapter 623: Spatial Rifts

The old man glanced around carefully. Only when he confirmed that there were no more bats did he finally let out a shaky breath.

"Lad, I didn't expect you would be so strong. I don't know how to thank you."

Very quickly, the other villagers headed over. When the young boy saw his parents, he ran over to them with tears in his eyes, who teared up themselves.

Zhang Lie asked, "Sir, do you know where there are humans around?"

Zhang Lie had to find a human settlement quickly. Only then would he have access to a teleportation array to return to the real world; otherwise, he would be trapped within the dimensional one.

The old man shook his head. "I've lived here for decades without hearing of the name. Lad, are you searching for your clan?"

"Yes, I am."

The old man harrumphed. "We live on a small world, one no larger than ten thousand miles in diameter. I've not met any other sentient race around. I recommend searching on a larger world instead."

"Do you know where the wormhole to access other worlds is located?"

"Twenty years ago, our world still had such a wormhole. It was located in that cave over there, and we would use it to trade with the residents of another world. However, at that time, a swarm of demonic bats began to occupy that cave.

"We organized a battalion of fighters to defeat the bat incursion, but the bat king leading the flock was far too strong for us. Its cries were enough to cause our fighters to implode—our village alone had over a hundred skilled fighters, but they all died to the bat king."

The old man sighed.

The arrival of the demonic bats had marked the downfall of the world. The alien race tried to force the bat king back, but to no avail. Thousands of alien fighters had perished, and even the regular demonic bat swarms proved too much for the remaining people.

Not long ago, the last alien city met its end. There were only a few small tribes remaining scattered throughout the world.

A middle-aged man walked forward and introduced himself respectfully. "To be honest, our numbers are rapidly dwindling. Each and every child is precious to our village, and we are truly grateful for what you've done."

The old man advised, "Lad, why don't you stay? You saved our entire village and our child. All of us will treat you like one of ours."

Zhang Lie glanced toward the direction of the cave the old man had pointed towards. "I still intend to have a look at the cave."

The old man continued, "Lad, the bat king is truly a dangerous foe. If you head there yourself, you'll almost certainly die."

Despite his words, Zhang Lie remained resolute. The old man sighed and realized that Zhang Lie would likely not be persuaded against the idea; instead, he dug around and found a burlap sack of green fruit. "Our village isn't particularly rich, and this is all we can offer you. Please accept this, if nothing else. These fruits aren't particularly special, but they'll at least satiate your hunger. If you eat one, you won't have to eat anything else for a few days."

Zhang Lie was about to refuse the man, but he insisted on giving the savior of a village child a reward, even if it was paltry. Eventually, Zhang Lie accepted.

He didn't ask the old man where the cave was located. With his mistmeld clam soulshard, he had controlled a swarm of bats that were now flying back to their cave, and they would lead Zhang Lie there.

As the bats returned to the cave, they began attacking their own kin. Zhang Lie continued strolling forward through the cave, wreathed in rainbow-colored fog.

The fog spread through the cave. All the bats caught within the mist became controlled by Zhang Lie's soulshard, and they began to attack their own kind.

The carnage spread deeper into the cave as Zhang Lie ventured further. With a shrill screech, countless bats exploded in mid-air, raining a waterfall of blood down on Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie waved it away with a casual sweep of his arm, shielding himself with genetic energy. A black shadow appeared before him—a gigantic bat whose wingspan filled up the width of the cave.

Its eyes were dark red and beady, and they gave off a cold aura. This bat was at the level of a superior-grade lifeform. If Zhang Lie weren't mistaken, this was the superior-grade bat king the villagers had mentioned.

A superior-grade lifeform in the third realm was equivalent to a post-peak-grade one in the second. Because of the difference in the integrity of the realm, trying to fight it might be equivalent to fighting a disaster-grade lifeform in the second.

But so what? Zhang Lie's strength was more than sufficient for the task. He glanced coldly at the superior-grade bat king, forcing it into submission with a gleam of his eyes.

The bat king's cold, beady eyes let out a rainbow gleam. With a screech, the bats that were rampaging against each other calmed down. The bat king lowered its body, retracted its wings, and knelt before Zhang Lie. The other bats followed suit.

Zhang Lie ignored the bat king and walked deeper into the cave, his feet stepping on a soft, mushy substance that felt like mud—guano. He could see bits of white solid scattered amidst the guano, likely all that was left of the alien fighters' bodies.

The other bats followed behind him. Zhang Lie didn't have any intention of eating the bats, although he had heard that deep-fried bat was a delicacy. However, he couldn't neglect the possibility that these bats harbored some kind of dangerous virus, threatening enough that his immune system wouldn't be able to handle it.

Despite the possibility of obtaining "free" gene fragments, Zhang Lie didn't intend to take the risk.

He felt a current of air deep within the cave. "I suppose it's right here..."

The entrance to the wormhole was covered up with a deep pile of guano. Zhang Lie snapped his fingers and motioned for the bats to clean it up, revealing a tunnel shining with light and exuding spatial ripples around its entrance.

This was a wormhole that connected the countless worlds of the third realm.

Zhang Lie stepped inside, followed by the bats.

Generally, such wormholes were stable when they linked from smaller worlds to each other, but not necessarily for larger ones. Spatial rifts and distortions were a common danger, and even small rifts could instantly kill a superior-grade third-realm lifeform.

A peak-grade lifeform might be able to traverse such a rift, but at extreme cost. Meanwhile, even a disaster-grade lifeform had to avoid the larger rifts. Dealing with the rifts themselves was hard enough, but travelers also had to contend with the vortices that surrounded these rifts, slowing them down and misdirecting them. Fortunately, most of the larger rifts occurred in wormholes between the larger worlds.

At some point, a genius inventor had come up with a tool to navigate these wormholes more safely—a wormhole shuttle.

Chapter 624: A Relaxing Meal

The wormhole shuttle was a device that would allow its passengers to zip through the wormholes. It couldn't negate the spatial rifts completely, but it provided a means by which weaker lifeforms could travel from world to world. It also moved very quickly. A regular person would need to walk for three days to get from one side of the wormhole to another, but a shuttle required only an hour.

There were even worse dangers in a wormhole than spatial rifts—void nodes. At these nodes, there were void-type lifeforms that were able to roam freely through the wormholes of the third realm and somehow defend themselves against the ravages of the spatial rifts.

They hunted for prey along these wormholes; even a strong third-realm hunter would be hard-pressed to do much against them, because destructive techniques couldn't be unleashed with

impunity within these wormholes—just like how people who shouted recklessly atop snowy mountains could cause an avalanche.

Strong attacks could decimate the wormhole entirely, spawning destructive spatial rifts that could instantly kill an entire party.

Within the third realm, there were specialized mercenary teams that hunted down these void lifeforms. Their skin and bones were principal ingredients for crafting wormhole shuttles, and each shuttle could be sold for an astronomical price.

As a result, despite the danger of these lifeforms, there were frequently hunting parties that traversed the wormholes and hunted them down.

The wormhole that Zhang Lie was in was very short. In almost no time at all, he had reached the other side. The entrance was covered by a layer of vines, which Zhang Lie cut off with a simple wave of his hand.

He heard a series of pained screeches—the vines shot toward him as though they were venomous snakes. There were so many of them that they filled the exit to the wormhole, but they all exploded once the bat king screeched.

Zhang Lie strode out the wormhole to find the desolate ruins of a stone city, surrounded by gigantic trees and vines. The trees grew out of the houses. Vines covered the ground and trailed up the walls. Zhang Lie felt as though he had stepped inside a forest treehouse.

Behind him was the largest building in the city, where the entrance to the wormhole was located. On its roof grew a gigantic carnivorous plant, vines spilling everywhere from its roots.

The bat king's screech hadn't managed to kill it. Vines swarmed toward Zhang Lie from all directions.

"Is this a plant-type lifeform, then?" Zhang Lie sent a punch flying toward the plant, tearing apart the vines and exploding the flower at the very top.

[You successfully killed a mutated-grade bloodborne flower. By consuming the petals of the mutated-grade bloodborne flower, you may receive one to ten mutated gene fragments.]

Unfortunately for Zhang Lie, the petals had all been annihilated by his punch. Before he could think about the message some more, he felt a huge swarm of mantises zipping toward him.

They were each about two or three meters tall, and they flew at a surprisingly rapid clip. The demonic bats that Zhang Lie controlled flew into the air, but they were easily struck down by the mantises.

They screeched, but all their sound waves could do was disorient the mantises for a moment. If the mantises managed to get close to them, the bats would die.

The bat king finally took to the air. Its shrill screeching caused a large number of mantises to implode. Blood and forelegs rained down from the sky.

Suddenly, with a blinding flash of light, part of the bat king's wings was cut off. A blood-red mantis appeared behind the bat king. It was about the size of a human—smaller than the other mantises, but more than an order of magnitude faster.

The superior-grade bat king was about to open its mouth to launch another sound wave, but the red mantis chopped its head off before it could do so.

The superior-grade bat king's body fell from the sky. The red mantis darted through the flock of bats, killing every bat it touched.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" Zhang Lie sent a fist flying into the sky, genetic energy rushing out of him like a flood. The frightening aura swept over the mantises and caused them to drop from the skies. The red mantis, with its extreme speed, avoided Zhang Lie's punch and began to counterattack.

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

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

The blood-red mantis darted faster and faster, leaving countless afterimages in the air. It swiftly closed in on Zhang Lie, lifted its forelegs wide in an attempt to behead him, and—that was it.

The moment it met Zhang Lie's gaze, its eyes took on a rainbow sheen. The red mantis suddenly became petrified. With a wave of Zhang Lie's hand, the red mantis immediately darted off respectfully. The remaining mantises in the sky all fled, but Zhang Lie didn't give chase.

There were still quite a few bats left. They weren't very strong, but Zhang Lie didn't intend to let them go. If he were to do so, they would immediately return to the cave and terrorize the alien race on the other side of the wormhole.

He had the bats scavenge for firewood as he roasted some of the fallen mantises. The bats had their fill, and, curiously enough, so did the blood-red mantis.

Zhang Lie enjoyed his meal to the pleasant chime of notifications in his head informing him that he had gained more and more gene fragments.

Zhang Lie: a disaster-grade lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX; Ninecarp Transformation, Sixth Form: River Dragon
Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (advanced), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (advanced), ...

Genes: Basic, 10; Mutated, 10

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

After finishing his meal, Zhang Lie proceeded deeper into the city. He quickly heard some sounds coming from the distance...

Chapter 625: A Small World

As Zhang Lie followed the noises in the distance, he came across a group of genetic lifeforms chasing after a few members of an alien race.

The aliens were battered and bruised all over. The group of lifeforms chasing after them consisted of members of various species—what looked like dinosaurs, green-skinned dog-sized salamanders.

The aliens had bronze skin, jade-green hair, and muscular physiques, but they had clearly been pushed to their limits already.

"Keep the lifeforms barely alive," Zhang Lie murmured, sending the blood-red mantis into the fray like a comet.

Bloodied streaks appeared on the lifeforms' legs, and they all fell to the ground. The blood-red mantis was an existence close to peak-grade. Dealing with these lifeforms was trivial for it.

Zhang Lie appeared above the aliens' heads and punched down with [Fists of the Silent Sea]. His attack skirted over the aliens and sent the lifeforms reeling, vomiting blood as they staggered.

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

Zhang Lie had controlled his strength very well so as to not cause the lifeforms to explode—they wouldn't taste good that way.

The aliens all turned around to stare at Zhang Lie. He wore the aura of the strong, and he was followed by a flock of black bats, but none of the aliens had ever seen his like. They ran off in alarm.

Zhang Lie frowned. "Don't you think you're all being a little ungrateful?"

In a flash of red light, the blood-red mantis blocked the aliens' path. Zhang Lie leisurely killed the dinosaur-like lifeform.

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

Zhang Lie was a little surprised to learn that the dinosaur had actually been a superior-grade lifeform.

Forced to a halt, the aliens glanced warily back at Zhang Lie, not knowing if he was friend or foe.

They had been chased by that pack of lifeforms for what seemed like eternity, and yet Zhang Lie had taken care of it all in one swift blow. Furthermore, he was apparently in control of a swarm of genetic lifeforms, and the aliens didn't dare make a move against him.

One of the aliens strode forward respectfully. "Thank you for saving us, kind sir. Is there anything we can do for you in return?"

Zhang Lie asked, "Do you know where I can find the human race in this world?"

"The human race?" The aliens glanced at each other in confusion. "We've never seen or heard of humans."

Zhang Lie sighed. It seemed as though he had his work cut out for him in this realm. "Perhaps your elders might know. Lead me to where your tribe is."

The aliens hesitated. Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed with a rainbow sheen, and then so did the aliens. They patted Zhang Lie on the shoulder.

"Of course! You saved our lives. It's the least we could do."

"And here I thought it might be dangerous to lead a stranger into our tribe! How laughable—a hero like you surely wouldn't attack us."

"No problem at all. We won't hesitate to help our savior, after all."

Zhang Lie had used his mistmeld clam soulshard to revise the aliens' wariness of him and elevate their feelings of gratitude. He had deep reserves of mental energy, and what he could do with it was staggering.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Let's deal with these genetic lifeforms first. We'll have a meal right here."

The aliens were shocked. "It's far too dangerous! Any lifeform who smells the meat will come rushing over."

Zhang Lie licked his lips. "Even better."

Despite their mental conditioning, the aliens began looking like Zhang Lie as though he were crazy. Nevertheless, without complaint, they began preparing the lifeforms for consumption. Zhang Lie took some water out of his soulspace to the aliens' surprise—in this world, water was an extremely precious commodity.

As the aliens cooked the meat, Zhang Lie had the demonic bats stand guard and deal with any lifeform that was drawn by the scent of the food.

A pack of what looked like dogs had rushed over in the meantime. The demonic bats stunned them with their screeches, then dragged them up into the air with their claws before dropping them to the ground, supplementing Zhang Lie's feast.

The aliens made the lifeforms into roast meat and meat broth, which was flavorful in a way that he wasn't used to. The aliens' spices were different from his own, but they were interesting and developed in their own right.

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade greenskin salamander, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 11]

Zhang Lie continued eating.

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade greenskin salamander, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 12]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade greenskin salamander, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 13]

The aliens all gathered by the fire and ate alongside Zhang Lie. As they enjoyed their meal, they questioned him as to his origins.

"From over there." Zhang Lie gestured vaguely at the stone city behind him.

The aliens glanced in that direction curiously; they weren't aware that there were other aliens in that direction.

Zhang Lie picked up a dinosaur drumstick and had a big bite.

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

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

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade earth tyrant, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 3]

Once he had obtained all ten superior gene fragments, he gave the rest of the meat to the aliens, who were shocked by the precious gift.

The dog-type lifeforms that the demonic bats had killed were made into a simple hotpot with wild vegetables that grew in the region. It was unfortunately rather bland; hotpots needed a particularly rich broth, and Zhang Lie made a mental note to himself to obtain some satchels of broth—the equivalent of teabags—when he returned to Earth.

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

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

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

As they feasted and conversed, the aliens and Zhang Lie grew closer to each other. One of the aliens brought out a vat of wine. He poured out a cup and handed it to Zhang Lie.

"Have a taste of our homemade alcohol!"

Zhang Lie had a gulp. Spicy warmth radiated down his body, as though he were simmering from the inside.

[For consuming regular-grade alcohol, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 21]

Zhang Lie: ???

Zhang Lie's eyes brightened. This was a very interesting brew! Not only did it give him gene fragments, it was even strengthening his body bit by bit. He was very surprised. As a disaster-grade lifeform, it should have been almost impossible for his body's strength to be raised by normal means, but this alcohol could somehow do it...

Chapter 626: Mysterious Alcohol

Zhang Lie wasn't one to give up such a marvelous brew. "How do you brew this alcohol?"

The alien sniffed. "Heh! This is a secret recipe of our clan. The alcohol's made with a few rare flowers, fruits, and herbs, along with the blood of some genetic lifeforms. Prolonged consumption can even generate permanent increases in strength!"

He stood up and flexed the steely muscles that rippled underneath his bronze skin.

Another alien patted Zhang Lie's shoulder. "Once we get back to our village, we'll treat you to more alcohol."

The alien who had flexed was called Mu. Mu laughed and continued, "The potency of our special brew increases with age. The longer the alcohol gets to mature, the stronger its effects. Every year, we have a competition among our clan's fighters. The winner of the entire affair gets a vat of hundred-year-old alcohol, and just one gulp of it gives you the strength of a superior-grade lifeform."

Zhang Lie downed another cup of alcohol and listened to the will of the world's chiming voice. [For consuming regular-grade alcohol, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 25]

This alcohol was really quite impressive. Alien races had particularly limited routes to advancement; they either had to consume the flesh of a compatible race or undergo long bouts of training, but this race had managed to concoct what was essentially a potion every alien race could consume.

Even humans had to kill their own genetic lifeforms to be able to derive gene fragments from them, but this alcohol completely disregarded such a rule.

Indeed, Zhang Lie was tempted to compel the aliens to give him the recipe.

Initially, his reason for heading toward the aliens' village was to get potential information about humans from their elders, but now he had a second as well.

Mu's face flushed. "To be frank, two centuries ago, we had an even better recipe for higher-grade alcohol, but we lacked a specific kind of fruit. This fruit could only be found in another small world, but the entrance to that world was blocked by a swarm of bats. There was a superior-grade bat king that even our clan chieftain could do nothing about."

Mu continued, "I heard from the previous clan head that the superior-grade bat king's cries had the ability to cause people to implode from within. Our chieftain could withstand its cries, but it impacted his fighting ability to such an extent that he had no choice but to retreat after suffering grievous injuries. Ever since then, that wormhole has gone unused."

Another alien piped up, "Actually, there used to be a city in the direction you said you came from, with a particularly large marketplace to facilitate trade. When the tunnel was blocked off, the city gradually grew decrepit, and everyone moved elsewhere."

None of the aliens knew that the superior-grade bat king had recently perished.

Zhang Lie frowned as he rummaged through his potbellied-toad pouch and retrieved a big sack of jade-green fruits. "Is this the fruit that you mentioned?"

Mu glanced at the sack in surprise. "They look very similar to what I've been told about them, but I'd have to confirm it with my elders."

Zhang Lie and the aliens had more or less finished their feast by then. There was still plenty of meat left, and Zhang Lie motioned for the demonic bats and blood-red mantis to finish them off.

The demonic bats flocked to the meat from the skies, many targeting the superior-grade earth tyrant—but the blood-red mantis got there before they could. Its wings buzzed in a threatening fashion, and none of the bats dared draw forward lest they incur its wrath.

The mantis began to consume the earth tyrant's meat. As it did so, its carapace became even redder, and its body seemed to burn with bright red flame. It devoured the rest of the meat in no time at all.

Even the aliens and Zhang Lie, who were some distance away, could sense the scorching heat that emanated from its flesh.

While Zhang Lie was glancing at the sudden commotion, the cry of birds came from afar. Overhead flew a flock of mutated-grade silver-feathered birds with sharp claws like metal hooks.

The swarm of bats rose to the skies, outraged that there were scavengers who had come to steal their food.

However, the bats were largely regular-grade, and they could do little against the mutated-grade birds. The regular-grade bats' screeches had no effect against the birds. The mutated-grade ones did, but it was very limited, and there were far too few of them to have a noticeable impact.

The blood-red mantis's evolution was far less impressive than that of a peak-grade lifeform evolving into a disaster-grade one. As its carapace cracked, the mantis furiously rushed out of the molten shell it left behind. It had turned a deep-red color, and its body grew even smaller—its body had been the length of a human, and was now half that size.

However, size was by no means a reliable indicator of its strength.

Mu seemed particularly surprised by the mantis's growth. "Savior, your genetic lifeform—"

The dark-red mantis's body glowed with red light as it flew into the flock of birds like a comet. As it rampaged through the flock, silver feathers fell to the ground, covered in blood. A pair of larger silvery birds appeared at the front of the flock, their size marking them as the leaders of the flock—and the leaders of a mutated-grade flock were surely superior-grade themselves.

However, the superior-grade birds lasted almost no time at all against the evolved mantis. It had attacked them before they even realized it; their wings were scarred with blood-red streaks, and lines of blood had appeared on their necks before they were able to make a move.

Blood fountained into the air as the birds fell from the sky. As the blood hit the mantis, it hissed and instantly vaporized into a bloody mist.

The aliens glanced at the massacre in shock. The superior-grade birds had seemed particularly strong, but the dark-red mantis had taken care of them in no time at all. In that case, how much stronger did its master, Zhang Lie, have to be?

They all turned toward Zhang Lie, who had vanished. They turned back to the flock to find that Zhang Lie had somehow darted into its midst without their notice.

"You idiot!" Zhang Lie called out. "How am I supposed to absorb those gene fragments if you're the one killing the lifeforms?!"

Chapter 627: Personable and Charming

The dark-red mantis lowered its head in shame, and the remaining birds were so scared by the presence of this new intruder into their midst that they all tried to fly away.

Zhang Lie killed two and tossed their carcasses at the aliens for them to handle. "Let's have a second round!"

The aliens rubbed their stomachs. "We're still very full."

"Well, I'll eat them all myself, then!"

In the end, the aliens made camp again and roasted the silver birds for Zhang Lie.

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade silverwing bird, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 21]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade silverwing bird, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 22]

[For consuming the flesh of a mutated-grade silverwing bird, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 23]

Perhaps because he had killed too many genetic lifeforms recently, Zhang Lie's body reeked of blood. No more genetic lifeforms bothered them on their journey onwards. These lifeforms weren't fools; the smell of blood would attract genetic lifeforms, but too strong a smell of blood would indicate danger, instead.

Despite how full the aliens claimed to be, they each cut off a slice of meat for themselves—superior-grade flesh was still a rarity for them, after all. The rest was picked clean by the dark-red mantis, who needed the nutrients to support its sudden growth spurt.

By that time, the bats had all died, but Zhang Lie didn't mind. It would be trivial for him to amass another group of lifeforms, at any rate.

He rubbed his jaw. "I suppose I had better name you. How does Red Comet sound?"

Once Red Comet had eaten its fill, Zhang Lie and the aliens set off again. As they headed into a forest, they were once again beset by genetic lifeforms.

As a result, the will of the world's voice continuously chimed in Zhang Lie's head once again.

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

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

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

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

Finally, after dealing with what seemed like an interminable number of lifeforms, Zhang Lie arrived at the aliens' village. In order to avoid any suspicion, Zhang Lie had Red Comet remain at the entrance to guard against any foes that might approach.

The village wasn't anything special—the houses were built of clay, and the buildings of wood. By the time they drew near, they had already been spotted by the sentries in the watchtowers.

Aliens rode over on two regular-grade lifeforms, surrounding the crowd and pointing their spears warily at Zhang Lie.

Mu called out to the leader of the guards, "Amu!"

Amu, who seemed like he could be Mu's superior, glanced at the ragtag band in annoyance. "Why have you brought outsiders into the village? Surely you know the danger they possess."

Mu cried out passionately, "He's our savior, Amu, he saved us all and shared a great deal of food with us! I'm sure he wouldn't hurt the village."

Amu frowned even more tightly. "Just how long have you known him? How are you so certain?"

"How could he?" Mu retorted, as though it were only natural.

"Right, right! Our savior has shown us nothing but kindness all this time."

"We have to thank him for our lives!"

The other aliens all spoke up on Zhang Lie's behalf, but Amu rebuffed them all. He turned to Zhang Lie. "As thanks for saving my kinsmen, I'll overlook the fact that they've brought a stranger like you here—now scram!"

Mu frowned. "Amu, how could you? If not for our savior's help, we would have been eaten by beasts! We brought him here as an honored guest to our village, but now you're trying to cast doubt on him!"

Amu's frown only deepened again. He narrowed his eyes on Zhang Lie. "Just what have you done to my foolish son?"

Mu might be simple-minded, but not to such an extent that he would bring a stranger of unknown origin into his village.

"Do you really want to know?" Zhang Lie's eyes glowed with rainbow light. "Look me in the eye, and I'll tell you."

As the rainbow glow grew stronger, Amu slowly relaxed and began to smile. "Oh, of course! You're Mu's savior—I truly have to thank you. Quick, come inside." He introduced himself in more detail. "I'm the captain of the guards, and I'm responsible for keeping the village safe. I apologize for treating you like a threat before."

Zhang Lie's mistmeld clam soulshard had erased Amu's wariness.

Amu clutched Zhang Lie on the shoulder warmly. "I truly have to thank you for saving my son—come, the occasion calls for a feast!"

Zhang Lie followed him deeper into the village as he asked, "Do you happen to know about a race known as humans?"

Amu cocked his head. "I've never heard of them, but the elder may know more. He's the longest-lived of us all, and he's far more knowledgeable than any of us."

As they headed into the village, the aliens began to point and glance at Zhang Lie with interest, not having seen his like before.

They had just walked up to Amu's house when an elderly, wizened alien, supported by two younger attendants, appeared before them. The elder was garbed in thick clothing, and the wrinkles on his face were so numerous and so deep that a fly could get lost in them. His face was dark.

Amu laughed when he saw the elder. "Ah, speak of the devil!"

The elder's voice was deeper than Zhang Lie would have expected from such a frail body. "Amu, what's the meaning of this? Who's this outsider?"

Amu patted Zhang Lie on the back. "This is my son's savior, as well as my honored guest!"

The elder slammed his walking stick against the ground. "Ridiculous! Have you lost your wits? Don't you remember how your father died?"

Mu countered, "Elder, this man's different! He's my savior and my friend!"

The elder thundered at Mu and his companions, "And you brats—how could you bring an outsider into the village? Don't you know how risky this is?"

An alien beside Zhang Lie turned to him and whispered, "Don't mind the elder too much. In the past, a member of the tribe brought in an outsider. Not long after the outsider left, others of his race came to rob us all. We managed to hold them off after a long fight, but with the location of our village revealed, we had no choice but to retreat."

Zhang Lie nodded and strode forward. "Elder, are you sure you don't recognize me?"

His eyes shone with rainbow light once more, and the elder's lined face quickly turned radiant. "Ah, you've come, you've come!"

He glared at Amu. "How could you not tell me in advance of this man's arrival?!"

Amu scratched his head in confusion, then turned to Zhang Lie. "Just what's going on?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Nothing—I'm simply very personable and charming."

Amu's eyes gleamed again. "Indeed, personable and charming, personable and charming!"

Chapter 628: The Alcohol's History

Amu tugged Zhang Lie away and into his house. "Come on, we'll have a feast as thanks for what you've done. I have alcohol of excellent quality."

As they walked inside, Amu headed down into the cellar and brought out a vat of ten-year-old alcohol. Zhang Lie swallowed a proffered cup, at which point he heard the will of the world's voice once again.

[For consuming ten-year-old alcohol, you received one mutated gene fragment. Current total: 31]

He took out some of the carcasses he had hunted on the way to the village and handed it to Mu. As he wine and dined some more, his gene fragments increased once again.

Zhang Lie: a disaster-grade lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX; Ninecarp Transformation, Sixth Form: River Dragon
Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (advanced), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (advanced), ...

Genes: Basic, 45; Mutated, 45; Superior, 10

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

As they conversed, Zhang Lie changed the topic of conversation to his second reason for visiting the village. "I heard that the village was once able to brew even stronger alcohol, but that it hasn't been able to acquire the necessary ingredients recently."

Amu frowned. "Exactly right—and it's a real shame. A flock of genetic lifeforms from who-knows-where blocked access to a wormhole we used for trade, and even our chieftain himself was unable to do anything against them."

"To be honest, I came across what I believe to be your missing ingredient recently." Zhang Lie retrieved a sack of jade-green fruits from his potbellied-toad pouch."

Upon seeing those fruits, Amu's eyes widened. "Could it be...?"

Mu asked, "Amu, do you recognize these fruits?"

Amu shook his head. "I've never seen the fruits for myself, either. We'd need the elder to confirm it."

As a result, Mu ended up hefting the sack of fruits toward the elder's house.

When the elder saw those fruits, his hands trembled. He dug one out of the sack and sniffed it carefully, causing his eyes to widen. "I hadn't expected to see these luojia fruits in my lifetime again... just where did you acquire them?"

Zhang Lie replied, "A group of aliens from another small world stuffed them in my hands."

The elder's eyes grew even brighter. "In that case, has the wormhole between our world and the other reopened?"

"It has," Zhang Lie confirmed.

"Very good, very good!" the elder laughed in joy. "Now, I can finally restore my ancestors' recipe to its full glory!"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "I've already scoured the world for these fruits, however, and it might be a few years before any more grow. Furthermore, it's a long distance away. With the current strength of your village, do you really think you can survive the journey?"

The elder narrowed his eyes. "Lad, I know what you want. State your price."

"I heard you had some vats of hundred-year-old alcohol."

"I'll trade you one vat for these fruits."

"Ten vats."

"We don't have such a large supply available. At the most, I can give you five such vats, along with ten ten-year-old vats."

Amu's eyes widened. "Elder, I didn't know we still had so much good alcohol remaining!"

The elder rolled his eyes. "If you had known, it would have vanished in a few days, I'm sure."

"Five hundred-year-old vats and thirty ten-year-old vats."

The elder snorted. "Our village doesn't have a large supply of the ten-year-old vats either. Fifteen and no more."

"Fifteen, then, as well as a hundred vats of whatever new alcohol you brew."

The elder was so incensed that he almost jumped up. "Do you think this is plain water? We're brewing alcohol here! Thirty vats at most!"

"Deal!"

Zhang Lie pulled out nine more sacks of the fruits, which he dumped in the elder's house. The fruits rolled out of the sacks and spilled over the floor. A faint fragrance drifted up toward the elder and Zhang Lie.

"That'll be fifty hundred-year-old vats, three hundred ten-year-old vats, and three hundred vats of your new alcohol, then!"

The elder's eyes rolled back, and he slumped to the ground.

Zhang Lie scratched his head. "When the village learned that I was leaving, they gave me all the fruits they had stockpiled."

The fruits were indeed very filling. The aliens of the other world had stockpiled these fruits in their cellars to avoid bat attacks, but now that Zhang Lie had killed them all, the fruits were no longer necessary.

The elder stared openmouthed at the fruits on the floor. "Did you really scrounge up all the fruits in that world?"

"Nothing so exaggerated."

The elder's face turned serious. "To be honest, we don't have so much alcohol available for trade."

"That's to be expected. I'll take whatever you do have." Zhang Lie's goal was to claim everything that the village currently possessed.

The elder shook his head. "At this point, we don't have a single vat of hundred-year-old alcohol in our village."

Zhang Lie frowned. "In that case, do you mean to renege on your deal?"

The elder coughed. "No, no, not quite! We don't have it now, but we used to have quite a stockpile."

"What do you mean?"

"Where our original village was located, we had a secret cellar with vats of hundred-year-old alcohol—and even a legendary grade of alcohol beyond that!"

Amu interjected in shock, "The legendary thousand-year-old alcohol?!"

The elder shook his head. "No, just five hundred years old."

To be honest, Zhang Lie was very impressed by the alcohol that this alien race could brew.

With enough time, the alcohol would continue maturing and developing new potential. Who knew if they could produce a disaster-grade brew if they left it to settle for a thousand years?

Zhang Lie understood what the elder was getting at. "I assume the route to your old settlement isn't safe."

The elder smiled. "As long as you bring the alcohol back, the five-hundred-year-old vats will be yours, too."

"Oh? Aren't you afraid I'll claim them all for myself?"

The elder laughed. "Lad, what's in those vats is concentrated pre-processed alcohol. If you drink it directly, you'll die."

Amu nodded. "No lifeform can bear the force of its kick. When I was young, I snuck a taste of a vat, and it left me bedridden for three months."

The elder smirked. "Lad, with your strength, perhaps you might survive the ten-year-old brew, but surely not the hundred- or five-hundred-year-old ones."

It was only then that Zhang Lie realized that the wily old elder had been intending to bait him from the beginning. When he came to that realization, Zhang Lie was tempted to use the mistmeld clam soulshard against him once more.

The elder was clearly trying to rip Zhang Lie off...

Chapter 629: The Beast Tribe

Unfortunately for the elder, his opponent was Zhang Lie.

The elder looked at Zhang Lie serenely. "In order to process those vats into actual alcohol, you'll need the secret technique of our clan."

Zhang Lie had no intention of letting this old man rip him off. "It's not a problem for me to make that trip, but I want the recipe that's been passed down within your clan."

Amu slammed a foot on the floor. "That's the basis of our clan's strength!"

The elder glanced at Zhang Lie meaningfully. "This lad's strong enough to take it by force if he wanted to, anyway."

Zhang Lie glanced at the elder in surprise.

It was likely that he had guessed that Zhang Lie had access to some form of mental compulsion. After all, Zhang Lie didn't put the elder under deep hypnosis; he simply changed the elder's perception of him. Most people wouldn't have suspected anything—the same way they believed that Earth was a planet surrounded by the void of space without necessarily seeing the proof of it for themselves.

It was a known fact; who would doubt such a thing?

Zhang Lie's mistmeld clam soulshard had put such a mental suggestion in the elder's brain, causing him to treat Zhang Lie like an honored guest. However, there was no basis for this treatment, and no corresponding memories in the elder's brain that had been revised. Under such conditions, the brain tended to manufacture fake memories of its own, in the same manner that delusional people conjured up false memories to fit their delusions.

Only particularly strong-willed or introspective people would discover that their supposed memories didn't truly exist.

What most impressed Zhang Lie was that, despite the fact that the elder knew that those memories were fake—or rather had guessed that they were fake—the elder didn't treat Zhang Lie like an enemy.

The elder was naturally incensed upon realizing the truth, but he quickly calmed down. He was intelligent enough to realize that, if Zhang Lie were able to revise his memories with nothing more than a simple glance, Zhang Lie was an enemy too strong for him to handle.

There was nothing to be gained from idle resistance; Zhang Lie was likely able to slaughter the entire village if he wanted to. In fact, he could even turn the respected elder into a prisoner of the village, exchanging his identity with Zhang Lie's own. He didn't have any idea about the depths of Zhang Lie's power, so he cleverly chose to play along with the charade.

Amu was the only one flummoxed among the three of them; he cocked his head upon seeing the elder and Zhang Lie looking at each other with identical knowing smiles.

The elder sketched a quick map, which he handed to Mu. He told Zhang Lie, "Mu lived in our old village as a child, and he knows roughly where the vats of alcohol are located. He'll be your scout."

They set off without any rest. The moment they emerged from the village, Red Comet zipped over to find them, and they set off toward the location of the old village together.

They encountered three regular-grade lifeforms along the way. Red Comet battered them down before Zhang Lie could make a move, then retreated so that Zhang Lie could take the kill.

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

Zhang Lie rapped the mantis's head. "Oh, you..."

He had intended on hypnotizing the genetic lifeform with his mistmeld clam soulshard and using it as a mount, but Red Comet had dealt with it before he could say anything.

He gave two of the carcasses to Red Comet, then roasted the other one on the spot.

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade hellwind serpent, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 46]

[For consuming the flesh of a regular-grade hellwind serpent, you received one basic gene fragment. Current total: 47]

As Zhang Lie obtained his fifty-fifth basic gene fragment, he commanded Red Comet, "Go find two mutated-grade lifeforms. I want the fastest ones there are—don't kill them, just let me know when you find them."

Who knew how much longer walking would take?

However, Red Comet didn't make a move. It stood still and rubbed its forelegs. Zhang Lie frowned. "Can you not understand human speech?"

Red Comet roughly understood what Zhang Lie wanted, but fine detail eluded it.

Sighing, Zhang Lie used his mistmeld clam soulshard on Red Comet. It might be incapable of fully understanding speech, but surely it could process thoughts, at the very least.

Red Comet instantly vanished. It came back almost in the blink of an eye, motioning toward a particular direction. Zhang Lie stepped through the air, not moving much slower than Red Comet itself, and quickly found the indicated target—two superior-grade black leopards.

Zhang Lie's eyes brightened, and he rubbed Red Comet along its head. "Not bad."

He appeared before the two black leopards in a blink, his eyes glowing with rainbow light. The black leopards howled threateningly, but their eyes quickly turned rainbow-colored as well. They slowly rolled over on the ground, as docile as two house cats.

Zhang Lie stepped forward and scratched their bellies, causing the leopards to nudge Zhang Lie with their heads and rub their bodies against his. Red Comet whirred its wings and clicked its mandibles in a threatening fashion, causing the black leopards to rear back—they were a little scared of it.

"Very good. You'll be my mounts starting from today—I suppose I'll call you White and Whiter."

Zhang Lie rather liked their paradoxical names, considering they were black leopards. [1]

He brought White and Whiter back toward where Amu was waiting for them. Zhang Lie rode on White, and Amu on Whiter. The two superior-grade leopards were extremely fast, and their auras prevented any lower-grade lifeforms from drawing near. The rest of the journey went quickly and uneventfully.

Suddenly, Amu pointed before them. "Ah, the original village is right ahead!"

Zhang Lie glanced far into the distance, where he saw a pile of ruins—wood and stone strewn all over, houses that had collapsed and been exposed to the natural elements, charred ground, bones, and piles of rubble and ash.

"It looks like you suffered a serious robbery indeed," Zhang Lie murmured.

He also noticed a great deal of bones from genetic lifeforms in the remnants of the village.

Amu nodded. "Those from the beast tribe were particularly vile."

"The beast tribe?"

"Ah, you must not know, savior. The tribes around here all have different abilities, and they've been given nicknames related to those abilities. The tribe that attacked us was the beast tribe, and they're a tribe of beast tamers. Working together, they're able to subdue beasts of incredible strength—but of course not at your level, savior."

Amu rubbed Whiter and shot an idle glance at Red Comet, zooming through the air.

He had never seen such powerful tamed lifeforms before, not even in the beast tribe. Red Comet was particularly impressive; it was so fast that he could barely catch its motion, and much too fast for him to react to it in time.

If the beast tribe had possessed a genetic lifeform as strong as Red Comet, none of them would have survived the ordeal.

Zhang Lie asked, "Has anyone returned to this village after the invasion?"

Amu shook his head. "Not as far as I know, but some members of the tribe might have returned secretly. Is something the matter?"

Chapter 630: Two Tamers

Zhang Lie frowned. "The ground's been cleared away, and there are a few burial mounds over there. There's a trail of fresh footprints, both humanoid and bestial."

Mu replied, "It could very well be those from the beast tribe hoping to loot the remains of the village. Their tribe isn't too far from here."

Zhang Lie glanced around. He could sense fluctuations of genetic energy nearby. He thought that they came from genetic lifeforms, but were there really any wild ones that wouldn't run away upon sensing Red Comet and the two superior-grade black leopards? Either they were very confident peak-grade lifeforms, or weak lifeforms that were scared stiff.

Under these circumstances, however, the most likely scenario was neither of these hypotheses—it had to be someone from the beast tribe! The lifeforms he was sensing were being controlled by one of their beast tamers.

"The elder was a wily old fox indeed..." Zhang Lie smiled coldly as he allowed their mysterious enemy to lay their plans.

He wanted to see just what these beast tamers could achieve, as well as what gave them the courage to try to tail Zhang Lie. If they chose not to make a move, they would get off scot-free, but if they did, well, Zhang Lie was ready for them.

Indeed, tailing Zhang Lie and Mu were tamers from the beast tribe.

"As expected, those from the alcohol tribe have returned to their village! Father's guess was right—they must have a secret alcohol cellar somewhere around here! Their millennia of hoarding surely couldn't have amounted to just those few pitiful vats of alcohol. I bet everything they have is hidden underground—including large quantities of their hundred-year-old brew!"

As he thought back to the taste of that divine alcohol, one of the beast tamers licked his lips, his eyes filling with greed.

Beside him, the other tamer urged, "Brother, shouldn't we return and head back to our tribe? Something seems strange."

"What's the matter?"

"Our beasts are trembling, as if they're afraid of something."

The other tamer began to laugh. "Kaimie, you're the only coward among us. If we can find their stockpile of hundred-year-old alcohol and drink it all ourselves, we'll become fearsome warriors. There'd be nothing that could stand against us then! If you return and inform the tribe of what we've found, how much of the alcohol do you think will be given to us?"

Kaimie hesitated after hearing his brother's words.

His brother continued, "You know how much alcohol's in one of the alcohol tribe's storehouses, don't you? You can drink your fill, then hide the rest away for later. You're interested in Cuihua, aren't you? I see you making faces at her all the time."

"Y-Yes."

"As long as you bring her enough of this alcohol, I'm sure she'll go out with you."

Kaimie blushed. "Cuihua isn't like that!"

His brother glanced askance at him. He had no intention of mentioning the fact that he had lured Cuihua to bed with him using three vats of hundred-year-old alcohol which he had sacked from the alcohol tribe, and whom he remembered rather fondly.

"If you're strong enough and boast enough resources, Cuihua will naturally be attracted to you," he affirmed.

Kaimie thought for a moment and nodded slowly. The two tamers trailed behind Zhang Lie.

Mu led them directly to the secret underground cellar. When he broke through the hastily bricked up entrance with a punch, a strong aroma of alcohol wafted out.

Zhang Lie strode in to find vat after vat of alcohol. He broke the seal off a vat to find sticky pre-processed alcohol within.

Mu sighed. "You've ruined that vat!"

Zhang Lie: ???

Mu explained, "The alcohol precursor has to be kept in an inert environment at all times. You've broken the seal, and replacing it will be useless now!"

"Is that so..." Zhang Lie turned behind him and called out, "Did you all hear that? This alcohol precursor has to be brought back to the alcohol tribe. It won't be of any use to you, so you'd better leave now!"

Mu's eyes widened as he glanced to his back and saw nothing but desolate ground. "Savior, who are you talking to?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "There are a few flies around."

Two tamers slowly appeared from afar, their beasts clambering through the ruins. The older said, "I'm very curious how you noticed our presence."

Mu frowned. "Kaichen!"

Kaichen's lips parted in an exaggerated grin. "Hand over the alcohol now!"

The other tamer, Kaimie, added, "If you don't want to become food for our lifeforms, hand over those vats immediately. The two of you won't be able to do anything against our lifeforms!"

Zhang Lie glanced at the two lifeforms, one of which was regular-grade and the other of which was mutated-grade. He really didn't know what gave the tamers confidence that they could overwhelm him.

Kaichen laughed again. "I've waited here for over three months! At least let me get something for my troubles."

Mu thundered, "You damned beast tribe! Not only did you ransack our village, you even killed so many among our clan. I'll give you nothing!"

Kaichen shrugged and spread his arms wide. "I've waited over three months for you in penance—that means something, surely? Don't think that you're still the dominant tribe you used to be. Hand over the alcohol and I might spare your lives."

In the past, the alcohol tribe had been the strongest of the tribes in the region, with close ties to many of the neighboring ones. There were even rumors that a hegemon would emerge from their midst and unite the world.

However, an incident had occurred. One of the key ingredients necessary for the tribe's famous alcohol had become impossible to acquire, and the ties that it had forged slowly fell apart.

The alcohol tribe's power and prestige grew lower by the year. They managed to develop new brews after a hefty amount of research, but they were only ersatz versions of the original.

Kaichen mocked, "Are the two of you all the tribe sent to retrieve these vats? Do they think we're so stupid that we wouldn't keep any guard around the area?"

Zhang Lie called out, "Red Comet, kill the hunters and cripple their lifeforms!"

Kaichen laughed as though he had heard a marvelous joke. Who did this upstart think he was? He and his brother were beast tamers from the beast tribe! Perhaps they would have to be worried about people from the alcohol tribe in the past, but surely not when they had become so downtrodden.

In a flash of red light, Kaichen's smiling face fell from his head.

Out of the corner of his eye, in his last moments of consciousness, he seemed to see his brother's head beside him. The two genetic lifeforms lay crouched on the ground, paralyzed with fear.

Mu's eyes widened. How had Zhang Lie taken care of the two beast tamers so easily? But it did make sense—those silver birds were far stronger than these tamers. If they fell to Zhang Lie, then it was only reasonable that these tamers would, too...

