

U. Warlord 881

Chapter 881: Prepared at All Times

Zhang Lie was stupefied by Zhu's claims.

"I never laid a hand on you, and the relationship between the two of us is far from romantic!"

"You told me that you would bring me with you wherever you went. I worked hard for you, not hoping that my feelings would be reciprocated, but only for an extra glance or two from you! Why would you be so cold-hearted?"

Just then, the draconian sage arrived with a spatial distortion. It wasn't clear whether he had chosen to arrive at that moment deliberately—he had been just in time to see Zhu complain about her situation to Zhang Lie.

The draconian sage laughed dryly, awkwardly. "Ah, I came to greet Zhang Lie's sister, since I and the draconian world are indebted to him. If not for Zhang Lie's presence here, we draconians would have gone extinct already. I'd like to emphasize that I didn't deliberately appear at the scene at this moment. Please, continue on, continue on!"

Zhang Lie's face turned dark.

Zhu clutched at her chest as though her heart were being cut apart, as though the pressure from her hands was all that was keeping it from shattering to pieces. She continued, "I really didn't want anything but a single glance from you, Zhang Lie! Why wouldn't you allow me even that courtesy? You left me in the blink of an eye, without giving me an additional moment to accompany you!"

Chen Fan had, at some point, walked up to the draconian sage. He whispered, "He used her, then discarded her..."

Zhang Lie glanced at the source of the whisper, causing Chen Fan to raise both his arms innocently. "I didn't rush over here to watch the show after being informed by my old friend, the draconian sage, I promise! I'm a human warlord, after all, and I still want some face. You left so quickly that I wanted to see what you were doing, and I had sensed your aura..."

Chen Fan pulled out a bag of roasted seeds from his extra-dimensional storage as he spoke as he made himself comfortable to watch the show.

The humans and draconians were on good terms, and so were human warlords and draconian kings of the realm.

Zhang Lie's lips twitched. It was clear that the draconian sage had meddled to bring Chen Fan over.

During the exchange between Zhu and Zhang Lie, the draconian sage devoured three bowls of rice. It was almost as though he were watching a drama unspooling in real life—with Zhang Lie the playboy protagonist.

Chen Fan regretted that there were no cameras available in this world, or he would have recorded a video to capture Zhang Lie's moment of embarrassment for eternity.

The draconian sage looked toward Chen Fan. He was quite familiar with the look on Chen Fan's face, and he whispered into his ear, "One authority possessed by the king of the realm is to replay what happened in a certain location at some point in the past."

Chen Fan gave his old friend a thumbs up.

Zhu stepped forward and clasped her palms, her warm, soft palms, against Zhang Lie's. Her eyes, which beaded with tears, were clear and limpid. She looked straight into Zhang Lie's eyes.

"Zhang Lie, you were the one who saved me from a life of hell. You were my light amidst the darkness! To me, you're my only relative, my benefactor, and the person I care most for in this world. Without you, there would never be the present me. I don't know what place I hold in your heart, Zhang Lie—but to me, you're the most important person in the world, more important than even I myself!"

No man could avert his gaze from this pair of limpid ocean-blue eyes, gentle and compelling, with the ability to melt even the steeliest of hearts.

The draconian sage was open-mouthed. "This is incredible. I have to share this with Li Qianlin!"

Zhu continued seriously, "You were the one who bathed me in light, who showed me what the world beyond my village was. You shielded me from loneliness. You told me I wasn't alone when you rescued me. I've learned so much from you, too much. I love—"

Green veins were visible on Zhang Lie's forehead. "Are you finished, Zhu?"

Zhu clasped one of Zhang Lie's palms, then pressed it against her soft, cool cheek. "I know you might not think highly of me, Zhang Lie, and I won't be so willful as to say that I want you to take responsibility for me again. But even if I'm your second, third, or fourth concubine, Zhang Lie, would you be willing to keep looking in my direction? I'll be standing right here, by your side..."

The Yeluo chieftain and warriors were struck by the scene unfolding ahead of them. Chen Fan and the draconian sage were simply watching the show, but the Yeluo knew the status of the young woman standing in front of Zhang Lie.

In the kingdom of Limit, an ordinary citizen might not know who the princess of the kingdom was, nor what the prime minister Yun Bing looked like, but all citizens knew the face of one woman: the queen of the oceans.

In the year after Zhang Lie's ascension into the third realm, Zhu had made a name for herself.

With the endless hordes of disaster-grade creatures under her command, she crushed all enemies that came her way and took control of huge swathes of the sea.

All children in the second realm trembled upon hearing her name. A year ago, parents frightened their children by saying that they would be swallowed up by the asura; now, they claimed that they would be devoured by the marine creatures of the bloody queen, the queen of the ocean.

All those aliens who had dared to resist the kingdom of Limit had been crushed by Zhu and her forces.

And yet, this woman who had single-handedly terrorized the second realm was behaving like nothing more than a helpless girl in front of Zhang Lie. The Yeluo couldn't help but be amazed.

Zhang Lie let out a long sigh. "Alright, that's enough. Do you really want to give these onlookers a show? I won't blame Hanxiang any longer."

"Really?" Zhu confirmed.

Everyone fell silent. In that one moment, Zhu's grievances and love both seemed to evaporate.

"When have I ever lied to you?"

Zhu and Zhang Hanxiang looked toward each other before the two young women began cheering in joy, hugging each other and revolving in a circle, as though the infatuated Zhu of moments before had vanished completely.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. He knew that something like this would happen. Women truly were born actresses; even someone as young as Zhu had almost fooled him with her acting.

Zhang Lie chuckled bitterly. His sister had corrupted Zhu with her terrible ideas and antics.

Zhu and Zhang Hanxiang settled down, and Zhu turned to Zhang Lie. "Zhang Lie, nothing that I said before was a lie. If you want me, I'll prepare myself for you at any time!"

Chapter 882: The Price of Ascension

At that moment, Zhu's face was flushed red—perhaps out of excitement or embarrassment.

She had been ostracized and shunned in her small seaside village. If not for Zhang Lie's opportune arrival, she would have turned into a genetic lifeform's feces, nothing more.

Zhang Lie had saved her from that awful fate and brought her to new lands, rich beyond her imagination. What she had now, she owed to Zhang Lie.

While she was an orphan in the dark, it was Zhang Lie who had reached out. When she had nightmares, it was Zhang Lie who clutched her hand.

Zhang Lie said little, but did far more.

She had fond memories of watching sunrises and sunsets with Zhang Lie out in the ocean as they traversed the perilous sea of mists. She watched Zhang Lie fight off monsters on her behalf; she discussed how best to construct an aquatic farm with him.

Zhu knew that Zhang Lie had always treated her like a little girl, one who would never stop progressing forward. Zhu didn't want to drag him down with her, and she didn't dare to desire him overtly—she didn't feel like she was a worthy match for him, after all.

Zhang Lie's status was far beyond her own. Even though everyone in the second realm thought of her as the queen of the seas, Zhu didn't grow arrogant and overbearing as a result. In her eyes, Zhang Lie would always be the sun shining down from above the highest heavens, whereas she was nothing more than a swimming fish in the sea. As long as the sunlight would occasionally shine over her body, she would be happy enough.

Zhu had a good understanding of Zhang Lie. It was true he didn't think of her like a woman, but rather a sister, much like Zhang Hanxiang herself. He preferred to believe that her words and actions were nothing more than a prank. "Hanxiang, I know you mean well, but this might hurt your companions. What if they can't get used to this higher-dimensional space?"

Zhang Hanxiang lowered her head and murmured pitifully, "Brother, you said you wouldn't blame me for what I did!"

Zhang Lie likewise sighed. He tried his best to make his tone gentle. "The third realm is a higher-dimensional realm, and the quality of energy here is more complex. You arrived at this realm after the ascension ceremony, so you can't sense how stark the difference is—but the rest of you, do you feel any discomfort?"

Zhu replied, "I feel as though my entire body's encased in some form of mud, which is restricting my movement."

Zhang Lie glanced carefully at the aliens that had advanced from the second realm.

Zhu had been at the level of a disaster-grade lifeform in terms of strength. After ascending to the third realm, her strength had been sealed, and she was now only the level of a peak-grade lifeform.

The Yeluo chieftain and warriors, who had been peak-grade lifeforms, were now superior-grade lifeforms.

Their nature as stowaways to the third realm had come at a price: Zhu and the Yeluo warriors would be unable to improve in terms of cultivation until they released that seal.

However, neither group seemed to mind.

The Yeluo chieftain explained, "Our herbal and alchemical research has stalled. The herbs and grasses available in the third realm will be invaluable for making progress, even if it comes at a cost."

Neither the Yeluo chieftain nor the Yeluo warriors felt as though they would have had the opportunity to advance in dimension, so rather than be trapped in the second realm, they were more than happy to pass to the third and continue their research.

After all, with Zhang Lie around, they wouldn't need to worry about encountering any danger.

Zhang Lie sighed. "Zhu was too rash. Given your talent and aptitude, none of you would have any trouble ascending naturally. Why adopt such a method?"

Zhu was the most unfortunate of them all.

Her talent was monstrous, and the resources she had gathered as the queen of the oceans, along with those she had access to from the kingdom of Limit, would eventually have allowed her to become like the asura, able to ascend to the third realm on her own merits.

Now that she had taken this shortcut, her future would be uncertain.

Zhu stuck out her tongue. "I wanted to see you more quickly, Zhang Lie."

"You—it's such a pity! If I were in the second realm, I would have stopped you at any cost."

Zhu rolled her eyes. "If you were in the second realm, Zhang Lie, I wouldn't have advanced."

"With your talent and strength, you would surely have been able to advance on your own with just a bit more time. Why rush?"

"If I didn't, it would be pointless."

Only Zhu knew how difficult it had become to reach the next threshold of strength. Zhu herself didn't know whether it would take a decade, a century, or even more to reach that level of strength, and she had already been cultivating day and night in hopes of catching up to Zhang Lie.

As Zhang Lie had stated, Zhu was aware of her own talent—but that talent didn't allow her to push much faster or further at disaster-grade. The threshold between peak- and disaster-grade was massive, and every step beyond disaster-grade, even more so.

The reason the monarch of stars had gone crazy was because of this ridiculously gated progression. Zhang Lie didn't think it was too difficult to get to the realm of the asura, but Zhu was the one with firsthand experience. Her target was so far beyond her that she couldn't even see the route to it.

While in the kingdom of Limit, when she received news of Zhang Lie from hunters of the Milky Way, Zhu immediately felt a compulsion to head to where Zhang Lie was.

Zhang Lie was moving at such a rapid pace that she simply couldn't catch up. The time dilation in the third realm was even more intense than in the second, and who knew where Zhang Lie would be in a decade?

After a century, by the time Zhu advanced, Zhang Lie would surely have entered even higher-dimensional realms. Zhu would have no choice but to follow behind, chasing after an impossible dream.

She didn't want such an ending. Even if she had to sacrifice her future potential, if she could accompany Zhang Lie at least through the third realm for just a little while, Zhu would be happy.

Zhang Lie sighed. "Well, since you've all ascended, I suppose there's nothing I can do. At the very least, you're all experienced researchers, and you can help with my current research. I have a few disaster-grade lifeforms at hand, and I'm planning to investigate what lies beyond it."

Everyone was shocked.

"Beyond disaster-grade!" Chen Fan gasped. "Aren't disaster-grade lifeforms at the acme of strength?"

The draconian sage added, "Could there really be sixth-level beasts...?"

The draconians were on friendly terms with the humans, so the draconian sage was well aware of disaster-grade lifeforms, which corresponded to fifth-level beasts in the terminology of the third realm.

This knowledge was what caused the draconian sage to be so shocked.

Zhang Hanxiang asked curiously, "Are there such existences in the third realm?"

Compared to the draconian sage and Chen Fan, Zhang Hanxiang and the others didn't seem particularly surprised.

Zhang Hanxiang knew little of the third realm, whereas the Yeluo warriors had a steady supply of disaster-grade lifeforms from the kingdom of Limit. It was well-known that disaster-grade lifeforms were generally a rare commodity—but not so for those in power in Limit.

After all, the kingdom of Limit had a disaster-grade farm, which had recently expanded to land. To them, disaster-grade lifeforms weren't lifeforms that heralded disaster, nor the peak of genetic lifeforms. They were simply the next level of strength beyond peak-grade existences...

Chapter 883: High to Low

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Theoretically speaking, there should be higher levels of power possible, but before we verify it through experiment, I can't confirm the results myself."

Chen Fan and the draconian sage nodded.

They thought that Zhang Lie had made a major discovery without their knowledge, but it was still just hypothetical for now.

Zhang Hanxiang and the others, however, felt differently. Since Zhang Lie believed that there was such a possibility, then he would surely succeed in drawing out that possibility. After years of working with Zhang Lie, their trust in him had reached unfathomable heights.

Zhang Hanxiang and the Yeluo chieftain asked, "Is there anything you need help with at the moment?"

"Not at the moment—I'm still at the exploratory phase of the research."

"Brother, if you succeed this time, you'll shake the world again!" Not just in the third realm, either—the dimensional realm at large and the Milky Way would be shaken by Zhang Lie's discovery.

The discovery of genetic lifeforms beyond disaster-grade would be as stupendous as that of limit fragments, or even limit-breaking potions.

All life in the Milky Way relied on these gene fragments to grow stronger. Only with the existence of disaster-grade lifeforms could there be disaster gene fragments—and the same was true for post-disaster-grade lifeforms.

The Milky Way still hadn't yet recovered from the discovery of disaster-grade lifeforms. Many warlords still hadn't managed to complete their collection of disaster gene fragments. While there were disaster-grade lifeforms in the second realm, they were so few in number, and so overwhelmingly sought, that hunters would count themselves lucky just acquiring one or two disaster gene fragments at a time. It was rare that a disaster-grade lifeform was found, and rarer still that it could be killed.

There were far more disaster-grade lifeforms in the third realm, but under normal circumstances, human hunters had no ability to search for them and hunt them down.

This was why the existence of disaster-grade lifeforms hadn't been known until Zhang Lie.

Despite all this, while the rest of the world—the rest of the galaxy!—had their hands full dealing with disaster-grade lifeforms, Zhang Lie had already begun his investigation into post-disaster-grade lifeforms. He was a whole era ahead of the rest of the galaxy.

Indeed, he had been the one to discover limit fragments and disaster-grade lifeforms as well...

Chen Fan couldn't help but feel a sense of relief. With Zhang Lie around, humanity was sure to grow strong. Humanity had been relatively weak among the races of the Milky way, but with Zhang Lie around, they were sure to shine.

Chen Fan was confident that Zhang Lie would be able to lead humanity to greatness.

"Right, Brother, let me hand this soulshard back to you. I expect you'll need it."

Zhang Hanxiang handed over the disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard.

The disaster-grade farm from the second realm had been constructed with the dragonwhale as the basis, and Zhang Hanxiang was sure her brother would find some use for it.

Zhang Lie didn't refuse her gift. The disaster-grade dragonwhale soulshard would do little for Zhang Hanxiang now, and he was very worried that she would continue bringing stowaways with her from the third realm to the fourth.

Zhang Lie activated the dragonwhale soulshard and looked inside. The disaster-grade marine lifeforms within had all been left in the second realm, but there was still a large quantity of bone-corroding shrimp within.

"Wonderful!" Zhang Lie cried out. "I'd been worried about what to feed all these lifeforms, but now..."

The shrimp could be allowed to grow and form a stable source of food for these lifeforms. Zhang Hanxiang had brought him a truly precious gift.

While the Zhang siblings discussed their respective experiences in the second and third realm, the draconian sage and Chen Fan teleported away.

Zhu asked, "Zhang Lie, how's the progress on your research?"

"It's hard to say—I'm still working on it. Hanxiang, you haven't started acquiring gene fragments in the third realm, have you? I have a large number of superior- and peak-grade lifeforms right here, so you can begin by acquiring those right now. Once the farm's operational again, we'll talk about the rest of the fragments."

Zhang Hanxiang shook her head. "No, Brother, there's no need. I'm sure you're busy with your own affairs, and I can't keep relying on you. I need to make use of my own strength and abilities to max out my gene fragments."

"As long as you have the ability to do so. You've just ascended to the third realm, so you're quite a bit weaker than most lifeforms around. Listen to me." Zhang Lie picked out sixteen superior-grade and ten peak-grade lifeforms, which he motioned to stand before Zhang Hanxiang.

Zhang Hanxiang was unable to resist her brother's commands. She obediently slaughtered them all.

Zhang Lie continued, "I'll leave the regular- and mutated-grade lifeforms to you. Consider this a trial to make sure you haven't been slacking off in the second realm."

If the members of Team Zenith were present, they would immediately protest at the preferential treatment that Zhang Lie had shown his sister.

Zhang Hanxiang's advancement trial was far more straightforward than what they had to overcome, but there was no helping it. Zhang Hanxiang was Zhang Lie's only sister, after all.

Zhu frowned. "Zhang Lie, I feel like you're pampering Hanxiang far more than me!"

Zhang Lie pretended not to hear Zhu's words and changed the subject. "Haha, Yun Bing and Chu Feng have just ascended, so let me bring them over here as well."

"Please, let us handle the preparation of the lifeforms' meat." After the lifeforms were slaughtered, the Yeluo chieftain and warriors volunteered to cook the sixteen superior-grade and ten peak-grade lifeforms into a sumptuous feast, while Zhang Lie shattered space and brought both Yun Bing and Chu Feng back.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng were very confused by the sudden teleportation, and the feast of lifeforms that was now laid up in front of them.

Zhang Lie didn't explain. Instead, he beckoned an equal number of superior- and peak-grade lifeforms over.

"You've both just ascended and have no gene fragments. I'll help you out with your superior and peak gene fragments, and you can deal with the regular and mutated ones yourselves."

Chu Feng blinked. Wasn't there something wrong with this order of acquiring fragments that Zhang Lie had suggested? Shouldn't they have started from regular gene fragments? They had just ascended to the third realm, and they were already acquiring superior and peak gene fragments...?

"Well, there's no choice. I don't have any regular- or mutated-grade lifeforms with me, so you'll have to hunt down low-quality trash in the future."

This strategy could only work for Zhang Lie and his subordinates; if anyone else dared to hunt down peak-grade lifeforms while having no regular or mutated gene fragments, they would surely die.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng were shocked but simultaneously delighted. This was a huge boon to them, and Yun Bing and Chu Feng were even more certain of their plan to follow Zhang Lie wherever he went.

Even after the three hunters finished acquiring all their gene fragments, there was still a huge pile of meat left. With Zhang Lie's agreement, the Yeluo warriors cooked it all and had a feast to celebrate the newcomers' arrival.

Chapter 884: Post-Disaster-Grade

While they feasted, Yun Bing asked, "Zhang Lie, are the rumors true? Will you really build a kingdom of Limit in the third realm?"

If Zhang Lie were to do so, it would surely cause a great disturbance in the third realm, as well as in the second.

Zhang Lie contemplated Yun Bing's question for a moment. "You've already asked this, haven't you?"

Chu Feng replied, "We'd like to confirm it again."

"You can understand it that way, I suppose—but it won't take the form of a kingdom."

Building a new kingdom wasn't one of Zhang Lie's primary objectives, but rather a side effect of what he did want to accomplish—finding all the scraps of the map he had been collecting for so long.

The most straightforward way of doing so was to take down all the worlds of the third realm.

Chu Feng thought for a moment. "If that's the case, then anyone who's currently employed in the kingdom of Limit could advance to the third realm without giving up their positions... Linking the second and third realms together via the kingdom of Limit will be extremely impactful, I'm sure of it."

Those hunters of the Milky Way who wanted protection in the third realm would have to join the kingdom of Limit to do so, and they would strengthen the kingdom in the second realm in order to get a good start in the third.

All those who joined the kingdom of Limit in the second realm would be able to ascend with relative ease and limited danger—provided that they achieved something of note in the second realm, as though this were a New Game+ or some sort of roguelike game.

On the other hand, those who went against the kingdom of Limit in the second realm would be hunted down if they were to ascend to the third.

The second and third realms were no longer wholly separate or distinct entities, but rather a smaller and a larger stage for hunters of the Milky Way.

The appearance of the kingdom of Limit and its subsequent development in both realms would revolutionize the ascension of hunters.

Yun Bing asked, "Is there anything I can help with?"

Her abilities at governance and paperwork were extraordinary, and she had been employed to great effect in the second realm.

Zhang Lie didn't lack for skilled warriors, but skilled bureaucrats were a different matter entirely.

"The troops need a logistician to record the worlds that have been taken down, the number of native inhabitants residing within, and the distribution of resources from the world to the frontline."

Before this, the members of Team Zenith and the warlords hadn't focused on governing their conquered worlds at all.

They killed the king of the realm and searched for the proof of kingship. If they were able to find it, they claimed it; otherwise, they informed the draconian sage of it, who subsequently relayed the information to Zhang Lie. The humans and the other hunters of the Milky Way would then comb through the world in search of the proof of kingship, unless Zhang Lie had other ideas.

What treasures there were in the conquered worlds were claimed by whichever hunter had a use for it, but they ignored the rest of the spoils. They were skilled at combat, but were no trained military.

The warlords, at least, had some notion of propriety and training, but the members of Team Zenith bumbled about for all that they were unreasonably skilled fighters.

Zhang Lie was also much more of a fighter than a logistician, so he had had no easy way of resolving the problem. With Yun Bing's arrival, however, things were different.

"Most of the resources should be allocated with a priority toward cultivating a post-disaster-grade lifeform. The remaining should be sent to the frontlines, though I expect they won't need many of the resources that are available."

Everyone had a storage-type soulshard of their own, and they were responsible for putting food and medicine within.

Yun Bing thought for a moment. "I disagree."

Zhang Lie blinked. "On which point, and on what grounds?"

Yun Bing replied, "As you said, the troops are able to function independently with their own storage-type soulshards, and they don't need to hunt for anything besides the king of the realm and the proof of kingship. In the past, that might have been reasonable, but now, with the Yeluo chieftain in the third realm as well, things have changed."

"Are you referring to the possibility that the Yeluo chieftain will be able to design better restoratives and healing potions in the third realm?"

"Yes, precisely. The research into post-disaster-grade lifeforms should be the top priority, but the development of better healing potions and restoratives should be a close second. These potions will immediately be helpful to frontline troops."

Zhang Lie nodded. He had never heard a single complaint about the potions that the Yeluo had produced.

Yun Bing suddenly asked, "Right, what do you mean by post-disaster-grade research?"

"I've been looking into how to make genetic lifeforms that are beyond disaster-grade in strength."

Yun Bing and Chu Feng were as stunned as Chen Fan and the draconian sage had been.

"Is that possible?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "It should be, but I haven't realized it yet. I'll have to do more testing."

Upon hearing that such a thing hadn't yet occurred in practice, Yun Bing sighed in simultaneous relief and regret.

If Zhang Lie had already developed a post-disaster-grade lifeform, that would be news that would shake the galaxy.

All life in the Milky Way relied on these gene fragments to grow stronger. Only with the existence of disaster-grade lifeforms could there be disaster gene fragments—and the same was true for post-disaster-grade lifeforms.

Once news of this discovery were to spread, the entire Milky Way would be abuzz.

The creation of limit-breaking potions had heralded the start of a new era. All the hunters of the Milky Way were studying these limit fragments, which had already been integrated into a hunter's education.

Allegedly, the world federation was intending to award Zhang Lie a medal of recognition for his services to the galaxy, and Earth would confer upon him the highest award he could receive for his scientific breakthrough.

The discovery of disaster-grade lifeforms was equally astounding, but it had led to a less pronounced impact simply because of the difficulty in finding and then hunting down such lifeforms.

Fortunately, no one had discovered the disaster-grade lifeform ensconced within the kingdom of Limit, or it would have caused a galaxy-wide hubbub.

If Zhang Lie were to succeed in his research on post-disaster-grade lifeforms, what sort of surprise would be lying in wait for the Milky Way? Zhang Lie simply couldn't imagine it.

In comparison, the construction of the kingdom of Limit would be a meaningless achievement. Only now did Yun Bing understand what Zhang Lie had once said: to others, founding the kingdom of Limit might have been an accomplishment they could brag about for the rest of their lives, but for Zhang Lie, it was simply a small part of his travels through the dimensional realm.

Yun Bing and Chu Feng glanced at Zhang Lie, their eyes gleaming. Following behind Zhang Lie was the most intelligent decision they had made—he was the one leading the entire Milky Way forward, the champion of the era, the peak existence of his generation. All the changes that had occurred in the Milky Way recently were inextricably linked to Zhang Lie in one form or another...

Chapter 885: Yang Ze's Injury

"I'll leave you to deal with the logistics, then. With regards to manpower, talk to Chen Fan and have him send you a few human hunters," Zhang Lie suggested.

Yun Bing replied, "There's no rush. I'd rather wait until the hunters from the kingdom of Limit in the second realm ascend—they're people I've worked with and am more comfortable with."

It wasn't that Yun Bing distrusted the hunters of the third realm. Rather, she had just ascended, and understood very little of the logistics currently in place. It wouldn't make sense for her to take over right away given her limited understanding; she would have to learn and analyze what the troops were already doing.

Furthermore, because Yun Bing had just ascended, she wasn't strong enough that these veterans would listen to her commands unconditionally. She had the ability to make them all listen to her, of course, and she had demonstrated that ability in the second realm, but she didn't think it was the appropriate time herself.

"As you will. If there's anything you can't resolve on your own, let me know and I can help."

Zhang Lie turned to the party. "Let me show you around the draconian world. This is where you'll be living for a long while, so it'll be good to get a sense for everything."

Zhang Lie waved a hand, shattering space and whisking everyone away.

The next moment, they appeared in a desert where the ground was black glass. Zhang Lie introduced, "This is the black desert of the draconian world, which originated from a world that Fang Yi conquered."

Zhang Hanxiang glanced all around her. "A black desert? Why isn't there any black sand, then?"

Zhang Lie coughed awkwardly. "For certain reasons, all the black sand has vanished from the area. Because this world of black sand had been drained of its energy by the black spirits, the will of the world was dramatically weakened. This land no longer has the ability to support any life."

Zhang Lie naturally had no intention to explain that subsequent damage to the land had been because he had absorbed his last few disaster gene fragments here.

Zhang Hanxiang stepped on the glass-like ground experimentally. "Of course no lifeforms would want to live on this sort of black glass."

With another wave of Zhang Lie's hand, space shattered once more. He brought everyone to a second patch of land, a huge forest.

"This forest was taken down by Yang Ze. Within it live two races, the indigenous bearmen and the transplanted mammoths. The mammoths moved over from a territory that Li Feng gained control over. Because the mammoths are outsiders, the bearmen find them very unwelcome, and they're frequently enmeshed in conflict."

As Zhang Lie spoke, cries and shouts came from deep within the forest before them. Mud, dust, rubble, and trees were sent flying into the air as the mammoths' trumpeting cries and bears' howls announced their presence.

"The draconian sage thinks that it's good for the two races to fight and exhaust their resources against each other, which would be beneficial for draconian rule. Furthermore, since the mammoths once betrayed the humans and draconians, the draconian sage wants to make life more difficult for them."

With another wave of his hand, Zhang Lie brought the party to the third location, a barren desert.

"This is a desert which used to be populated by greenskins, and which Sun Xiaowu conquered. Because two-thirds of the greenskins have been sent to the battlefield, however, there are far fewer greenskins left here."

The members of Team Zenith had taken down each world, but the responsibility for making sure that these inhabitants obeyed the draconians fell to the draconians' own forces.

Zhang Lie brought the party to a fourth location.

"This is a tundra that Li Feng invaded, and large quantities of ice-attuned genetic lifeforms live here.

It was part of the land that the mammoths used to live in, but because of how harrowing the living conditions are, the mammoths wanted to move elsewhere. Only a few members of their clan still remain in the snowy valleys within."

Yun Bing asked, "Are they unwilling to move?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "You underestimate the aliens. An elder proposed that some remain behind; they don't trust us draconians and humans fully."

Yun Bing understood. "Not putting all their eggs in one basket, then?"

"Exactly so."

The fifth location was a forest, but a far smaller one compared to the ancient forest in which the bear-men lived.

"Zhou Ying conquered this world, which was once a fetid swamp. She terraformed the land and turned it into a patch of verdant forest. Subsequently, because we had to search for the proof of kingship that the king left behind, we had to dig up almost the entire forest. Afterwards, Zhou Ying planted some more trees down, and that's where we are now."

The sixth region was a charred, scorched land.

"Sun Mengmeng took down this world, which was also once a forest. After a heated battle, the forest burned down entirely."

The seventh region was one final forest, containing black Chinese parasol trees.

Zhang Lie gave the newcomers an extended tour before depositing them all in the draconian city. Zhang Hanxiang, Yun Bing, and Chu Feng scattered to take in the sights, but Zhang Lie called the Yeluo chieftain back.

"Chieftain, don't go yet. I want to introduce you to the draconian sage and have him arrange a research laboratory for you. This is the heart of the draconian territory, and there are many herbs specific to the third realm that can be found here. It should be a good start to your research, and I'll also assign you some manpower to help you collect more."

The Yeluo chieftain nodded. "As you will, your majesty!"

Zhang Lie brought the Yeluo chieftain to see the draconian sage, only to be surprised when the draconian sage was also looking for him. "Good timing. I have some news for you."

"Did something happen?" Zhang Lie asked.

"Yang Ze's back, but he's heavily injured—battle wounds, he said."

"I'll go see him immediately." Zhang Lie rushed off in search of Yang Ze, whom the draconian sage had sent to a nearby infirmary.

When Zhang Lie found him, he was swaddled in bandages. Yang Ze chuckled ruefully. "Sorry to disappoint you, Captain."

"No, none of that! How badly hurt are you? Have you had any medication yet?"

"I've consumed some of the Yeluo restoratives from the second realm. I'm not too badly injured, and I should be able to get back to normal in a few days. It's just that I allowed the king of the realm to run off..."

Although Yang Ze was hurt, his opponent didn't fare much better, either.

Zhang Lie relaxed after hearing that Yang Ze had suffered no lasting injuries.

"There's no need for you to worry about your opponent now. The Yeluo chieftain has just ascended to the third realm, and it's likely that he's developed better potions by now."

Yang Ze's eyes widened. "The Yeluo chieftain has ascended?!"

Chapter 886: The Martian Invasion

Zhang Lie nodded. "My sister brought him up with her."

Yang Ze narrowed his eyes. "As a stowaway...? You and your sister are really both troublemakers, aren't you, Captain?"

Zhang Lie sighed. "My sister is apparently fearless of everything, but I'm not sure she has the skills to back it up."

Yang Ze remained silent for a while longer. For a moment, he seemed to want to speak before subsequently changing his mind.

Zhang Lie asked, "Just what happened to you? I wouldn't have expected you to get hurt even if you were against the strongest kings of large worlds."

Yang Ze was strong even among the members of Team Zenith, and his analytical and strategic abilities made him far more devastating than the other members of Team Zenith in battle.

He had managed to kill a medium-sized king with hardly anything but his wits alone, and Zhang Lie expected Yang Ze to have had easy success.

The most fearsome foes for him wouldn't be intelligent enemies but rather ones with no intelligence at all, whose actions he wouldn't be able to predict.

Yang Ze remained silent for a while before replying, "I'd like to take some time to return to Mars."

Zhang Lie frowned.

When Yang Ze left Mars, it was almost as though he had been chased out of his clan.

The Yang clan and several other prominent clans in the Martian cities had ganged up on him, and Zhang Lie didn't think that Yang Ze bore his clan any goodwill.

He recalled that Yang Ze had once mentioned that he was nothing more than an outcast, one disfavored by his family and ostracized even among those of his generation.

Yang Ze was like the protagonist of one of those xuanhuan novels, who had seemed mediocre before grasping at a rare opportunity and subsequently embarking on a journey that would grant him limitless strength.

After Yang Ze left Mars, Zhang Lie didn't recall ever seeing him talk about his old family.

The Yang clan, on the other hand, had reached out to the kingdom of Limit more than once or twice. Yang Ze had helped to construct the kingdom of Limit, and held a high position within the Zenith Dojo.

The entire galaxy was aware of the kingdom of Limit and the Zenith Dojo; Zhang Lie's actions had brought it into prominence.

The Yang clan had been hoping to make use of their connection with Yang Ze to obtain some support from him in the second realm, to get a position of governance in the kingdom of Limit there, and perhaps to join the Zenith Dojo.

However, Yang Ze didn't respond to any of the Yang clan's overtures. He had ignored his family all throughout his advancement.

The members of the Zenith Dojo, Yun Bing, and the others chose to turn a blind eye to the Yang clan's misdeeds on behalf of Yang Ze's connection to them.

Although they were aware that the Yang clan had, along with the other clans of Mars, tried to ostracize Yang Ze, they were ultimately a blood relation, and the Zenith Dojo and the kingdom of Limit both treated the members of the Yang clan fairly.

Yang Ze understood Zhang Lie's confusion. He explained, "Mars has just suffered an invasion of bugs from outer space. The Marshal of Flame, Li Pu, was gravely injured, and half of Mars has fallen. I know the draconian world is at war. I'm very sorry, but I'd like to take a leave of absence and return to Mars for the moment. I don't have any fond memories there, but it's still my homeland."

Zhang Lie blinked. "You got injured because you were distracted with the issue on Mars?"

Yang Ze was distracted for two reasons, in truth: the situation on Mars, and the possibility that Zhang Lie might not let him leave.

Zhang Lie nodded. "In that case, let's go together."

"I know that it'll be difficult to permit my absence during the ongoing war, but—hold on, what did you say?"

"I said, I'll go with you!"

Yang Ze's eyes widened. "Hold on, Captain! Mars is my homeland—I'd hate to drag you in with me. Furthermore, don't you have to be here to make sure the invasion goes well?"

"No, there's no need for my presence here. Furthermore, we're friends and teammates, aren't we? If something like this happened to Mars, I can't let you go there alone."

Yang Ze was very touched, but he continued rationally, "Captain, are you sure? There's a tremendous time difference between the third realm and the Milky Way. Half of Mars has been invaded, and it'll take at least a month to get rid of the bug infestation. By that time, three years would have passed in the third realm!"

Zhang Lie nodded. "It is quite a problem, isn't it? But don't worry, I'll see if the other members of Team Zenith want to come as well."

"No, no, Captain, you don't understand! It's three years in the third realm—I can't hold you back for that long. So much could happen in three years, and if I were to drag my entire team down with me..."

"So what?"

Yang Ze cried out, "What would happen to your plan on conquering the third realm, Captain?"

Zhang Lie didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. When did he ever profess a desire to conquer the third realm? Who knew what the members of Team Zenith were saying about him behind their back?

The only reason Zhang Lie was doing so was to finish gathering the pieces of his map.

"If I want to conquer the third realm, I can do that at any point. The most important thing at the moment is to resolve the crisis on Mars. After all, Mars is where a significant part of humanity lives. Furthermore, even if you didn't tell me about what was going on on Mars, Hong Tianqi would surely send me a message."

Although Zhang Lie's words sounded noble, Yang Ze knew very well that Zhang Lie didn't care about such trifling matters; he was doing this for Yang Ze, not anyone else. If he were to recall the members of Team Zenith, Zhang Lie's plan of conquering the third realm would have to wait another three years.

"Given your current condition, I think you'd better get some more rest first. I'll ask the Yeluo chieftain if he has any better medicine for you."

Zhang lie returned to the draconian sage's quarters, where the sage was having tea with the Yeluo chieftain.

"How is Yang Ze?" the Yeluo chieftain asked.

"He's doing fine. Thanks to the regenerative potions you formulated, Chieftain, the worst of Yang Ze's injuries have been dealt with."

"Thank goodness."

Zhang Lie continued, "Chieftain, did you ever end up coming up with improved versions of your potions?"

The Yeluo chieftain nodded. "Of course! After studying Zhou Ling's cells in greater detail, I was able to develop an even more superior regenerative potion.

I have some of my stock with me—you should bring it to Yang Ze. The Yeluo warriors all have quite a large supply with them, and we're happy to share them with the warriors in the frontline."

"Excellent. Can I ask about the effects of the potions?"

The Yeluo chieftain smiled. "Your majesty, please relax. I wouldn't hand over potions that are still in experimental testing. These potions perform far better than the original—roughly five times better, I'd say."

Zhang Lie's eyebrows rose in delight. The effect of the restorative potions had been remarkable to begin with, and a fivefold increase was nothing short of extraordinary. He was certain that Yang Ze would be able to get out of bed in no more than two days in that case.

"Very good. On behalf of Yang Ze and all wounded hunters to come, I thank you for your contribution."

The Yeluo chieftain smiled again. "There's no need for thanks, your majesty. If you hadn't brought us out of our valley, we wouldn't have been able to aspire to such great heights."

Zhang Lie turned to the draconian sage. "Right, sage, the Yeluo would like to construct a research laboratory in the draconian world..."

The sage replied, "We were just discussing this during our conversation. I'm very happy to support the construction of such a laboratory, and research successes would benefit us all."

Zhang Lie nodded. "I won't interfere with the discussion, then—I'm going to hand these potions off to Yang Ze."

Chapter 887: Hong Tianqi's Messages

After Yang Ze consumed the newest restorative potions from the Yeluo chieftain, he immediately praised them. "I can feel my wounds healing already—no, I think I can even head to the battlefield at this point!"

Zhang Lie was suitably impressed. "I'm surprised the effects are so obvious and immediate, myself. Hold on and let the potion heal you fully. I'll have to contact the others."

Yang Ze obediently lay back down as Zhang Lie shattered space and vanished from sight. When he told them about what was going on in Mars, everyone in Team Zenith decided to go.

Once the members of Team Zenith returned to Earth, the plans for invasion would certainly have to be scrapped, and there might even be retaliation for what the draconians had done.

With another teleport, Zhang Lie headed toward the warlords who had accompanied him. He instructed them to hunker down, to stop any expansion, and to patrol the outer limits of the draconian territory.

After everything was settled, he and the other members of Team Zenith returned to Earth.

The first thing Zhang Lie did was to look at his transceiver and see who had contacted him. There were many such people, some from the limit fragment research society, some from the major clans of the Milky Way, and others who were all famous or renowned for one reason or another.

Who knew how they had obtained his private number? This was an old number that Zhang Lie had given out freely, though. Given these organizations' reach, he expected it would be rather trivial for them to contact him.

Most of the messages were sent via text—and among them, the most recent were all from Hong Tianqi. The messages had begun a few weeks ago and were sent once every couple of days. Over the last three days, however, Hong Tianqi had sent him a message once every hour, as though there were something truly urgent.

Zhang Lie called Hong Tianqi on his private number, but Hong Tianqi didn't respond immediately—likely he was busy in a meeting or other duties that took up his time. Zhang Lie had a bath, then contacted the members of Team Zenith.

All but Yang Ze had already left the third realm. Yang Ze had yet to recover fully, and he would make use of the time difference between the third realm and the Milky Way to recuperate before joining them.

Once they were ready to set off to Mars, they would inform Yang Ze.

Almost immediately after speaking with the members of Team Zenith, Hong Tianqi called him.

"Presiding Authority Hong, what may I do for you?"

Hong Tianqi was seated in front of an elegant redwood table, both his hands propping up his jaw. "King of Limit, there's a task with which I urgently need your help."

Zhang Lie and Hong Tianqi looked at each other for a moment, and then both parties began to laugh.

Zhang Lie asked, "And what may I, the king of Limit, do for the presiding authority of the world federation? If it's about disaster gene fragments, there's nothing I can do."

"Enough with the titles! Zhang Lie, to be honest, there's nothing I can do by myself. I need your help."

"It's very difficult for me to refuse you, Hong Tianqi." While he was weak, Zhang Lie had received quite a few favors from Hong Tianqi, and it seemed as though he would be calling them in now.

Hong Tianqi replied, "I don't think you have any reason to refuse. Are you aware of what's going on on Mars?"

Zhang Lie was a little nonplussed. He had just heard about the situation from Yang Ze; and now here was Hong Tianqi, reaching out.

"A little. Mars is being invaded by an unprecedented swarm of space bugs, isn't it?"

Such invasions were frequent as far as stellar and galactic disasters went. Other such disasters involved the formation of black holes, supernova explosions, solar flares, and so on.

Out in the void of space lived a particularly terrifying race of space bugs. When the swarm descended on a planet teeming with life, it would consume all that lifeforce, then lay eggs within the smoking ruins to give birth to even more of their kind. Subsequently, these bugs would fly to nearby worlds and extinguish all bugs there too.

These space bugs were vermin—only waste and desolation followed in their wake. They didn't know how to create, only to destroy.

Such bugs were relatively common in the galaxy, but the swarms varied in size. Earth had been struck by a smaller invasion of bugs, and Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith had gained a bit of fame from participating in one of those battles.

If small-scale invasions were handled poorly, they could very well lead to the destruction of the entire planet. Large-scale invasions were far harder to quell. The outbreak of space bugs on Mars was undoubtedly an example of a large-scale invasion.

Hong Tianqi nodded. "It's good that you're aware. I'd like to employ the Zenith Dojo to provide aid to Mars, and the forces sent to Mars have to include you."

"If you don't mind my asking, why aren't you there helping out at the scene yourself? There are at least a billion people on Mars, and millions of people are getting hurt with every passing day."

Hong Tianqi sighed. "My position comes with its own frustrations."

"And yet the previous authority seemed to have plenty of time to spare to embroil me in his schemes..."

"The situation is different. The world federation has just been reconstructed anew, and I simply can't take time off at the moment. Furthermore, I suspect that this disaster has been orchestrated by a mastermind."

"On what grounds?"

"The invasion was simply too sudden. Large-scale invasions should have been detected well in advance, with sufficient time for the Martians to evacuate. However, the detection was five hours late."

Five hours might not seem like much, but every second mattered in the face of impending disaster.

Hong Tianqi continued with certainty, "Now isn't the time to try to push the blame around, but I believe that the invasion was caused by those who don't want to see humanity prosper."

"Who do you think is culpable?"

"I don't know. There are simply too many suspects," Hong Tianqi replied with some exasperation. "Now that humanity is thriving, its detractors have gone silent, and it's even harder to find any schemers concocting their plans in hiding."

Ever since Zhang Lie's appearance, the rate at which humanity was growing had risen dramatically. Half the galaxy's stock of ingredients for concocting limit-breaking potions was supplied by Earth, and Hong Tianqi, a human, had become the highest authority of the world federation.

In the second realm, Zhang Lie had founded the kingdom of Limit, and he looked to be doing the same in the third realm as well.

Humanity's achievements had shaken the galaxy, sparking envy and jealousy from the countless races of the Milky Way—and those who couldn't bear to see humanity succeed.

No one dared to set their sights on Earth, where the Zenith Dojo was situated, and whose protector was Hong Tianqi. On the other hand, Mars, likewise populated by humans, was relatively undefended...

Chapter 888: Map Fragments

"It's precisely because I suspect the presence of a mastermind that I can't make a move myself," Hong Tianqi told Zhang Lie.

"Why?"

"Because I can't remain the sole protector of humanity. Those who go against Earth will learn that Earth has far more defenders."

Zhang Lie understood at once. "You'd like me to become the second Hong Tianqi?"

"What's the matter? Are you unwilling to do so?" Hong Tianqi's eyes were twinkling and benevolent, as though he were looking at one of his own disciples.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I've never wanted to become you."

It wasn't that Zhang Lie wanted to surpass Hong Tianqi; they were two independent, separate, and distinct people. There was no need for Zhang Lie to grow into the mold of Hong Tianqi. He was certain that one day, they would walk together, side by side—and it was only a matter of time before he surpassed Hong Tianqi himself.

If he were to make these views public, there would be countless detractors in the Milky Way who would criticize Zhang Lie's arrogance, but Zhang Lie himself was confident.

His foundations were immaculate and necessarily superior to those who came before him: he had acquired disaster gene fragments in the first realm, filled them up in the second realm, and had even obtained peak limit fragments in the third realm. These were overwhelming advantages that Hong Tianqi didn't possess. Even a pig who were somehow granted Zhang Lie's foundation would be able to grow stronger than Hong Tianqi.

Hong Tianqi continued seriously, "Now that I've taken on the role of the presiding authority of the world federation, I need another strong human to step up to be the defender of Earth. You're the best choice!"

Zhang Lie now understood why Hong Tianqi wanted him in particular to support Mars.

Humanity had expanded beyond the solar system as the galactic age dawned, and they had taken over a few planets of their own. Many lived on planets where there were other aliens around; such cross-pollination was normal and even expected.

Mars was a planet in the solar system. If these space bugs were to take over Mars, they would eventually come for Earth.

Even so, Hong Tianqi hadn't gone to deal with the threat personally. Instead, he intended on hiring the Zenith Dojo to do so—because he wanted to demonstrate humanity's might for the rest of the galaxy to see. Humanity was strong even when Hong Tianqi was taken out of the picture.

"This is why you wanted to hire me and the Zenith Dojo to deal with this crisis?"

Hong Tianqi nodded. "Is this fee agreeable to you?"

Even though Zhang Lie had more money than he knew what to do with, his eyes bulged upon seeing the number that Hong Tianqi had quoted.

That said, Zhang Lie didn't much care for the money. It wasn't as though he lacked for it; the patent fee for the limit-breaking potions alone was sufficient to catapult Zhang Lie to among the top ten richest figures in the galaxy.

Not only that, the Zenith Dojo took in huge margins from the sale of ingredients for these limit-breaking potions. Even if the Zenith Dojo were to fund its disciples' advancement with everything that money could buy, Zhang Lie could live for a thousand generations without worry—no matter how profligate he was.

To Zhang Lie, money wasn't even just a string of numbers—it was something that had left his mind entirely.

"Let's not put a monetary value on our relationship. How about something else, instead?"

"You don't want money?"

"Not really, no. Why don't you use your connections and manpower to help me find something instead?"

"What are you looking for?" Hong Tianqi was perplexed. Given Zhang Lie's status, was there anything he wouldn't be able to acquire on his own? The king of Limit, the pioneer of the third realm, the leader of the warlords, the ally of the four prime races—what could there be that he, Zhang Lie, was unable to access?

"I need a few spiritual herbs and grasses," Zhang Lie explained, sending a list over to Hong Tianqi. Of course, the list was incomplete—Zhang Lie had left out the herbs already in his possession, as well as the core ingredient: the energy of a superior world.

That energy was required to meld and refine the various ingredients that would ultimately form the limit-breaking potion; without its addition, Zhang Lie would be consuming a poison that would cause his body to explode.

"None of these herbs are all that expensive—they're just rare. I should be able to get most of them for you, but could I ask what you're doing with them?"

"Research on limit-breaking potions," Zhang Lie replied.

Hong Tianqi's eyes widened. "Potion #3?"

"More or less."

Hong Tianqi nodded firmly. "I'll try to find them, but why not ask the laboratories interested in working with you to help contribute as well?"

"If I ask them to do so, they'll request that I share the fruits of my labor with them."

Zhang Lie had long since come up with a refined recipe for superior limit fragments, and none of the members of Team Zenith had reported any ill effects after consuming the superior limit-breaking potion. The research was mature, and there would be no issue with Zhang Lie sharing it with the public—but the ingredients he was asking for didn't match up with those that went into the superior limit-breaking potions.

"I understand," Hong Tianqi replied.

"Furthermore, could you help me find more pieces of this map?"

Zhang Lie sent Hong Tianqi a few images of the map he had been collecting.

Hong Tianqi recognized them immediately. "Oh, these? I searched for them myself back when I was in the third realm!"

Hong Tianqi didn't think it was unusual that Zhang Lie was hunting these down; many of the hunters who had ascended to the third realm had tried, but none had succeeded.

The source of these fragments was shrouded in mystery. Anyone who came into contact with a fragment would notice how unusual it was—these fragments couldn't be destroyed by ordinary or extraordinary means.

No one knew what would appear when all the fragments of the map were gathered, and there were all sorts of guesses. Some suggested that this was a map that would lead to the greatest treasure hidden within the third realm; others, that it was a path straight to the fourth realm.

It might have been the location of the grave of a third-realm warlord who had perished before his prime, or perhaps the location of a secret extradimensional space. One particularly novel hypothesis was that the map was a red herring for a mysterious, powerful combat technique that lay within.

However, none of these hypotheses could be verified. There were simply too many fragments that had been scattered all over the three thousand worlds.

"I collected quite a few fragments myself," Hong Tianqi told Zhang Lie.

"Really? How many?"

"Three hundred or so, all hidden away."

Zhang Lie inhaled deeply.

When he told the warlords of the Milky Way that he was collecting these fragments, the hundred strongest races of the galaxy had all given him their collection. Only the four prime races had managed to acquire over three hundred fragments; the others all had roughly a hundred.

Weaker races only possessed perhaps a few dozen such fragments, and they had all been taken by the hundred strongest races by force or trade to be given to Zhang Lie.

Those fragments were something that each race had spent countless years collecting, but Hong Tianqi alone had a collection with that on par with the strongest races. Zhang Lie couldn't help but be astounded.

"I hid them in a certain world in the third realm. I don't mind handing over the fragments to you—they're useless to me, anyway, and I'd be happy to assign some manpower to help you find more."

"In that case, I'll gladly accept this offer of cooperation—we can treat the herbs and map fragments as the employment fee. I'll head to Mars immediately."

Zhang Lie had already been planning on doing so, originally with the other members of Team Zenith, but now, he would bring the entire Zenith Dojo along...

Chapter 889: A Trial Ahead

Hong Tianqi asked curiously, "How many fragments of the map have you collected?"

"About ten thousand or so," Zhang Lie replied, intending to be truthful with Hong Tianqi.

Hong Tianqi was so shocked that he could hardly speak. "How many? T-Ten thousand?!"

Zhang Lie had barely ascended to the third realm a month ago for an observer in the Milky Way. How had he already accumulated ten thousand fragments? It would have taken a very dedicated or very well-connected hunter to do so.

Hong Tianqi took what seemed like an eternity to recover from his shock. "As expected of you... But are you still not done with the map even after collecting all these pieces?"

Zhang Lie shook his head, a small smile on his face.

"Thank goodness I didn't collect these fragments on my own, then—ten thousand and counting, is this meant to be a puzzle or something?"

To be honest, Hong Tianqi didn't know what those fragments were part of. It looked like a map, and Zhang Lie had called them map fragments, so Hong Tianqi followed suit.

Zhang Lie replied, "It should be a map. I'm almost halfway done with it, and I expect that there will only be another ten or twenty thousand fragments or so."

"A thirty-thousand-piece puzzle...?" Hong Tianqi felt nauseous just thinking about it. Once again, he was relieved that he hadn't tried to complete the collection—it would have drained his time and left him with nothing to show for it. Could someone really finish the map?

"It's very impressive that you managed to get this far."

Zhang Lie smiled. "I made use of the other races of the Milky Way."

"That said, don't get too enamored with it. Who knows how much longer it'll take you to get the remaining ten or twenty thousand? You're even more talented than I was at your age, and far stronger. I'm amazed by your talent, and I believe that you'll reach far greater heights than I did. Don't waste all your time and talent on this map."

"I understand."

"You may have gotten closer than anyone since the appearance of these fragments, but even so, I urge you to focus on what's important."

"I know, I know. Leave matters on Mars to me." Zhang Lie was unwilling to speak more regarding the map, because this was one of the only hints about his parents' disappearance.

As he hung up and flopped onto his bed, Zhang Lie began to think about matters on Mars once more. If the invasion of these space bugs really had been masterminded by a third party... Regardless of what was going on, however, they wouldn't be able to stop Zhang Lie.

He left his room and walked around the dojo as he checked on the disciples who were diligently training.

The incoming disciples were all talented and highly motivated youth. As Zhang Lie's name spread, more and more people became interested in joining the Zenith Dojo, and the selection process grew correspondingly rigorous. As a result, anyone who could make it in had to be the cream of the crop.

As far as the older disciples went, however, Zhang Lie was a little displeased. They had grown somewhat indolent and were resting on their laurels.

The reputation of the Zenith Dojo afforded prestige to anyone who was part of it, and the first batch of the Zenith Dojo's disciples essentially had VIP status no matter where they went—in China and even throughout the rest of the Milky Way.

Either they were chatting instead of diligently training, simply going through the motions without putting any heart into their work. Zhang Lie was very dissatisfied by these disciples' actions, but he didn't criticize them outright.

"I heard someone say that the dojo leader himself was out inspecting the disciples' training. Is something the matter?" Just then, Zhang Hong walked up to him.

If not for Zhang Hong's appearance, the older disciples wouldn't have noticed that Zhang Lie had appeared in the dojo.

Zhang Lie was largely focused on the dimensional realm, rather than on the Zenith Dojo, so his presence here was unexpected and shocking.

The older disciples jumped up in shock, hastily bowed toward him, and went back to training.

"Zhang Hong, gather all disciples in the dojo. I intend to make an announcement tomorrow morning during the morning drill."

Zhang Hong asked, "Shall I inform those in the first and second realms as well?"

Zhang Lie thought for a moment. "Yes, have them all return. It should be an eye-opening experience for them all—but there's no need to bring back anyone in the third realm. All the combat-ready hunters have returned already."

Zhang Lie didn't intend to call Zhang Hanxiang back. Although participating in the crisis on Mars would certainly help her mature, Zhang Lie was worried that something untoward would happen to her during such a large-scale crisis.

Zhang Hong asked, "Is something wrong?"

To her knowledge, the Zenith Dojo had never convened such a large-scale gathering before, as though it were about to go to war. However, in the Milky Way, with Zhang Lie and Hong Tianqi around, who would dare to mess with the Zenith Dojo?

"I accepted a request from Hong Tianqi. It'll be a good opportunity for the disciples to gain practical experience in fighting."

Zhang Lie intended to make use of this opportunity to shock the lazier disciples into training hard again.

Back in the first realm, the members of the Zenith Dojo had tried to build their own settlement and had to defend against quite a few waves of enemies—some from other settlements, and others from groups of genetic lifeforms. Thanks to the disciples' hard work and cooperation, they were able to overwhelm their enemies and successfully construct a settlement.

After that, however, Zhang Lie had constructed the kingdom of Limit in the second realm. No one dared to provoke those disciples from the Zenith Dojo who ascended to the second realm, and they were easily able to obtain gene fragments for themselves—there was far less opportunity and reason to go out hunting for genetic lifeforms.

The members of Team Zenith were working hard to expand their territory in the third realm. By the time the disciples in the second realm were ready to ascend, it was likely that there would be no threats waiting for them in the third realm as well.

If this were to proceed indefinitely, the members of the Zenith Dojo would be useless hunters.

After his conversation with Hong Tianqi, Zhang Lie realized one thing. He and Hong Tianqi wouldn't be able to serve as guardians of humanity indefinitely; humanity needed not only a second Hong Tianqi, but also a third, a fourth, a fifth, an endless supply of Hong Tianqis.

Zhang Lie was certain that he could become the second Hong Tianqi, or even a superior Hong Tianqi, and so could the members of Team Zenith. But what about the future?

Zhang Hanxiang, Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, Hong Xi, and Hong Xiao might succeed—and then what?

Zhang Lie had realized one thing: if he wanted to prevent others from daring to meddle with humanity, from scheming against humanity, what he needed wasn't a singular Hong Tianqi, but a whole band of them.

He intended to make use of this opportunity on Mars to reforge and temper the disciples of the Zenith Dojo—to metamorphosize as hunters after facing a foe that had swallowed up half the planet already.

Zhang Hong had some idea of what was going to happen, because she knew that there was no force on Earth that could stand against the Zenith Dojo.

Even so, she asked, "Are we waging war?"

Chapter 890: Lavish Rewards

Zhang Lie looked up toward the sky. "I suspect you know the answer already."

Looking up in the direction of Zhang Lie's gaze, Zhang Hong did understand: it had to be the Martian crisis!

The next morning, all the disciples of the Zenith Dojo gathered on the field.

The Zenith Dojo had expanded and expanded again as Zhang Hong purchased all the surrounding land. By now, it was the size of five stadiums. However, the gathering was still an extremely crowded affair, because the Zenith Dojo had now amassed over five hundred thousand disciples.

The ones standing at the very front of the field were the hunters of Team Zenith. Yang Ze had returned from the third realm; it had only been half a day on Earth, but over three weeks in the third realm, and Yang Ze had recovered fully from his injuries.

The six members of Team Zenith stood straight, their heads erect, setting perfect examples for those behind them. They were followed by Hong Xi, Hong Xiao, Jun Jiuxiao, and Ye Xianchen, and subsequently by the disciples of the Zenith Dojo, ordered by seniority.

The first, second, and third waves of disciples were relatively small, but the number had grown far larger by the sixth, seventh, and eighth waves.

Zhang Lie walked into the field with both hands clasped behind his back, nodding in satisfaction as he observed the disciples standing neatly and waiting for his arrival.

Sun Xiaowu suddenly shouted, "We greet the dojo leader!"

The members of Team Zenith thumped their chests with their fists.

"We greet the dojo leader!" With a shout, all the disciples of the Zenith Dojo repeated Sun Xiaowu's actions.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but marvel.

It had been a long time since the last such gathering, perhaps two or three months by Earth's time, when the disciples of the Zenith Dojo were constructing their own settlement in the first realm.

Zhang Lie walked up to the stage, whereupon Zhang Hong walked over and draped a cloak behind him.

Zhang Lie asked softly, "Who thought of this idea?"

"You mean, what they did just now?"

"It was imposing, impactful," Zhang Lie praised.

"Sun Xiaowu and the others suggested it themselves." She fastened the cloak, then stepped back.

Zhang Lie strode forward, his cloak billowing behind him as he unleashed his aura. The crowd of disciples watched on with bated breath.

Rather than deal with audio equipment, Zhang Lie simply infused genetic energy into his voice. Zhang Lie's voice filled the field. "You must be wondering why I, the dojo leader, have gathered all of you here today."

The disciples of the dojo listened quietly. No one dared speak or even murmur; they were all shocked stiff by Zhang Lie's aura.

"Mars is suffering an unprecedented disaster, an invasion of space bugs beyond anything ever experienced in its history. Over a billion humans are imperiled, and millions are dying day by day. Humanity looks out for itself, and as a part of humanity, I don't intend to let those bugs do as they will any longer. I've decided to lead all of you to clean up this mess!"

Zhang Lie cut straight to the chase, not mentioning how Hong Tianqi had tasked him with this responsibility or how he had observed that the first few batches of disciples were growing lazy and complacent.

"I don't intend to expound on morals. Your life is precious and valuable—and it belongs only to you. Our enemy is a swarm of space bugs that has since invaded half of Mars, and heading to that battlefield will put you in danger. Expect the possibility of death. If you don't want to go with me, turn and leave—give up your status as a member of the Zenith Dojo. I won't stop you. Those who intend to follow me to Mars, hone your blades and prepare to fight for your lives. You have one day to decide."

When Zhang Lie was done with his speech, he did a sharp about-face, then marched off the stage. The members of Team Zenith and Hong Xi's group of four immediately followed behind him.

They headed to a private conference room. Zhang Lie sat down and crossed his legs. "Yang Ze, are you feeling better?"

Yang Ze flexed, revealing a muscled arm. "Yes, Captain! I'm ready to slaughter some bugs with you."

No member of Team Zenith raised an objection to Zhang Lie's words. Either they agreed with his actions, or they trusted him to do what was right.

Zhang Lie turned to Zhang Hong. "Zhang Hong, please prepare a large shuttle. Given what's going on on Mars, we need to be prepared that the wormhole will be unusable. Furthermore, inform all participating disciples to gather at the Chinese spaceport next morning."

"Will there be any punishment for those who don't intend to go?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "There's nothing to punish. Respecting their own lives and choosing to leave the dojo is a commendable decision, but we'll reward all disciples who participate and survive with a superior limit-breaking potion."

Hong Xi's eyes widened. "Master, are you releasing it publicly so early?"

"Only within the dojo, for now."

There were only a rare few disciples in the Zenith Dojo who had imbibed such a potion; not even Zhang Hong had had access to it.

Zhang Lie turned to Hong Xi and the others. "How many sets of ingredients have you been able to collect for the superior limit-breaking potions?"

Hong Xi rolled her eyes. "Master, surely you aren't underestimating your apprentices? Since we have wood spirits in the kingdom of Limit, we don't have to go out hunting for these rare herbs anymore. We've set up an efficient system of farming to produce them in bulk, with the wood spirits' help."

Zhang Lie nodded. "I forgot about this."

Yun Bing had mentioned something similar. Zhang Lie had delegated this task to her, and then conveniently forgotten about it.

Hong Xi reported, "Given the rate at which we're producing these ingredients, we'd be able to supply all of Earth with these potions, let alone the Zenith Dojo."

"Good," Zhang Lie replied, nodding. "As for rewards, we'll go with 1, 10, 100, and 1,000 points for a one-star, two-star, three-star, and four-star bug respectively. As for a fifth-star bug—well, I don't think any of the disciples can take one down themselves."

Zhang Hong transcribed Zhang Lie's words in a virtual interface. She would have to be responsible for implementing and keeping track of this point system.

Zhang Lie continued, "Offer a superior limit-breaking potion for 10,000 points, but only up to one per person. In addition, offer a disaster-grade core for 100,000 points! Let them purchase peak-grade lifeforms for 1,000 points each, and superior-grade lifeforms for 100 points, only redeemable in the second realm."

The Zenith Dojo had given all its disciples a regular and mutated limit-breaking potion for free. The former could be obtained by becoming a disciple, and the latter after a hundred days in the dojo.

Many forces in the Milky Way were able to make such limit-breaking potions on their own by now, and the expense was no big deal.

Hong Xi's eyes widened. "Disaster-grade cores, too? None of us have maxed out our disaster gene fragments yet!"

Yang Ze rolled his eyes. "Hong Xi, aren't you a Zenith Dojo member yourself?"

Hong Xi blinked. "Yes, you're right."