

U. Warlord 931

Chapter 931: A Sumptuous Feast

With the black spirits' main cruiser—and the black spirit king within—destroyed, there was no reason for Zhang Lie to remain on this ruined world. He returned to the palace on the multicolored dragon's back, then flew off into the distance.

At the heart of another ruined world was a huge pyramid. If the black spirits' main cruiser was the size of a small city, then the black pyramid that stood at the heart of the world was the size of a province.

The immense pyramid had been constructed in the center of a number of dead worlds, and was surrounded by a large number of black pyramids—like a sun and the planets that orbited it. These pyramids were what the other nine superior worlds feared, and which they had dedicated enormous amounts of resources toward to barricade them away.

The superior world that had once been home to the death spirits had been devoured and drained of its world's energy, leaving a ruined mess behind.

The death spirit king had built pyramids atop these ruins—or rather, a fleet of battleships. The black pyramids that floated in the air were octahedral in shape, the combination of a pyramid with its inverted counterpart, joined at their base.

Deep within the immense pyramid was a coffin of similarly astounding size. Engraved on the coffin were abstruse diagrams and figures, wreathed in purple flame.

"A shipment of the world's energy has gone missing..."

The death spirit king was making use of a special technique that he had devised himself to communicate with his subordinates via a spiritual link.

Crazed though the death spirit king was, overflowing with ambition and desire though he was, one had to admit that he had the ability to make his ambitions come true.

Of all those aliens who strived to become strong, the death spirit king was notable for his unique and innovative discoveries—in particular his research with the spirit. These discoveries were supported by his complete lack of humanity and unconscionable experiments.

He had created the black spirit and void spirit race; he had been the first to come up with the idea, and then the practice, of converting lifeforms and corpses into black and void spirits.

Among his discoveries was the ability to communicate via a soul link, much like the transceivers that were used within the Milky Way.

The fact that modern electronics didn't work in the dimensional realm meant that this research on the soul was immensely valuable, allowing for swift and efficient communication between even far-flung regions of the realm.

If the king of the death spirits weren't such a madman, he would likely have been venerated throughout the realm.

"The signal in Cluster #23 has vanished. We have reason to believe that our outpost in Cluster #23 has been destroyed," a death spirit reported from within yet another black pyramid.

"This is the third destroyed outpost within two years—equal to the number that was destroyed during the past fifty. Recall all outposts immediately."

"Your majesty, it's too early to wage war! This is far beyond our predictions."

The reason the black spirits had acted so outlandishly was because the death spirits were about to launch their full-scale invasion into the third realm.

After destroying countless small, medium-sized, and large worlds within the third realm, they had amassed copious amounts of world's energy, which they would use to create even more of the black spirits.

Simultaneously, they were whittling away at the forces which would turn against them the moment their ambitious plans were revealed.

"The destruction of Outpost #23 was no coincidence. It's clear that someone has discovered our plans. In order to prevent any more accidents, striking now is the most prudent decision."

"Yes, your majesty!"

The death spirit king's will was conveyed to all his subordinates.

Zhang Lie returned to the scaleman world, whereupon the new king looked expectantly at Zhang Lie.

"How did it go, Master?"

Zhang Lie sniffed. "When have you ever seen me fail at a task?"

The new king was instantly overjoyed—the dark clouds that had covered up the world, the impending threat of the black spirits, those were all gone. This crisis could have overwhelmed his world—but Zhang Lie had saved the day once more.

The new king shouted in excitement, "I'll share the news with everyone immediately!"

"Did you succeed in the task I gave you?"

The king didn't disappoint Zhang Lie. Following the information that Zhang Lie had provided him with, he managed to recover the map fragments that Hong Tianqi had squirreled away. Now, Zhang Lie had a grand total of 13,068 map fragments.

"Master, I'll be going, then." The new king bowed and left with a spring in his step, then used his authority as king of the realm to transmit the news to the entire populace. "The enemies that have invaded our land have been killed! We've successfully defended the world!"

The new king announced a sumptuous banquet, one attended by all the hundred officials of his court. At the banquet, the ninth prince lavishly rewarded the soldiers who had participated in the defense.

The soldiers were ultimately responsible for being able to defend against the onslaught of the black spirits; otherwise, the world wouldn't have lasted until Zhang Lie's return.

Zhang Lie had no choice but to accept his disciple's ardent invitation.

"Please, Master, sit right here!" The new king motioned to his own throne.

Zhang Lie discovered a number of new faces whom he hadn't seen before, clearly officials that the new king had raised to prominence himself.

Upon witnessing that the king had given this stranger the seat of honor, these new officials murmured to each other in hushed voices. The experienced ones sighed, as though recalling what had happened years ago.

A younger official asked, "Uncle, just who is this man?"

The older official beside him replied, "His majesty promoted you only a year ago, so it's normal that you wouldn't know."

"Uncle, who is he? Why would the king grant him the seat of honor?"

The older official sighed. "It's the king's master," he replied, without explaining further.

"His master? But even so—no, that can't be appropriate! No matter how much his majesty respects his master, this subverts the king's authority. Who does this master think he is?! No, I have to say something!"

The older official laughed and shook his head. "If you want to die, go right ahead. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The younger official asked curiously, "Does his majesty respect his teacher that much?"

The older official downed a few cups of wine before shaking his head, his cheeks flushed. "At this point, it's not respect anymore. His majesty venerates his master over all else, even the past king. As long as you don't insult the past king within earshot, his majesty will ignore you—and even if he were to hear it, as long as it's incidental, he'll let the matter slide with no more than a few caustic remarks."

The official downed another cup of wine. "But any who dare to insult his master will be put to death, regardless of status or position, without any chance of defending themselves."

The younger official's eyes widened. "But that..."

The older official lowered his head and downed another cup of wine.

An official by his other side jumped in. "Hah, there's no need to worry about your uncle! He was able to survive two tumultuous reigns spanning over fifty years. He survived the transition of power and subsequently the invasion of the black spirits. Don't you worry, he'll be fine. We've had a miraculous victory today, and there's no way his majesty would sentence anyone to death on such a joyous occasion."

The older official shook his head. "You're quite mistaken. He might not kill anyone today, but he'll remember the matter in his heart. When an opportunity arises, he'll find something or another to justify beheading you."

Chapter 932: The Accidental King

The third official shrunk back. "Truly? But his majesty—no, how could his majesty be so petty? His majesty is generous and benevolent, and he wouldn't kill us just because of a few words!"

Despite the official's words, he refrained from speaking ill of Zhang Lie. Instead, he lowered his head, ate, and downed copious quantities of alcohol.

The older official shook his head. "Don't worry about it too much. His majesty is entirely focused on his master—he won't be listening in on us. The most important thing to his majesty at the moment is to further his relationship with his master, whom he hasn't seen for over two years. If he could, he'd spend every waking moment by his side."

The officials turned toward the throne, where indeed they found the king entirely focused on Zhang Lie.

"Master, please, try this dish! I had it specially prepared for you. I don't know what sort of dishes you like, so I had the imperial chefs make all the same dishes from two years ago..."

The officials' expressions turned rather strange as they watched their king pamper his master. The king hadn't yet married, had he?

Based on historical precedent, a king who had just ascended to the throne would frequently choose to crown a consort in order to secure his political standing, but the ninth prince hadn't needed to do so.

It was unnecessary—the court officials had all been brainwashed by Zhang Lie's mistmeld clam soulshard, and they wouldn't contest his rule.

Furthermore, the king wasn't just the king of the kingdom, but also the king of the realm. He was vested with power by the realm itself, and his rule was unshakable.

None of the officials had seemed to mind that the king didn't take a consort, but upon seeing how close the king seemed to be to his master, their minds were now swirling. Surely their king wasn't interested in men, was he...?

Regardless of their king's sexual inclinations, many of the officials were worried about the continuation and legitimacy of the royal line.

After the banquet, they promised themselves that they would remind the king of his need to appoint a consort.

After all, even a king of the realm couldn't escape the need to be married—in fact, such kings would be pressed more firmly toward marriage.

The official sighed. "Even if we speak badly of the king's master, it's likely he won't pay any attention to our words. He's just had a tremendous victory and been reunited with his master, so he's sure to be feeling exhilarated."

Of course, even so, the official didn't speak badly of the king's master. If any official were to speak badly of the king, the king would only smile wryly.

Compared to their previous king, the current one was rather more relaxed. He didn't mind if any of his officials were to criticize him behind closed doors, but if he heard a single disparaging remark about his master Zhang Lie, the king would immediately become incensed.

The young official asked, even more curious, "Just what caused the king to be so infatuated with his master?"

The older officials all chose to remain silent, and one even changed the topic.

"Shall we discuss something else instead...?"

Upon seeing the change in the officials' attitudes, the young official's curiosity grew without bound. He tugged on his uncle's sleeve.

Eventually, his uncle dragged him to one side. "Actually, his majesty shouldn't have ended up becoming the king of the realm."

The young official's eyes widened. "Uncle, what do you mean? The king shouldn't have become king...?"

The older official continued seriously, "Don't mention this to anyone, you hear? Even if the king himself doesn't mind, someone else surely will—and you might drag yourself into a whole slew of trouble."

The young official's eyes sparkled. "Uncle, could you elaborate? Did his majesty not want to become the king of the realm?"

The current king was a wise and virtuous one, and the world had grown prosperous under his rule. The inhabitants of the world had been able to recover from the crisis of the Jinghun clan, and their king had personally led the charge against the black spirits.

The young official frowned. He simply didn't understand what his uncle meant by his words.

Were there other candidates in the past? As far as the younger official could tell, there could be no better candidate to become king.

The older official sighed. "You misunderstand what I mean. The current king had been an inferior candidate, without the power to ascend to the throne—the only reason he's king now is because his master meddled. Without his master, the current king would be dead in the wilderness.

"While his majesty was still just the ninth prince, he was last among his brothers, and the least likely to become the king of the realm. The two princes who were thought most likely to ascend to the throne were the crown and second princes. The former is a lord in the east, and the latter is now deceased."

"How did the ninth prince end up as king, then?"

The older official replied, "His master snatched him the throne. If not for his master's appearance, all our lives would be different. What's more, the one who managed to stop the black spirits' invasion was his master as well."

The young official snuck a peek at Zhang Lie, his glance betraying his perturbed emotions.

The older official sighed. "While the king was still just the ninth prince, I expected that the crown prince would ascend. After all, the king's situation had been awkward and unfortunate—no one expected that the weak and powerless ninth prince would manage to become king."

If not for the fact that he had helped out the ninth prince once upon a time, he would likely have been stripped of his position as official himself.

In general, those officials who sided with failed candidates might not die, but they surely wouldn't receive the favor of the new king.

Most were stripped of their title and position, then forced to leave the capital, the heart of power. They could become magistrates of a province or town, but never again would they wield great authority.

The fact that the older official had survived the purge and remained at the capital was firstly because he hadn't been too closely tied to the crown prince, and secondly because he had helped the ninth prince while he was still a weakling.

After the ninth prince ascended to the throne, over eighty percent of the officials belonged to the crown prince's faction. Although Zhang Lie had brainwashed all those officials using his mistmeld clam soulshard, the ninth prince couldn't reasonably make use of them all.

In the end, the new king would have to cultivate his own officials; he found it rather awkward to make use of the brainwashed ones that Zhang Lie had handed him.

In order for there to be sufficient positions available for his new officials, the king of the realm had to decide which ones to strip of power and which ones to keep. After all, he could hardly remove everyone who had been brainwashed.

There were many officials in court who had been loyal to the past king for life. It did feel strange to have them brainwashed, but they were truly capable at what they did. If he were to replace all the officials immediately, the new officials would be unable to familiarize themselves with their responsibilities beforehand.

As a result, the king could only retire a few officials at a time, and he had cleaned out about half the former officials two years into his tenure. During this process, he had also grown used to several of the older officials...

Chapter 933: The Envoys' Sudden Appearance

"Master, please, try this dish! I had it specially prepared for you. I don't know what sort of dishes you like, so I had the imperial chefs make all the same dishes from two years ago..."

The king served Zhang Lie himself.

He had no need to worry about the quality of the meat. Zhang Lie had stayed on this world for quite some time, and he had set up a small farm of disaster-grade lifeforms in the world. After his departure, the new king revived that farm.

Although Zhang Lie and the Jinghun clan had taken away the larger part of peak- and superior-grade lifeforms from the world, there was still about ten percent of the original number left.

Most importantly, the world still possessed large numbers of regular- and mutated-grade lifeforms, which had been deemed too weak or worthless to claim.

Over the last two years, the new king had been diligently taking care of the farm, facilitating their evolution and speeding up the time within the farm by a factor of three.

Even without Zhang Lie's specialized attention, it had generated two or three disaster-grade lifeforms and huge numbers of peak- and superior-grade lifeforms. The new king had prepared these lifeforms as a gift in hopes of Zhang Lie's eventual return—and he made use of them now.

The new king sighed as he recollected his memories. "Do you remember when I was just a prince, Master? We had just come back from the royal hunt, and you commanded the kitchen to make so many dishes that we couldn't finish them all. Back then, I didn't have the same position I do now, but I truly did enjoy the time I spent with you."

Both he and Zhang Lie had been eating as much as they could stuff into their mouths, and the new king regretted that he hadn't observed what dishes Zhang Lie consumed most. Otherwise, he would know his master's favorite food.

Zhang Lie had a bite. "It tastes different from before."

The new king frowned. "I specially instructed the imperial chef from two years ago to prepare this feast! For the taste to have changed—"

The king might have been willing to overlook more minor mishaps, but for the chef to have made such a mistake for the king's most important guest...

The king frowned. "I specially instructed the chef to give this feast his best effort because it would be dedicated to you. For him to have made such a rudimentary mistake—is he trying to challenge my authority?!"

Zhang Lie placed his hand on the king's shoulder. "No, no, not like that. The meal tastes even better than before."

The new king relaxed. "As long as you like it, Master."

Zhang Lie sighed. "Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

As though he were still the ninth prince of two years hence, the king lowered his head. "I don't, Master. Would you illuminate me?"

"We're not the same people we used to be, and you're no longer the ninth prince of the past. Back then, you had no power or status to speak of—I'm sure you know this better than I do. Even if you made use of the crown prince's connections to have the imperial kitchen make a feast in your honor, the chefs would only do so half-heartedly."

Zhang Lie had another bite of food. "But now that you're the king of the realm, no longer the transparent slip of a prince you were before, the imperial chefs will naturally hang on your every word. They'll do their best to meet and even exceed your expectations, and it's obvious that the food should taste different. Do you understand?"

The king nodded. "Yes, Master!"

Zhang Lie was using the change in the taste of the food to allude to the change in the prince's identity.

Now that the ninth prince had become king, he would never be able to capture the taste of the food he had shared with his master in a small chamber two years ago, and he wouldn't be able to keep relying on Zhang Lie.

Just then, an announcement came from outside the great hall.

"Envoys of various nearby worlds have arrived!" a voice announced.

Zhang Lie turned to the king. "Have you invited those envoys to take part in the banquet?"

The new king frowned, some worry clouding his gaze. "I only informed them of the deaths of the black spirits. The situation unfolding now is somewhat beyond my expectations."

Zhang Lie had a cup of alcohol. "Send them in, then. I'd like to see what they're up to."

"As you will, Master." The king stood up and waved his hand. "Send the envoys in!"

The palace attendants immediately sprung into action, preparing additional seats, cutlery, and food for the new guests.

Zhang Lie turned to the king. "How do you feel about the neighboring worlds?"

"What do you mean, Master?"

"You'll see once they enter, I suppose," Zhang Lie replied, as though he had gathered their purpose, but he didn't elaborate.

The envoys quickly walked in. Some among them were the kings of their respective worlds, who had fled while the black spirits took over.

Upon entering the great hall, the envoys knelt on one knee. "Congratulations, your majesty! We owe you our heartfelt thanks for destroying the black spirits and saving our worlds. If not for your defense against their incursion, all our worlds would have been ruined."

The king shook his head. "I could hardly claim to have saved your worlds. The person you should thank is my master, not me."

The envoys' eyes glowed as they inspected Zhang Lie.

The king of the realm leading the envoys called out, "You're far too modest, your majesty! If not for you, would your master have made a move to save us?"

"In that case, I'll accept your thanks." The new king nodded. "You have great timing. We were having a celebratory banquet for successfully repelling the invasion, and you're welcome to join us."

The envoys did so.

Zhang Lie asked directly, "I'd like to know why all of you have come here so suddenly."

The envoys' leader replied with a smile, "To thank you and his majesty, honored sir."

Zhang Lie frowned. "In that case, do you grant us license to ignore any requests that you might subsequently make?"

The leader of the envoys was rather taken aback by Zhang Lie's abruptness. The envoys had been intending on flattering the new king before following up with their ultimate goal, but Zhang Lie had disrupted all their plans with this statement.

The leader of the envoys opened his mouth, but didn't know what to say. Things were decidedly not going according to plan.

Zhang Lie had no interest in these rabble. It was evident that they had come with a request in mind, and he had no intention of allowing them to beat around the bush. Directly asking about their intentions would be the best plan of action.

The leader of the envoys looked toward the king, who looked back at them expectantly, without any intention of stopping Zhang Lie. Either he had no intention of going against Zhang Lie's decisions, or he was also hoping that his master would cut to the chase.

In either case, the envoys had to make their claims now.

Chapter 934: A Private Discussion

The king of the realm who led the envoys chuckled and explained, "We've come over here requesting an alliance with your majesty. More accurately, we'd like to subordinate ourselves to your rule."

The new king frowned. "Subordinate? How so?"

The king explained, "We're willing to offer up our own worlds to join up with yours, your majesty, and to become your subordinates."

The officials of court whispered to themselves, shocked by what these envoys were proposing.

"And those other kings whom the rest of you represent—they share the same intentions?" the king clarified.

The envoys nodded. "Your majesty, you've done us a great service by destroying the black spirits. To repay this debt, all we can offer up are our worlds."

"That is our majesty's will," the envoys chorused.

There were a few dozen envoys or so present at the scene. Could all these kings be willing to give up on their worlds and become subordinate to another? There was surely something amiss—this had to be a poisoned gift.

The circumstances behind these kings' sudden desire to give up their worlds were abnormal.

The king mulled over what he had heard. Did these envoys believe they could gain the strength that he had employed to kill these black spirits? No—surely they would be sacrificing too much for the barest idea of a possibility.

Finally, the king thought of one reason the envoys could be acting in such a fashion.

As the officials whispered to themselves, the young official who had commented about Zhang Lie asked his uncle,

"Uncle, do you know what these envoys are thinking? They're willing to give up their worlds...?"

An older official beside him replied confidently, "What else? They've clearly been captivated by our king and kingdom's prowess, and they're willing to submit to us!"

Many of the older officials agreed with this point of view. They puffed out their chests and explained proudly, "These other worlds couldn't do anything against the black spirits, but we were able to vanquish them completely. Wouldn't it be stranger if they didn't want to join us?"

"If a threat like the black spirits emerges again, all these worlds would be in danger. Rather than cower in fear, why not join our world, which has demonstrated its prowess against such foes?"

The young official frowned. "But doesn't it seem strange?"

"What's strange about it? We were the ones who dealt with the black spirits, and these envoys clearly respect our might."

The young official's uncle glanced askance at his peers. "To think there are so many pigheaded fools in the vicinity. Would any of you give up on being a king to become mere nobility?"

The older officials retorted, "They can sense the strength of the scalemen! If they don't submit to us now, we'll conquer them later. It does them no good to resist."

"I don't know where your confidence is coming from. Have you considered the possibility that these envoys have come for some ulterior motive or another?"

Without the intervention of the king's master, the world would have been ruined. Of course, these envoys didn't know that, but it was far more likely that they had made this offer with an ulterior motive in mind.

The younger official pressed, "Uncle, do you know what their motive could be?"

"I'm very glad you haven't been consumed by arrogance and self-confidence, nephew."

The older officials in earshot frowned. "Official Qing, what could you be talking about? Make your assertions clear!"

Official Qing replied serenely, "I should think they're clear enough. I'm calling all of you overconfident."

"You!"

Official Qing shrugged. "Me? What about me? Am I mistaken?"

"Official Qing, don't keep us in the dark. Just what do you know?"

"Have you considered what happens to the worlds that have been taken over by the black spirits? You'll know what these envoys are here to do, then."

The older officials were all stupefied. Many of them had no idea what happened to such worlds; they were simply worried about their own world, not others'. All they knew was that the inhabitants of those worlds had been forced to flee as refugees.

One official asked, "Didn't the black spirits just kidnap all lifeforms in the worlds they took over?"

Now that the black spirits had been destroyed, was there still anything to worry about on this front? What did this have to do with the envoys?

Another official hazarded a guess. "Could they be afraid that there are more black spirits hiding somewhere, or existences on par with the black spirits? Are they hoping that our world will shield them?"

If that were the case, things would become quite a bit more complicated.

The younger official pondered his uncle's question. "I helped a few refugees who escaped to our world find a temporary place to live, and I've spoken with them quite a bit. They told me that, after their worlds were seized by the black spirits, the inhabitants would be kidnapped, and the world would lose its capacity to support life."

The other officials frowned. "What do you mean?"

The young official shrugged. "If I'm remembering correctly, nothing would grow on the worlds that have been taken over by the black spirits. I don't know anything beyond that."

Official Qing nodded approvingly. "Very clever, to have investigated beforehand. I've also done my own research beforehand on these common foes. Allegedly, after the black spirits invade a world, they snatch away its original inhabitants—and the energy that sustains life on it."

"What do you mean? That the black spirits can suck up the world's energy?"

"You can understand it that way. The worlds that the black spirits take over will quickly decay into barrenness, as though they've taken away something fundamental or intrinsic to the world. It's very likely that this change is permanent. Even the defeat of the black spirits wouldn't be able to revive the world."

Although Official Qing had never seen the world's energy for himself, his guess was surprisingly close to the mark.

"I expect that those envoys hope that our world can resolve their problems—that they might be trying to seize that vitality from our world."

The older officials all bore identical looks of shock and dismay. "They're intending to steal from our world?"

"We need to inform his majesty of this information immediately!" The officials began to clamor.

Official Qing smiled. "Don't worry. I expect our king has seen through their ploys."

The king was just about to refuse the offer. "I apologize, but I have no intention to exp—"

Before he could do so, however, Zhang Lie broke him off. "This is too important an affair to treat lightly. We'll have to discuss it in greater detail."

Official Qing blinked in surprise, and even the king turned to Zhang Lie skeptically. Zhang Lie calmly took a sip of alcohol. The king, trusting in his master's plans, agreed.

"Please, allow me some time with my master." The king invoked the authority of the realm to create a private space in which he and Zhang Lie could communicate freely.

Chapter 935: A Disguised Trap

The new king explained, "The fact that they rushed over here immediately after the black spirits were destroyed means that they're particularly invested in becoming part of our kingdom. They might appear to be here to thank us for what we've done, but it's all a ploy!"

"Continue," Zhang Lie instructed.

The new king replied, "The black spirits consumed large quantities of the world's energy from all the worlds that they invaded, leaving those worlds in ruins. Without the world's energy to support them, the soil will be barren and infertile, and it's only a matter of time before all that land turns to

desert. They want to combine their worlds, which have been drained of energy, with ours in order to suck up some of our energy and transfer it to their own!"

"Very good. You identified the issue quickly and accurately. What else?"

"Master, were you already aware of this?"

Zhang Lie stretched out two fingers. "You missed two points. There are envoys representing two different types of worlds present right now. The first has been invaded by the black spirits, leaving few civilians behind, and a world devoid of any energy left. These alien races have had their population wrecked by the black spirits, and they don't have the resources to defend their world any longer."

The king seemed rather upset. "Master, if you're already aware of all this, why did you have me analyze the situation?"

Rather than responding outright, Zhang Lie continued, "The second type of world hasn't had their world's energy drained, but all their soldiers and fighting forces have been killed by the black spirits.

"Many of these worlds no longer have a king of the realm, and they can hardly muster up any resistance whatsoever. Perhaps there are other neighboring worlds around that are eyeing their resources, or enemies that the worlds made in the past that might seek vengeance now."

The black spirits had invaded a large number of worlds, but only to varying extents before they were slaughtered by Zhang Lie. The worlds which had been less affected by the invasion might now take this opportunity to attack their neighbors.

"While the black spirits were wreaking havoc everywhere, none of these worlds had the time to consider invading the others, but now that we've slaughtered the black spirits, these worlds are free to act. Thus, the envoys of these worlds have reached out to us, the world that managed to take down the black spirits, in hopes that they can shelter under our strength."

The king frowned. "Master, what do you propose?"

Zhang Lie asked directly, "Don't you want to take in these worlds?"

The new king replied, "Master, as I've said, these worlds were all invaded by the black spirits. They consumed large quantities of the world's energy from all the worlds that they invaded, leaving those worlds in ruins. Without the world's energy to support them, the soil will be barren and infertile, and it's only a matter of time before all that land turns to desert. They simply want to drain our world of its energy—if there were just two or three such worlds, I would be able to accept it, but there are at least a few dozen!"

The king continued, "Portioning out the world's energy over twenty or thirty worlds—well, at that rate, our world will end up a desert too."

There simply wasn't enough energy to go around, not among so many worlds.

Zhang Lie retrieved a coffin from his dimensional storage. "And if you had this?"

Zhang Lie removed the lid of the coffin to reveal a pool of concentrated world's energy. The will of the world resonated with the king, expressing its desire."

The king's gaze sparkled. "Master, you had so much energy to spare?!"

Zhang Lie replaced the coffin's lid. "I can't give you everything in here—at most half."

The king nodded. "Of course, Master, I understand! It's a precious resource."

Before he became king, the ninth prince didn't know what this world's energy was, nor why it was so precious. That was information he had only learned afterwards.

A world's energy was exceedingly rare, and a medium-sized world could only produce a fistful every year or so.

Once a world lost its energy, it would quickly start the process of desertification. The end of that process was a barren desert—much like the worlds that had been taken over by the black spirits. Not even weeds would grow on such land.

On the other hand, a world with concentrated amounts of energy would be bounteous, lush, and filled with spiritual essence. Its inhabitants would grow more quickly and develop more completely.

The world's energy was a rare and irreplaceable resource, which explained why it was so precious. The amount of energy within Zhang Lie's coffin could spark a war among countless worlds.

The king desired that energy like all others, but he still hesitated. "Would it really be alright to hand me so much of that energy?"

The energy present in Zhang Lie's coffin would be enough to keep the scaleman world thriving for thousands of years, and even half of that was an immeasurably precious fortune. Despite his desire, the king couldn't help but be wary. It was too precious a gift.

Zhang Lie caressed the king's head.

"What are you talking about? You're my disciple, after all."

At any rate, Zhang Lie had obtained this energy from the black spirits. Acquiring this fortune had been trivial, and Zhang Lie didn't feel particularly upset about giving it away.

He smiled. "Furthermore, I've already given you far more than the equivalent of half a coffin's worth of world's energy. What's some more?"

The king sighed. Zhang Lie had truly taught him far too much than he had any obligation to.

"This is why I'm unable to be independent, Master—I'll always act like a child in front of you."

Zhang Lie cocked his head. "You don't want this energy, then?"

The king patted himself on the chest. "No, I do! Thank you for your generosity, Master."

The king unraveled the private chamber, and his face turned serious again. Zhang Lie and the king returned to the great hall, and the king faced the envoys.

The envoys were visibly nervous; they glanced at each other. This was a matter that could affect the life and death of their world.

The king replied seriously, "I accept your request."

The envoys' eyes widened. They smiled with unbridled joy. "Thank you, your majesty!"

The envoys had received what they had come for. Official Qing was very confused, but he didn't speak—but the other officials began to panic, thinking that Zhang Lie had misled the king.

A white-haired official stepped away from his seat and bowed to the king. "Your majesty, if I may, I think it unwise to follow along with these envoys' suggestions so blindly. May we convene another session of court to discuss it?"

Of course, the official was wise enough not to point out the mistake directly. After all, the king had already agreed to the plan. Pointing out flaws in it now would irk both the king and the envoys.

The envoys all perked up, worried that the king would change his mind—but they had no reason to worry.

The king shook his head. "I understand what I'm doing. This deal will proceed."

The official eyed Zhang Lie suspiciously. "Your majesty, your master has saved our world more than once, but for such an important matter to be decided without further deliberation with the officials of court is a little..."

Chapter 936: The World's Energy

The king nodded. "Of course, Master, I understand! It's a precious resource."

Before he became king, the ninth prince didn't know what this world's energy was, nor why it was so precious. That was information he had only learned afterwards.

A world's energy was exceedingly rare, and a medium-sized world could only produce a fistful every year or so.

Once a world lost its energy, it would quickly start the process of desertification. The end of that process was a barren desert—much like the worlds that had been taken over by the black spirits. Not even weeds would grow on such land.

On the other hand, a world with concentrated amounts of energy would be bounteous, lush, and filled with spiritual essence. Its inhabitants would grow more quickly and develop more completely.

The world's energy was a rare and irreplaceable resource, which explained why it was so precious. The amount of energy within Zhang Lie's coffin could spark a war among countless worlds.

The king desired that energy like all others, but he still hesitated. "Would it really be alright to hand me so much of that energy?"

The energy present in Zhang Lie's coffin would be enough to keep the scaleman world thriving for thousands of years, and even half of that was an immeasurably precious fortune. Despite his desire, the king couldn't help but be wary. It was too precious a gift.

Zhang Lie patted the king on the shoulder. "You're my disciple. It's only natural that I would give you gifts."

At any rate, Zhang Lie had obtained this energy from the black spirits. Acquiring this fortune had been trivial, and Zhang Lie didn't feel particularly upset about giving it away.

He smiled. "Furthermore, I've already given you far more than the equivalent of half a coffin's worth of world's energy. What's some more?"

The king sighed. Zhang Lie had truly taught him far too much than he had any obligation to.

"This is why I'm unable to be independent, Master—I'll always act like a child in front of you."

Zhang Lie cocked his head. "You don't want this energy, then?"

The king patted himself on the chest. "No, I do! Thank you for your generosity, Master."

The king unraveled the private chamber, and his face turned serious again. Zhang Lie and the king returned to the great hall, and the king faced the envoys.

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The official eyed Zhang Lie suspiciously. "Your majesty, your master has saved our world more than once, but for such an important matter to be decided without further deliberation with the officials of court is a little..."

The king glared. "Do you intend to imply that I, the king of the realm, don't have the authority to handle matters pertaining to the world?"

"No, no, of course not, your majesty!" the official hastily replied. "I simply wish for more prudence. It would be unwise to blindly listen to one-sided advice."

The king shook his head and waved a hand at the official to dismiss him. "Enough. The matter is settled."

The official was about to continue speaking when Official Qing stepped forward and interrupted the official. "Your majesty, we trust your decisions. None of us would dare countermand your command; he was simply being overly worried."

Official Qing dragged the unwilling official back to his seat.

The official whispered to him unhappily, "Official Qing, just what are you doing? Weren't you the one who mentioned that these envoys are here hoping to steal our world's energy?"

Official Qing nodded. "I did say that."

"In that case, why are you preventing me from speaking up? It's clear that his majesty is being hoodwinked!"

Official Qing rolled his eyes. "Do you still think that his majesty is the child he used to be?"

The official frowned. "No, of course not, but he is still young. Although he inherited the past king's will to become the king of the realm, he's still an inexperienced ruler, and it wouldn't be unusual for him to miss such a subtlety."

Although all the officials had been hypnotized by Zhang Lie's mistmeld clam soulshard, Zhang Lie hadn't turned them all into puppets.

As time passed, although their mental conditioning wouldn't fade, their own thoughts would adapt to that conditioning. They would reframe arguments in order to convince themselves that their thoughts were truly theirs.

The official replied seriously, "As an official that the king allowed to remain in court, I naturally have to serve him well and point out flaws in his reasoning. Only then will I have done my duty to this kingdom."

Official Qing rolled his eyes. "Indeed? You turned a blind eye to the king while he was still a prince, and you've never before cared for his well-being. Do you now claim to be thinking of what's best for him?"

The official replied seriously, "Neglecting the king while he was a prince was a mistake on our part. It's precisely because of that mistake that we need to ensure that his majesty doesn't stray from the proper path now."

Official Qing rolled his eyes. "Don't worry. Even without you, his majesty would be a virtuous ruler."

"I have no doubt about that."

Official Qing sighed. "His majesty is more intelligent than you give him credit for. He understood the envoys' purpose immediately, and he was going to decline their offer before his discussion with his master."

The official frowned. "You mean, the king's master—surely he's not trying to plot against the kingdom?"

"If the king's master wanted to hurt him, he wouldn't have helped the king ascend to the throne, and neither would he have saved our world. He was able to deal with the threat of the black spirits alone; he could very well overpower the king by force."

There was a clear disparity in power between the king and his master; Zhang Lie wouldn't have to scheme if he truly wanted to get rid of the king.

The king valued his master even more than the world he governed. The officials suspected that, were the king's master to request control over the world, the king might hesitate, but would quickly proffer it gladly.

Official Qing shrugged. "All you need to understand is that the king's master won't hurt him. The fact that the king suddenly changed his mind after a discussion with his master means that he must

have come up with an even more sophisticated approach to deal with the envoys. As such, there's nothing to worry about—we'll see how everything unfolds."

Chapter 937: I Picked It Up

Zhang Lie portioned half the world's energy he had obtained to the new king and instructed him, "Don't merge this world with the others for some time."

"How long do I need to wait?"

"Until the start of the war."

"The war?"

"The war against the death spirits!"

The king frowned, then asked perceptively, "Is there some relationship between the death spirits and the black spirits?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "To be precise, the black spirits are the vanguard sent out by the death spirits. Soon, there will be a war that consumes the entirety of the three thousand worlds. Small worlds will be crushed to dust, and even medium-sized worlds will be hard-pressed to survive. Large worlds could be doomed by just a single wrong move."

Zhang Lie's descriptions alone highlighted the enormity of the struggle that they would face.

"However, this war will also consume the attention of the superior worlds around—presenting you with the best opportunity for your world's evolution."

"Do I not want their attention? What would they do?"

Zhang Lie patiently explained, "The superior worlds don't want any competitors—they won't allow the formation of new superior worlds."

The king nodded, fully trusting in Zhang Lie's words.

Zhang Lie stood up. "Thank you for inviting me to the banquet. It's past time for me to go, I think."

The king barely refrained from holding his master back. "Will you be leaving now, Master?"

"There are still a lot of tasks waiting for me to deal with, unfortunately."

"I don't know when I'll ever see you again, Master..."

Zhang Lie smiled. "While I remain in the third realm, there are plenty of opportunities for us to meet."

The king dipped his head. When Zhang Lie first left, the king had never expected to see him again—but two years later, they had a chance meeting.

The king asked, "Master, where in the three thousand worlds are you located? Even if I don't have the opportunity or time to meet you in person, I hope I'll at least be able to send you a few letters."

"No need for that—we'll meet each other again if it's fated to be."

Zhang Lie stepped out of the hall, his back to the king, as he waved a hand.

With a sharp whistle, the five-colored dragon flew over. Zhang Lie leapt up onto its back and into the palace it bore. The dragon flapped its wings and flew toward a wormhole out of the scaleman world.

The king walked to the entrance to the hall and waved at Zhang Lie as he departed. "Goodbye, Master!"

The day Zhang Lie left, the death spirits made their move, breaking free of the barricade that the superior worlds had erected around them and setting up the stage for a war of the worlds. The other superior worlds quickly received news of what had happened and convened an emergency meeting.

As soon as Zhang Lie returned to the draconian world, he received a message from the Yeluo chieftain, who had made a breakthrough in the development of the peak limit-breaking potion. War would quickly break out as a result of the death spirits' actions, and if the members of Team Zenith could obtain peak limit fragments by then, it would be a great boost to their strength.

That said, Zhang Lie feared neither the other superior worlds nor the death spirits.

He rushed to the Yeluo laboratory and found the Yeluo chieftain immediately. "You're finally back, your majesty!"

"How are the results?" Zhang Lie asked excitedly.

"I've managed to make a few vials of the potion with reduced potency. For safety considerations, however, I think it'll be necessary to consume these vials in conjunction with the upgraded restorative made from Zhou Ying's cells."

"Excellent news. I'll summon the members of Team Zenith back immediately."

He instructed the warlords under his control to find the members of Team Zenith and bring them back, while he headed to the farm that had been set up in the draconian world. During this period of time, Zhu had been busy cultivating disaster-grade lifeforms, but monarch-grade lifeforms were clearly far harder to produce.

Zhu sighed. "Zhang Lie, am I useless? I can't even help you with such a simple task..."

Zhang Lie caressed Zhu's sky-blue hair. "No, no such thing. If monarch-grade lifeforms were so easy to cultivate, the third realm would have been full of them by now. Even Gold Comet only evolved to monarch-grade after being with me for almost the entirety of my stay in the third realm."

Zhu stuck out her tongue. "Thank you for your consolation, Zhang Lie. I feel quite a bit better."

"I have some special feed for the lifeforms," Zhang Lie added, retrieving the coffin from his storage-type soulshard.

Zhu seemed bewildered. "Zhang Lie, what's with the coffin?"

"Look at what's inside." Zhang Lie smiled mysteriously, then removed the lid of the coffin.

As he did so, the world's energy shone so brightly that a pillar of rainbow light shot up into the sky. The phenomenon drew the will of the world's attention at once, and the genetic lifeforms in the farm all began to clamor. Struck by desire, they drew close to the coffin—until Zhang Lie glared at them.

The draconian sage teleported over and was amazed by what he found. "All this world's energy? But from where?"

He looked at the pillar of light, almost drooling at its intensity, before turning to Zhang Lie. "You're causing trouble again..."

As he looked into the coffin and found enough world's energy to power his world six times over, he frowned. "You pillaged the world's energy from the worlds you conquered?"

The draconian sage was aware of the fact that the hunters of the Milky Way had been invading and seizing all the nearby worlds. They now had at least fifty worlds under their control, and many neighboring worlds surrendered after seeing how completely the Worldpact Coalition was destroyed.

If Zhang Lie were to combine all these worlds into one, he would be able to create an unparalleled superior world, the likes of which had never before been seen. However, Zhang Lie had no intention of doing so.

Precisely what he was planning, the draconian sage couldn't tell. To the draconian sage, Zhang Lie was a strong and mysterious hunter, and trouble always followed in his footsteps. He was a mystery, but the draconian sage didn't intend to unravel it—he wasn't sure he could deal with what lay within.

The draconian sage scowled. "How many worlds did you destroy?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "Do I look like a tyrant that would destroy worlds out of nowhere?"

Very much so! the draconian sage wanted to say, but Zhang Lie had never done so.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "I simply picked up all this world's energy."

Picked up...? The draconian sage pressed, "Please tell me where you managed to 'pick up' so much energy."

He certainly didn't believe that it would be readily available to be picked up; otherwise, the kings of the third realm wouldn't have to worry about depleting this rare resource...

Chapter 938: Zhu's Evolution

The draconian sage turned again to the coffin brimming with world's energy. He swallowed a gulp of saliva and sidled up to Zhang Lie.

"Zhang Lie, would you be willing to share some of this energy with me? Just a fraction—a tenth, no, a twentieth would be sufficient!"

Zhang Lie smiled. "Of course. We're allies, aren't we? You've taken care of the humans for so long, Sage—it would be my pleasure to share it with you. It would even be fair to give you all this energy, but I do need it for some of my plans, so I can't share too much. Will a quarter of what's here suffice?"

Many of Zhang Lie's plans had been facilitated by the draconian sage—the construction of the disaster-grade farm, the Yeluo research laboratory, among others.

Furthermore, the draconian sage had been instrumental in helping him collect disaster gene fragments. Considering all these factors, Zhang Lie was more than happy to hand this world's energy to the sage.

The draconian sage, who would have been happy just to receive a twentieth of the world's energy present in the coffin, a rare and precious resource within the third realm,

suddenly found himself with a windfall—the equivalent of the total energy a peak large world would possess. The draconian sage's eyes lit up in shock and excitement. "Haha, you truly are a friend of the draconians!"

Zhang Lie turned to Zhu. "Zhu, you snuck into the third realm without receiving the blessing of the realm. This world's energy will be able to shore up your foundations—take a portion for yourself, and feed the rest to the disaster-grade lifeforms."

The draconian sage looked toward Zhu enviously.

Zhu didn't realize how precious the world's energy was, and she was happy to accept a gift from Zhang Lie. "Thank you, Zhang Lie."

The draconian sage retrieved a quarter of the world's energy and had the will of the draconian world absorb it. The moment it did so, the world suddenly seemed more vibrant. The world itself was rejuvenated; the lifeforms of the world could feel themselves growing more comfortable, although they didn't know the reason as to why.

Zhu dipped a hand into the coffin and looked at the rainbow-colored energy cupped in her palm, as beautiful as any jewel. As she did so, strands of energy were absorbed into her body.

Zhu, who had dropped to the level of a peak-grade lifeform after stowing away into the third realm, was infused with the world's energy. The restrictions placed on her growth loosened, and dark clouds suddenly appeared in the sky.

Zhu hadn't received the second realm's blessing because of her unorthodox route into the third. Perhaps because the will of the third realm had noticed the intruder, or perhaps because Zhu had simply reached the requisite threshold of power to spawn a trial, a huge bolt of lightning struck from the heavens. Zhang Lie hurriedly replaced the lid of the coffin and stored the coffin away, just in case the world's energy was sucked up by the lightning.

He didn't intend to shield Zhu from the trial, which was part of the natural process of her ascension. Of course, if Zhu were struggling to survive it, he would step it then.

Zhu soaked in the lightning, her genes being activated under its pressure. The world's energy that she had absorbed elevated her status as a lifeform and strengthened her body.

Once Zhu's body charred under the lightning, Zhang Lie made his move. Allowing Zhu to remain within the bolt of lightning further would only injure her. He struck out with his palm, dissipating the thundercloud above her.

As though its authority were being challenged, the thundercloud seemed to grow darker. A scorching white bolt of lightning exploded from the cloud and struck at him, but Zhang Lie didn't mind. He retaliated with a punch of his own.

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

A huge wave soared into the air. As Zhang Lie punched forward, the fish slammed its huge tail on the ground and sent a torrent of water surging toward the sky.

The pale-blue genetic energy rippled through the air with unceasing momentum. Like an enraged black dragon, it struck the lightning and shattered it.

The lightning seeped through the air, infusing it with a static charge that made the onlookers' hair rise. Zhu was pulled into an extradimensional space infused with energy and subsequently sent back to the third realm, where she looked to have aged a few years in a matter of minutes.

Her teenage exterior had matured into that of a young woman. Her eyes were dazzling, as though they mirrored the very galaxy itself.

Zhang Lie and the draconian sage were both able to defend against her charm, but anyone else who saw her would be struck dumb.

Her wavy hair unfurled in an invisible wind as her status as a lifeform shot up two straight levels into disaster-grade. The restrictions imposed on her as a stowaway had vanished, and she was free to grow stronger again.

Zhang Lie nodded with satisfaction. "Very good."

When Gold Comet was still Red Comet, it had absorbed a bit of the world's energy, which had elevated its abilities and attributes. Zhang Lie wanted to see if it would have any impact on Zhu and the other stowaways—and the experiment was clearly a complete success.

Zhu hadn't understood what the world's energy was before, but after sensing the benefits that she had received from it, she understood just how precious it was—a miraculous substance that could unlock her future growth.

She beamed at Zhang Lie in thanks.

Zhang Lie instructed, "Split the remaining world's energy among the disaster-grade lifeforms."

The effect of the world's energy on these lifeforms was equivalent to that on Gold Comet. After absorbing the energy, they all began to evolve.

Zhang Lie left Zhu to tend to the lifeforms as he returned to the city, teleported back to Earth, and told Hong Tianqi that he had found his stash of map fragments. Almost as an aside, he asked about the situation on Mars.

In general, Hong Tianqi wasn't someone that could be contacted at any time. As the highest authority of the world federation, his schedule had to be unbelievably packed—but Zhang Lie's call immediately connected.

Hong Tianqi asked, "Is something the matter?"

"Aren't you supposed to be inordinately busy? How did you have time in your schedule for little old me?"

Hong Tianqi chuckled dryly. "Little old you? What an understatement."

Hong Tianqi had responded so quickly not because he was free, but because Zhang Lie was one of the highest-priority people he would do his best to clear time in his schedule for, unless there really were a time-sensitive task at hand that he needed to accomplish at that very moment.

"I've found the map fragments—thank you."

"Ah, those fragments? Good to hear it. Earth has a few too, and I'll send them to you via Chen Fan."

"How's the situation on Mars now?"

"Thanks to the help of the Zenith Dojo, everything seems to be going back to normal. The last of the bugs should be cleared away in no time."

"Good, good. In that case, I'll hang up now."

"Hold on!" Hong Tianqi shouted. "I have a question for you."

"What is it?"

"What's up with this Potion #3? Why have I never heard of it before?"

Chapter 939: The Team Assembles

"Ah, you heard?" Zhang Lie asked, though he wasn't particularly surprised.

Hundreds of thousands of the disciples from the Zenith Dojo had gone to Mars with Zhang Lie, the majority of which were Chinese. Even if none of the disciples were spies that Hong Tianqi had installed in the dojo, it was inevitable that word of the prizes from the Martian defense would spread. Hong Tianqi, who was in a position of power, would easily find out about the existence of Potion #3.

Hong Tianqi asked, "Were you able to develop Potion #3 this quickly?"

The limit-fragment research laboratory sponsored by the four prime races had its pick of all the talent and resources the galaxy had to offer, but its only success to date had been with variants of Potion #2, for mutated limit fragments that were suitable for various races in the galaxy.

Meanwhile, despite being a lone, independent researcher, Zhang Lie was far ahead of any other group—he had already come up with Potion #3, for superior limit fragments.

Hong Tianqi had expected that it would take at least ten years before research into superior limit fragments bore fruit, even with all the resources of the galaxy at one's disposal. He had some familiarity with these limit-breaking potions, and he knew that these limit fragments represented taller and taller walls for a hunter's ascension.

However, by announcing that Potion #3 would be available for all disciples who participated in the bug hunt, Zhang Lie had revealed that he had both succeeded in producing Potion #3 and begun its mass production.

Hong Tianqi was shocked beyond belief. In his effort to verify that all this was legitimate, he even specially sent a trusted subordinate to Mars to investigate this rumor.

The subsequent investigation vindicated the rumor. There were reports of disciples from the Zenith Dojo who had exchanged their points for such potions, consumed them, and obtained limit fragments as a result.

After a momentary period of shock, Hong Tianqi was relieved.

Zhang Lie had been at the forefront of limit fragment research from the beginning. He had started by demonstrating how a hunter could obtain regular limit fragments, and he had now developed a superior limit-breaking potion—all by himself.

Hong Tianqi had to admit that Zhang Lie had consummate skill, which no other in the galaxy was able to match. Not only that, his other accomplishments had been equally shocking. Zhang Lie had discovered disaster gene fragments, destroyed the sura in the second realm, and founded the kingdom of Limit.

Each of these accomplishments was astounding; it was as though Zhang Lie was traveling through a timeline far ahead of the rest of the hunters.

Zhang Lie nodded. "I did manage to discover a recipe for it, but I don't have enough stockpiled herbs to supply them to the entire galaxy."

Hong Tianqi smiled. "I know it must be difficult to mass produce them at the moment, but as for China—"

Zhang Lie blinked. "Even as the highest authority of the world federation, you're still concerned about China?"

Hong Tianqi quirked his lips. "Regardless of my position, I'm a citizen of China—now and always."

Zhang Lie inclined his head. "I can't refuse you, Hong Tianqi. I'll send a portion of the potions to China the moment I manage to produce them in bulk."

Hong Tianqi thought for a moment. "I'll satisfy any request you have—anything you want."

Zhang Lie sighed. "As if I'm not a citizen of China myself! I'm not holding out because I want you to sweeten the deal—I simply can't provide you with these potions at the moment."

"I'll thank you in advance, then."

"See you soon." Zhang Lie hung up on Hong Tianqi and returned to the third realm. Because of the difference in the rate at which time passed between Earth and the third realm, a few hours had passed there, and the members of Team Zenith had all received Zhang Lie's summons and headed back to the draconian world.

The draconian sage teleported Zhang Lie right to their side.

Yang Ze asked, "Captain, did you summon us back for some reason?"

"For three reasons. I'll discuss them right now," Zhang Lie explained.

The members of Team Zenith listened seriously. They knew that Zhang Lie wouldn't call them back for no reason, especially when they were currently spearheading an invasion.

"First, I've successfully prepared Potion #4—peak limit fragments—for all of you."

The members of Team Zenith gaped. "What?! Peak limit-breaking potions, already?"

They were shocked, but not as much as Hong Tianqi. They had already consumed superior limit-breaking potions well before they were made known to the public, and it didn't seem particularly

exceptional to them that Zhang Lie had already managed to refine the next potion in the series. Zhang Lie was Zhang Lie, after all.

Zhang Lie was, in fact, the most surprised of them all. "Didn't you know about this? I expected Zhou Ying to have told you."

Sun Mengmeng frowned. "What does this have to do with Zhou Ying?"

"Zhou Ying's already consumed Potion #4."

"What?!" All the members of Team Zenith beside Zhou Ying were stupefied.

Zhang Lie continued, "Zhou Ying was the first to consume and test this potion. Zhou Ying, didn't you mention it to the others?"

Zhou Ying stuck out her tongue. "I wanted to make it a surprise."

"You rascal—you just wanted to see our shocked expressions!"

Sun Mengmeng suddenly grabbed Zhou Ying and began to tickle her waist, causing her to break out in irrepressible laughter. She shouted, "Stop, Mengmeng, I surrender, I surrender!"

Zhang Lie coughed a few times before Sun Mengmeng finally let go of her. Yang Ze asked, "Zhou Ying, how did it feel to ingest the potion?"

Zhou Ying patted down her mussed up hair and clothes. "My experience was rather unusual. It was very much like consuming Potion #3, for superior limit fragments. I received huge increases to my strength, constitution, framework, and techniques—but not only that, I was able to perceive a mysterious power, which our captain called the power of karma."

Sun Mengmeng frowned. "Karmic power? Does something so mysterious really exist?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "The first hunters must have thought the dimensional realm mysterious, but by our time, it's a scientific phenomenon we can explain to some extent. The more you familiarize yourself with mystery, the less mysterious it becomes."

Yang Ze nodded. "The same way people from ancient times would be perplexed by our transceivers and airships, or even microwaves and computers."

In order to avoid destroying the Yeluo research laboratory, the members of Team Zenith headed to the black desert before consuming the peak limit-breaking potions.

The Yeluo chieftain handed each of them a restorative. "While consuming the limit-breaking potion, if you feel unwell at any time, drink this potion immediately."

"What potion is this?" Sun Mengmeng asked.

"It's the upgraded form of the restorative I devised from Zhou Ying's cells," the Yeluo chieftain explained.

"But, Chieftain, didn't you mention that you already reduced the potency of these limit-breaking potions?"

The Yeluo chieftain shrugged. "I haven't been able to test out the potions myself. The herbal ingredients were introduced at reduced potency, but there are factors that I can't account for within these potions, and accidents might occur."

Chapter 940: The Metamorphosis

Yang Ze frowned. "But aren't we just lab rats, then?"

The Yeluo chieftain scoffed, "What do you mean, lab rats? You're making a noble sacrifice in the name of biological research!"

"So we are lab rats," Yang Ze surmised.

Everyone turned to Zhang Lie, who replied, "We've relied on the Yeluo clan to make our potions for years now, and we know that they're reliable and ingenious potionmakers. Zhou Ying had an accident when she ingested the first test run of the potion, but she's standing right there now, hale and hearty."

The Yeluo chieftain continued, "I've prepared safety contingencies. All of you can count on me."

The members of Team Zenith considered the Yeluo chieftain's words somewhat skeptically.

"Even if you don't trust my skills, surely you'll at least trust his majesty. If anything goes wrong during the absorption process—for example, if your brain turns to mush, your cells explode, your body becomes paralyzed—as long as those things don't happen instantaneously, his majesty will surely be able to revert those effects. Of course, if he can't do so, then I simply have to wish you luck..."

The members of Team Zenith grew even more wary upon hearing the Yeluo chieftain's words.

"Ah, I don't care anymore! I trust the captain—the road to strength is always fraught with danger, and if we're unwilling to take even a bit of risk, we'll never grow stronger! We're fortunate enough to have our captain paving the way for us!" Sun Mengmeng downed the potion in one gulp.

She felt as though she was experiencing the blood ants' genetic technique, [Bloodbath]. As the potent effects of the potion surged through her body, she felt as though she were exuding heat from every pore on her skin.

Sweat poured down her back. Sun Mengmeng was drenched within moments. Her crystalline body began to glow before turning black; black flames had erupted all over her body.

Sun Mengmeng's face took on the color of a boiled prawn.

Considering her framework was fire-attuned, Sun Mengmeng was able to bear the extreme heat—but then, energy frothed and roiled from within her body.

Energy rushed out of her body and formed a hurricane around her. The black glass beneath her cracked, and the entire draconian world began to shudder.

The members of Team Zenith, alarmed, all stepped back. Sun Xiaowu asked in concern, "Captain, my sister will be alright, won't she?"

Zhou Ying replied, "Sun Mengmeng's current condition is much like mine was when I consumed the potion, but her effects seem milder than mine."

Crystalline powder spread through the air. Huge amounts of energy gathered by Sun Mengmeng's heart, and she couldn't help but spit out a mouthful of blood. The blood that left her body evaporated instantly, revealing just how hot her body had become.

The fire-attuned genetic in her body rampaged, wrapping her body up in purplish-black flame. As the potion's energy combined with that in her body, the flames grew ever stronger.

"Consume the restorative!" the Yeluo chieftain shouted.

Sun Mengmeng could feel her body's condition deteriorating by the minute. She immediately consumed the restorative, as the Yeluo chieftain had urged.

The moment she did so, a huge wave of vitality flooded her body from the inside, regenerating her cells swiftly. Fortunately, the Yeluo chieftain had significantly reduced the potency of the limit-breaking potion, or Sun Mengmeng's body would have been unable to overcome the strain.

The consumption of the restorative bypassed the immediate danger that Sun Mengmeng had been facing. Subsequently, golden and black threads accumulated around her, forming a cocoon that trapped the purplish-black flame within.

The flames glowed so brightly that Sun Mengmeng's figure could be seen within the cocoon. It was like a heart, one which beat to the rhythm of her breaths. As the flames within the cocoon grew brighter and brighter, they finally burned the cocoon away.

The purplish-black flames turned completely dark as the cocoon was burnt to a crisp. They turned on themselves, eventually forming a thick layer of what seemed like an eggshell.

As the eggshell cracked, a phoenix wreathed in gold and black flame emerged and soared through the air, lighting up the sky and casting reflections over each shard of glass.

The phoenix slowly descended from the heavens and landed by Zhang Lie's side, morphing back into the form of the young woman Sun Mengmeng. Sun Mengmeng's purplish-black hair fluttered in the wind like flames. Her eyes burned with inner light.

Sun Xiaowu asked, "Sister, are you alright?"

Sun Mengmeng reined in her aura. "I feel far better than I expected. The benefit of these peak limit fragments is immense."

Yang Ze asked, "Did you sense this supposed karmic power?"

Sun Mengmeng nodded. "I was able to witness a few golden and black threads. If I'm not mistaken, these are lines of fate and karma, the likes of which our captain and Zhou Ying have discussed. As to how to control them, well, that's something I still have to study."

With Sun Mengmeng as the first lab rat, the other members of Team Zenith were emboldened to down their own potions.

They each formed cocoons around their body. Yang Ze's glowed with resplendent, ethereal blue light, as though he were not of the physical world. Within the cocoon, one could see an entire ocean, the tides rising and falling as they caused the world to quake.

Pale blue genetic energy wrapped around the cocoon, which formed a crystalline bud. The space surrounding the cocoon calmed down, but the interior of the cocoon grew even more charged. The ocean within the cocoon began to froth—clearly, after absorbing the potion's energy, Yang Ze's evolution was starting in earnest.

Sun Xiaowu's cocoon glowed with golden light reminiscent of a sun. Runes emerged over its surface, and golden scales seemed to be coalescing into existence within the cocoon. However, the specifics of what was going on couldn't be identified due to the brightness of the light.

Li Feng's cocoon was much like Sun Xiaowu's, covered with a thick silvery-white layer of light, as though silver were woven through the black and gold threads. Dragon howls could be heard from within the cocoon, as though a whole world of dragons had formed within it. However, the light prevented one from looking inward.

Fang Yi's cocoon was interwoven with silver and gray threads, and its interior was warped by wind and storm. The cocoon shook perceptibly. Within it, a dragon and a tiger were battling with each other, or perhaps merging together. The two discordant forces circled each other time and again as Fang Yi's mastery over time bloomed. The hands of a clock grew out of the karmic threads. With each revolution of those hands, a loop of time wrapped around Fang Yi.

Fang Yi's cocoon was clearly the most advanced among the members of Team Zenith. The power of time and karma were interacting with each other and evolving into something novel, which even Zhang Lie hadn't seen before. He was very curious as to just how much Fang Yi would grow...