

U. Warlord 341

Chapter 341: Stubborn Fools

The poisonous bugs that the Yeluo were fighting were purplish-green and looked a little like supersized Earth beetles. The beetles were wingless and couldn't fly, but they were as large as cars, their carapaces metallic, shiny, and lustrous. Their mandibles were as sharp as honed blades. They gave off a faint miasma.

The fighting was intense. Zhang Lie glanced around and concluded that, even if the Yeluo fighters could win, they would likely have to give up the village that they were protecting. They were holding firmly against the poisonous bugs, but the bugs swarmed without end from the depths of the valley. Either the fighters would run out of stamina and perish to the bugs, or they would be forced to run off, leaving their village to be invaded.

"It looks like we'll have to help. Hong Xi, cover me with your fan and arrows." Zhang Lie focused on the gigantic golden beetle that led the invasion, whose body seemed to be made of pure gold. This was undoubtedly their leader.

Hong Xi materialized her fan and began to wave it around in long, flowing sweeps, summoning a gigantic hurricane in the very center of the swarm of beetles and disorienting them. In the middle of the confusion, Zhang Lie vanished in mid-air.

When the beetles noticed the sudden attack from the flank, part of the swarm separated and headed straight for Hong Xi. She continued waving her fan, shooting out thousands of wind spears that did noticeable damage to bugs and struck holes in their carapaces.

Suddenly, a pillar of genetic energy shot into the sky. The very air trembled; a river of the underworld appeared on the battlefield, drowning a large number of bugs with its current.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" A horde of dragons appeared in midair, swallowing up the sky. They dove down on the bugs and exploded once they reached their targets, swallowing them up in explosions of black flame.

Even the golden beetle in the very center was affected by the explosions.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" A gigantic blood dragon emerged from among the hundreds of black dragons, clawing bloody gouges in the golden beetle's carapace, then flipping it over with a sweep of its tail. It roared as it ascended to the skies, then dove down and pierced the beetle's body.

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

Upon its death, the remainder of the swarm fell into disarray. A large fraction of the bugs left immediately, and the Yeluo tribesmen immediately counterattacked.

Zhang Lie had predicted that the beetle's strength lay largely in defense and its ability to command a whole swarm of insects, without much offensive power on its own. His absurd and staggering growth made the beetle look far weaker in comparison.

After the Yeluo tribesmen drove off the bugs, they turned warily toward Zhang Lie and Hong Xi.

Hong Xi frowned and crossed her arms. "Why do you all look so hostile? We just helped you out!"

The leader of the Yeluo fighters strode forward. "Who knows what you want from us? Who are you? What are you doing in Yeluo lands?"

Zhang Lie raised both his arms high up in the sky. "We harbor no malicious intentions. I simply have matters I wish to discuss with the Yeluo clan."

"With the Yeluo clan?" The supposed leader turned to one of the fighters standing beside him.

"Zhan Qing, do we need to report this to the clan head?"

Zhan Qing smiled and considered the two hunters. "You're humans, aren't you? Invaders to the second realm, as weak as stinkbugs?"

The other Yeluo fighters began murmuring among themselves.

"So these are what humans look like! Indeed, they're similar to monkeys."

"Apparently they're livestock reared by the sura..."

"Is that so? Then I imagine they must taste rather good!"

"If they're really so weak, how about we give them a try?"

The Yeluo fighters all suddenly felt ravenous.

Zhan Qing waved an arm. "There's no reason for us to hold any sort of conversation with weak humans like you."

Hong Xi frowned. "Not even after helping you all in times of crisis? If we're stinkbugs, then you all must be worse than stinkbugs!"

Zhan Qing scoffed. "Insolence! The Yeluo would hardly fall to a swarm of bugs. Even without your help, we would have easily won!"

Zhang Lie figured out what he had done wrongly—he had entered the fight too early on! If he had waited until half the Yeluo fighters were crippled or dead, his help would have seemed far more vital.

Zhang Lie replied coldly, "I came here in order to purchase a few specialized potions from the Yeluo. Don't make me an enemy."

Zhan Qing laughed uproariously. He glanced toward Hong Xi, then scanned her up and down. "If you hand us that young woman by your side, we might consider it."

"Master!" Hong Xi glanced at her master with disgust on her face at Zhan Qing's lecherous expression.

"Come with us, girl!" Zhan Qing let out a wolf whistle. "Don't you want to be with a real man for once? Can your short, skinny companion compare to us?"

"Ha! She's thin and slender herself—won't we have to be careful with her?"

"Once we've had our fun with her, we can even turn her into a meal!"

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. "I don't suppose a peaceful resolution is possible, then."

Zhan Qing smirked. "Do you think you pitiful humans have the right to hold a discussion with our clan elders? You're the ones intruding in Yeluo territory."

He reached out for Hong Xi, but Zhang Lie batted his arm away.

"Oho. You want to have a fight, do you?" Zhan Qing hefted his polearm from his back, then swung it in a silver arc right toward Zhang Lie's neck.

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]! With a crisp metallic whistle, the head of Zhan Qing's polearm was smashed to pieces. He staggered back with the force of Zhang Lie's blow, his weapon completely ruined. Zhang Lie murmured, "A violent clan, aren't you? No wonder you were all killed. Again—don't force me to become an enemy!"

Chapter 342: The Top Fighter

The two fighters beside Zhan Qing each tossed him their blades. With two blades in hand, Zhan Qing leapt up into the skies and began to whirl like a corkscrew, forming a terrifying storm of blades in midair, tearing apart the air and distorting the underlying space.

Zhang Lie lifted only two fingers in response.

"What's this stinkbug doing? Is he so scared that he can't think straight? How can he hope to combat Zhan Qing with just two fingers?!"

"Who does he think he is? Even our top fighter, Ya Xiongtu, wouldn't dare to counter Zhan Qing's blade with just two fingers."

"He's sick of living, isn't he?"

"Better that he die—once he does, that woman will be ours! I've never tasted a human woman before—I wonder how it'll be?"

The crisp impact of metal on metal rang through the battlefield, shocking everyone gathered. Zhan Qing's polearm, which he whirled with abandon, really had been trapped by two of Zhang Lie's fingers.

"How is that possible?! He's just a spindly human warrior!"

"This isn't an illusion, surely?"

Zhang Lie ignored the Yeluo fighters' surprise, as though he had done nothing out of the ordinary. "If you desist now, I'll pretend that our altercation never occurred. As I said, I'm just here for potions from the Yeluo clan, and I don't want to cause any trouble."

His fingers locked Zhan Qing's polearm in place as easily as a stalk of wheat, forcing Zhan Qing to look him in the eye. Zhan Qing's forehead beaded with sweat. Even with all his strength, all his energy, he was unable to move the polearm one bit.

He had really made a fool of himself in front of the Yeluo fighters, boasting that the humans were weaklings, trash, nothing more than stinkbugs—and now he was proving that he was weaker than even a stinkbug! If he were to desist now, he would lose all his hard-won reputation.

No, he couldn't relent—but if he didn't, the man in front of him might well kill him! Zhan Qing hesitated.

Zhang Lie frowned and warned him once again, "Desist now!"

"I won't!" Zhan Qing released the first polearm and swung his second toward Zhang Lie's unprotected neck.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. He sidestepped the attack, then punched at Zhan Qing's abdomen. A rampaging dragon of blood pierced his armor, sending him flying up into the air. The next moment, Zhang Lie dashed forward, stomping on Zhan Qing's body in midair and sending him crashing into the ground.

A plume of dust shook the field. Zhan Qing, bossy, brash, and domineering, lay stunned in a hole in the ground that Zhang Lie had created with a brute-force impact. He turned around. "Are you fighters ready to have a cordial discussion now?"

The Yeluo fighters unconsciously took a step back as they glanced at Zhang Lie with fear in their eyes. Was this how strong the humans were?

"He's... much stronger than I expected!"

"Are all humans as strong as he is? We can't fight against such foes!"

Zhan Qing had, somehow, still not given up on his assault. From where he lay behind Zhang Lie's back, he infused all his genetic energy to the one polearm he still had, then tossed it at Zhang Lie.

Without even looking backwards, Zhang Lie grabbed the flying polearm and tossed it back. It traced a silver arc. The sound of the air whooshing against the polearm's blade caused Zhan Qing's eyes to widen—it was much faster than he had expected, and his bruised and battered body would be unable to avoid the blow.

He looked death in the eye, but death never came. The next second, the polearm's blade struck a scimitar that appeared out of nowhere, absorbing its momentum and sending it clattering to the ground.

"A human? What human dares make a fuss in the territory of the Yeluo?!" As the dust cleared, the figure of a three-meter tall Yeluo fighter appeared out of nowhere. The Yeluo fighters, who were rearing back after being shocked by Zhang Lie's strength, immediately grew excited again.

"It's Ya Xiongtu, the strongest warrior of the clan!"

"Haha, this human fighter's going to die!"

"Ya Xiongtu, this human struck down Zhan Qing! Make him pay the ultimate price!"

"We were fighting off an invasion of poisonous beetles. This human took advantage of our weakness in the aftermath to hurt and defeat Zhan Qing!"

Hong Xi strode forward in anger. "Ridiculous nonsense! You were the ones who struck first. My master was polite thrice over, but thrice you rejected his goodwill! Cowardly, dishonorable fools!"

Ya Xiongtu shook his head. "No matter the circumstances, it is true that you struck a Yeluo fighter in his own land. No more need be said."

"I'm only here to purchase potions from the Yeluo clan," Zhang Lie gritted out.

In another time and place, he would already have slaughtered everyone present, but he had no choice but to rein in his temper in order to get the potions he wanted without any fuss. He knew little of these potions from his past life, and he didn't want to sour the relationship between him and the Yeluo clan needlessly.

Unfortunately, these fighters were idiots.

Ya Xiongtu folded his arms and declared, "I don't care what you're here for. For injuring a Yeluo fighter on Yeluo land, you'll both pay a price!"

"What price?" Zhang Lie asked patiently.

"You'll both serve as slaves in the Yeluo clan for thirty years!"

Zhang Lie couldn't rein in his temper any longer. "Are you all fools? Perhaps all your brain cells have gone into building muscle instead!"

"This is not a matter of discussion. Either you submit now, or I'll beat you until you submit!" Ya Xiongtu walked to Zhan Qing's side and picked up his scimitar.

"The top fighter of the Yeluo clan, are you?" Zhang Lie scanned him up and down. Zhang Lie pointed at Zhan Qing. "If you don't want to become like him, stand aside!"

The Yeluo fighters all began to laugh. "Haha, this fellow's brain must be rotting! Does he think he can take on our best fighter?"

"You've got spunk, I'll give you that! Let's see if you have the skills to back that mouth up, too!" Ya Xiongtu laughed, then charged toward Zhang Lie with the scimitar in his hands, his aura a hundred times as intimidating as Zhan Qing's.

His killing intent had reached an incredible density, so much so that it almost seemed as though they were in a battlefield filled with corpses and blood.

He directed his killing intent straight toward Zhang Lie, but such a petty trick did nothing. Zhang Lie punched forward with his fists, shattering the half-formed image before counter-attacking with [Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade].

Ya Xiongtu's scimitar struck Zhang Lie's fist, wreathed in black. Rather than pierce through Zhang Lie's skin as he expected, however, it was his own scimitar that disintegrated inch by inch upon coming into contact with Zhang Lie's fist.

Ya Xiongtu retreated. "Interesting, interesting! Try this!"

Two blood scimitars materialized in his palms, and his aura increased by an order of magnitude. Each scimitar was three meters long, sharp and frightening.

"Name yourself, human fighter! My blood scimitars do not strike an unnamed foe. Dying to my scimitars will be an honor for you!"

Zhang Lie frowned and reported his name. Then, waving his scimitars in a complicated pattern, Ya Xiongtu struck at Zhang Lie with a flurry of blades, but Zhang Lie somehow managed to avoid each blow as though he were an agile butterfly.

No one would be able to maintain such a ferocious attack for long, not even Ya Xiongtu. Once he used up his stamina, Zhang Lie struck back.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" Venombane broke through the flurry of slices Ya Xiongtu sent his way. No one saw how Zhang Lie had launched his counterattack; by the time Ya Xiongtu himself noticed, Zhang Lie's blade was already right by his neck.

Chapter 343: Without End

Ya Xiongtu's eyes bulged. He had hardly expected defeat, let alone one so quick. If he hadn't taken his foe lightly, this scenario certainly wouldn't have happened. With just a moment's hesitation, however, Ya Xiongtu began to smile.

"How long it has been since I had such an interesting opponent as you! Come, fight me again!" Ya Xiongtu began to laugh like a crazed fighter, uncaring if Zhang Lie would actually stab him through the neck.

"You, Zhang Lie, are an interesting fellow indeed!" His bronzed skin turned dark, and he suddenly grew two more meters into a five-meter tall hulk. His blood scimitars seemed like the perfect size for his new body.

The gathered Yeluo fighters all howled in delight. "Ya Xiongtu's summoning his blackgold warform! He's really getting serious now— that lad's going to be beaten into meat paste!"

The Yeluo possessed a technique that could awaken the latent potential of their genes, but it was so hard to master that only five of the Yeluo fighters had managed to do so.

One of the Yeluo fighters teased Hong Xi, "If you don't want your man to turn into meat paste, there's still time to kneel on the ground and beg for mercy."

Hong Xi snorted, folded her arms, and turned aside. In her eyes, her master was peerless. "Don't get too cocky just yet. I believe that my master will beat this warrior of yours!"

"You'd better last a little while longer—it wouldn't be interesting if you were to lose too quickly! [Thousand-Ton Strike]!"

Ya Xiongtu struck with his scimitars so forcefully that the ground cracked under his advance. Blood shadows burst forth from the scimitars, slicing apart all that was within sight. A bloody mist without end filled the skies.

"It looks intimidating, but nothing more! [The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" Zhang Lie activated his blood ant and forest wolfman soulshards simultaneously. As he thrust forward with Venombane, a blood dragon uncoiled from his blade.

His sword clashed against Ya Xiongtu's scimitars, his dragon against Ya Xiongtu's blood shadows. The aftermath of their exchange left scars in the ground so deep that it began to quake, and the village's stone fence broke apart.

Quite a few of the Yeluo fighters, especially those closest to the impact, found slashes of blood erupting from their bodies. They had no choice but to hunker down and run farther from the scene in disgrace. They could understand why Ya Xiongtu was so strong, but what about Zhang Lie? How had a human grown so powerful that he could rival Ya Xiongtu himself?

The remainder of the match was one of endurance, one that Ya Xiongtu lost. His repeated blows, strong though they might be, sapped a great deal of genetic energy and stamina from him. A few

such blows were fine; he believed that he would easily be able to take Zhang Lie down, but Zhang Lie had been far stronger than he had expected.

Even among the Yeluo fighters, no one but the clan head himself would be able to push Ya Xiongtu to such an extent. Once his stamina began to falter, his attacks would get duller and slower, and he might even collapse from overexertion himself.

He gritted his teeth, regretting that he had shouted for Zhang Lie to try to withstand his blows as long as he could when he was the one who would give out first instead. He clashed once more with Zhang Lie. As he retreated, his bones splintered, and blood gushed out of his cuts.

Ya Xiongtu, who had reached the limits of his strength, collapsed onto the ground.

Zhang Lie chuckled. "Is this truly the strongest Yeluo fighter around?"

He charged up for a final blow with his sword. The Yeluo fighters all gulped—they knew that none of them would be able to defend against this blow, not even Ya Xiongtu.

[First Form: Parting the River]!

The gleam of Zhang Lie's blade was visible throughout the Yeluo Valley. He made to cut the mountains, the skies, the flooding rivers. Even the beetles lowered their heads in dread, fearing the descent of the blade.

"Wait!"

Zhang Lie ignored Ya Xiongtu's plea and chopped off one of his arms with a clean snick. Zhang Lie could easily have killed him, but Ya Xiongtu was as good as dead, regardless. He clutched his bleeding stump in agony, writhing as though he were a fish out of water.

The other Yeluo fighters gulped, knowing that Ya Xiongtu was done for. The Yeluo style was to fight with two bladed weapons, so losing an arm meant losing half his combat power—or worse. Furthermore, Ya Xiongtu's veins had burst from his exertion, and he wouldn't be able to recover fully from his injuries.

Zhang Lie's gleaming Venombane caused the Yeluo fighters to gulp in fear. He was far too strong and far too frightening an enemy! Even their top fighter had lasted only two rounds with him. How could the remaining fighters look down on him any longer? They could hardly believe how strong this human was—could their ancestors have been wrong? Or was this human an exception of his race?

Zhang Lie sighed. It was impossible to reason with these barbarians; he should have fought them from the very beginning. He slammed a foot down on Ya Xiongtu, who was secretly trying to crawl away. "Summon your clan head, or I'll slaughter all of you until he appears!"

"Haha, there really aren't any coolheaded youth anymore!" Almost as Zhang Lie finished speaking, a hunchbacked old man walked forward with a crutch from the depths of the village. He stroked his beard. "Young man, you're quite strong, but don't think too highly of yourself. There's a reason the Yeluo clan has survived for millennia in the realm of sura, after all."

"Elder!"

"Elder, you're finally here!"

"Elder, you heard him! That lad wanted to slaughter us all!"

Chapter 344: A Shameless Elder

Zhang Lie gritted his teeth. "As I've mentioned time and time again, I'm here in search of potions made by the Yeluo clan, not to kill its warriors."

His patience was reaching his limit.

The elder laughed coldly. "Don't you think you're being a bit arrogant, young man? We Yeluo fighters aren't so easy to defeat. Release Ya Xiongtu, and I'll consider sparing your life given that it's your first offense!"

"Let go of Ya Xiongtu, or today will be the day of your death!"

"Elder, have at him! Who would dare to cause such a fuss outside our village? If word of this were to spread, our reputation will surely crumble!"

"Right, he has to pay a price for his transgression!"

The elder hmphed. His bones groaned and creaked as his body suddenly grew taller and larger. In a matter of moments, not only was he no longer hunchbacked, he had grown into an eight-meter-tall giant. His body was full of bulging muscles, and his genetic energy burned as bright as flame. "It's been a long time since I took on this form. Lad, let go of Ya Xiongtu and beg for mercy, and I might spare you yet! You seem to have some skill of your own—I'm happy to grant you the opportunity to serve the Yeluo."

Zhang Lie scoffed. "Are the Yeluo all as brash and arrogant as you? Serve the Yeluo? Beg for mercy? No. I'm here for the potions that only the Yeluo know how to brew. Tell your clan head to come forth, or I'll kill this man right here and now!"

The elder immediately countered, "You dare? In front of a Yeluo elder himself?!"

"On the count of three: if the Yeluo clan head doesn't show up himself, this man will die. One!"

The Yeluo fighters all stared at Zhang Lie ferociously.

"Elder, kill this bug for besmirching the reputation of the Yeluo!"

"When have we ever been threatened by these puny humans? We wouldn't succumb even against the sura!"

"Two!"

"Lad, I advise you not to be rash. If you dare kill Ya Xiongtu, all of humanity will fall for your crimes," the Yeluo elder threatened. On the ground, Ya Xiongtu continued to struggle, spitting out a gob of saliva. The elder's arrival made his eyes gleam. "Aren't you going to let me go, lad? Do you really want to sacrifice everyone you know, your friends and family alike, for your foolishness?"

Zhang Lie ignored the Yeluo fighters, the Yeluo elder, and Ya Xiongtu. He held Venombane in one hand and sliced Ya Xiongtu's throat, out of which fresh blood gushed.

Ya Xiongtu pressed one arm to his neck as he stared at Zhang Lie in disbelief. He tried to say something, but was physically unable to do so: "What about three? Didn't you say on the count of three?"

Zhang Lie looked back at the elder and smiled. "My goodness, I'm sorry. It looks like my hand slipped."

The Yeluo fighters and elder gaped at what they had witnessed. Had that human really dared to kill Ya Xiongtu?! The Yeluo fighters brimmed with rage.

"You damned stinkbug—for your crime, you will die!" the elder shouted, howled to the skies, then charged at Zhang Lie like a rampaging beast. Whenever his feet touched the ground, it shook as though there were a volcano right about to erupt. "I've changed my mind. I won't let you die so easily—I'll smash apart your bones, then kill every human I can find in the second realm. You'll watch on as we torture your friends and family to death!"

Ya Xiongtu was his grandson, as well as the strongest fighter of the Yeluo clan. He was being groomed to become the next clan head—until he perished at Zhang Lie's hand. The elder hadn't been too worried that one of Ya xiongtu's arms had been cut off. That was a troublesome injury, but not a wholly unmanageable one. With Zhang Lie enslaved and helping Ya Xiongtu out, the latter could still have become the clan head—but now, his plans for the next clan head were gone, along with his grandson!

The elder took two more steps forward, then cocked his arm back for a punch so intense a cavity of space formed all around his fingers.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" However, Zhang Lie didn't hold back either. He struck forward with Venombane, matching the elder's punch with a punch of his own. Both combatants stumbled back from the force of the impact.

When the Yeluo fighters saw that the elder's attack had been effective, they immediately roared, "Elder, kill him! Destroy this human!"

"[Meteoric Punch]!" The elder bounded upwards, then shot down toward Zhang Lie like a meteor. His fists flared and sparked with friction, then burst into flames. He broke the sound barrier, sending a tremendous boom into the air as he landed.

Zhang Lie smiled as the elder leapt up into the air, then pressed his palms to the ground. "[Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]!"

Four mysterious runic tablets crashed to the ground, increasing the force of gravity on the poor elder so much that he began curving downwards instead of heading ballistically toward Zhang Lie.

The Yeluo fighters gaped. Their elder had jumped up into the air, morphed into a meteor, and was right about to... fall to the ground powerlessly?

Zhang Lie would naturally take advantage of such an opportunity. He punched upward, sending a blood dragon rising up into the air directly into the elder's path. Dragon and elder clashed in midair, causing a blood-colored explosion.

The elder crashed into the ground like a burlap sack, wounded and burned all over. The moment Zhang Lie had triggered his unusual technique, the elder immediately went on the defensive—but even so, he was unable to block the effects of Zhang Lie's technique fully.

An arm and half his shoulder had been sloughed off, and his organs were visible around the grotesque injury.

"Elder!" the Yeluo fighters cried out.

Their shouts reminded him that he wasn't alone. Ignoring his wounded body, he commanded, "You damned fools! What are you doing standing there? Go capture that girl! As long as you do, this man will do as we say!"

Zhang Lie laughed coldly. "You dare?"

He thought that the Yeluo fighters were nothing more than simple-minded fools, but to think that one of their elders would stoop to such underhanded acts! He would have to reevaluate working with them, it seemed.

The fighters all began to rush toward Hong Xi.

"Heh, don't blame us, little human girl—your man's simply been too irksome."

"Don't be afraid, we'll take good care of you!"

Zhang Lie was right about to head off to help his apprentice when the elder, dragging his battered body, blocked his way. "Lad, while I'm alive, don't expect to get anywhere!"

Chapter 345: A Strategic Alliance

"Are you certain?" Zhang Lie scowled.

"Haha, you might be a strong hunter, but I'm sure I can delay you at the cost of my life. I told you—you won't get away with killing my grandson so easily!"

The elder gulped down a green vial of liquid.

Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed. That's the potion I came here for!

As the elder consumed the liquid, his wounds began to recover, and his body grew again until he was ten meters tall. That had to be it—the potion that was a boon to the Yeluo and deadly poison to the sura! "I might not be able to survive long after taking this potion, but I can at least take you down with me!"

"In that case, you might as well perish now! [The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" Zhang Lie had to finish this fight quickly to save Hong Xi. He summoned a river of the underworld, drowning the elder in its midst.

[Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]! Dematerializing and rematerializing the four tablets around the elder, he formed an array that would trap him within.

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

Mired in the underworld river, the elder punched forward again and again, destroying a black dragon with every punch. Perhaps he might have been able to take on the onslaught of dragons if he were hale and hearty, but with just one arm, he found himself on the losing end.

Zhang Lie wasn't an easy opponent, even if the elder had just drunk a miraculous restorative. As the black dragons gradually got through his defenses, the elder found himself bruised and battered once more, his bones cracking, entrails leaking out of his body.

He stumbled a few steps back and spat out a mouthful of blood. "Ha, haha, I hadn't expected I would have such a wonderful fight before my death!"

"Scram! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!"

Zhang Lie launched another onslaught of black dragons at the harried elder, which he barely defended against. The elder looked as though he would drop dead at any moment.

"I'm here for just one reason. Hand me the recipe for that potion you just drank, and I'll leave immediately!"

"Ha!" the elder shouted with his dying breath. "Do you think I'll give it to you after you've killed my grandson? Ridiculous fool!"

Zhang Lie's eyes narrowed. "If you give me what I want now, the only dead grandson will be yours. Otherwise, your whole tribe will be full of dead grandsons."

"Oho, is that so? You've wasted quite a lot of time on little old me. What about that girl you brought with you? Unless you commit suicide now in reparation for your crimes, those fighters surely won't let her go! I think I've stalled you for long enough that my fighters have her by now, don't you?"

"Open your eyes and look around, then!"

"There's no need to pretend to be calm. I heard that girl call out for you with my own ears!" The elder smirked. He turned and glanced around, but when he saw the scene behind him, he gaped in surprise.

With a longsword in her right hand and a fan in her left, Hong Xi stood encircled by dozens of Yeluo fighters. The domain of [Eclipse] flared all around her. She cut and slashed the Yeluo fighters who reached out for her, dancing in the midst of the encirclement, guarding against them all by herself. Only then did the Yeluo fighters realize that their so-called prey was more like a predator in her own right.

Could they have been mistaken? Were all humans as strong as she and Zhang Lie?

No, the Yeluo fighters were simply too arrogant and thought too highly of themselves. Even though Zhang Lie had trained her for an entire month, she was still nowhere near the upper echelons of strength among the humans.

The only conclusion was that the Yeluo fighters themselves were too weak. If they couldn't even kill a pinnacle-grade lifeform working together, they would have no chance against Hong Xi.

It was the elder's time to gulp. If this battle were to drag out, it would be his tribesmen who would perish—the man in front of him could very well possess the power to wipe out the entirety of the Yeluo clan.

Even so, by this point, the elder had no choice but to continue his charade. He snorted. "Even if they haven't managed to detain her just yet, I'm sure she'll run out of stamina eventually!"

Zhang Lie's voice whispered in his ear before he even realized that Zhang Lie had moved. "Believe me—they won't be able to last that long. [Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!"

The elder's scenery split in twain. He tried to block the onslaught with his one remaining arm, which disintegrated immediately upon attempting to block the blow. The aftermath of the attack left the elder curled up in pain, blocking the sword energy with nothing more than his naked body.

Fortunately, after consuming the special potion of his clan, his defensive ability had increased greatly. Although he was bloodied all over, and a layer of skin had been scraped off his body, he wasn't dead.

"I should have bought my tribesmen enough time..."

He glanced up weakly, and then his eyes bulged once again. Half the Yeluo tribesmen were lying on the ground, and the other half too terrified to step forward. Hong Xi stood in the middle of the encirclement, glaring arrogantly at the fighters.

The elder spat out a mouthful of blood, so incensed that he almost succumbed to his wounds out of anger. He had sacrificed his own life to give them some valuable time, but they had squandered it all! "Trash, you useless trash! Can't you even take care of a lone woman?!"

When he and the clan head had roamed the second realm, they had surely killed at least a few hundred humans—but now, two humans alone were enough to overcome a whole tribe's worth of fighters. If not for the fact that the clan head was in secluded cultivation, this would hardly have happened. When had the Yeluo clan been so threatened in their very own valley?!

"Well? If you don't want your clan to be slaughtered to the last, hand over the recipe."

The elder roared, "Kill us if you dare! We won't hand over the recipe!"

Perhaps he might have considered it if Zhang Lie hadn't killed his grandson, but Ya Xiongtu's death had voided that option.

However, the Yeluo fighters themselves seemed to be disobeying their elder.

"Elder, surely we can discuss this?"

"Yes, Elder, please reconsider! How can a recipe be more valuable than an entire generation of fighters? After all, we're still in our prime—don't you want us to be able to keep the clan alive?"

Chapter 346: The Yeluo Clan Head

The Yeluo elder was so incensed by the next generation of Yeluo fighters that he again spat out blood.

"Don't die yet, Elder! We need you to agree to his request!"

"Right, aren't we more important than a recipe?"

"What's the point of hiding the recipe if we're all going to die? This human said that he was going to leave after obtaining the recipe, so won't you give it to him?"

The elder roared, "This isn't a problem about the recipe, but rather about the dignity of the Yeluo!"

"Elder, surely our lives are worth more than this unfathomable dignity?"

The elder spat out even more blood. "Don't you have any pride as Yeluo fighters?!"

Hong Xi murmured, "If you had been willing to talk matters through with us peaceably, it wouldn't have devolved to this extent..."

Given the interaction between the Yeluo elder and the Yeluo fighters, it was obvious to Zhang Lie that this recipe was a secret of the clan, one which none of the regular fighters would have any access to. Otherwise, they would already have handed it over.

Just then, a frightening pillar of genetic energy burst out of the Yeluo settlement, and a figure ascended toward the clouds.

The dying elder's face was fixed in a rictus. "Haha, the clan head's finally out of secluded cultivation now! You'll pay a steep price for what you've done—just you wait!"

Having said his last, the elder of the Yeluo perished amidst a fit of laughter.

The figure who had risen to the skies swooped toward Zhang Lie so quickly that he released a sonic boom, causing the air all around him to tremble.

"Another flier? [Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form]!"

Four runic tablets smashed into the ground, but, surprisingly, this figure managed to withstand the sharply increased force of gravity. Was this the clan head of the Yeluo? Perhaps he did have some skill.

[Fists of the Silent Sea: Dragon's Wrath]!

A gigantic blood wolf appeared. Zhang Lie pulled back his left claw, and, as dragon scales formed over it, punched forward and summoned a howling black dragon headed right for the figure in the sky.

The terrifying howl of the dragon shook the heavens with such authority that the Yeluo fighters found their legs turned to jelly, and they slumped onto the ground. The black dragon devoured the meteoric figure swooping down from the skies, dispelling the force of his descent with claw and fang.

Genetic energy billowed in waves from the epicenter of the explosion, and a windstorm shook the entirety of the Yeluo Valley. The ground began to crack. An avalanche occurred on the mountains.

A figure dropped out of the sky. The ten-meter-tall Yeluo clan head, brow dripping with sweat, face a mask of shock, knelt on the ground as he landed. "Head of the Yeluo clan, Ye Hua, thanks this human warrior for his clemency!"

As the clan head knelt, the Yeluo fighters found their rising hope and pride dashed. To them, their clan head had been like a martial god, one who had never suffered defeat. He had defeated even the most illustrious of their elders, and his skill had reached an apex after going into secluded

cultivation. Of course they thought he would be able to fend off the frightening human in front of them—but in truth, even the clan head fell to a single blow.

The Yeluo fighters' knees trembled. They could hardly imagine what sort of monster they had provoked. He had forced their clan head to surrender with just one blow, and they, with their foolish pride and arrogance, had mocked him and tried to steal the woman by his side!

Zhang Lie himself seemed a little surprised. "You could sense it?"

The clan head bowed respectfully. "At least a little. If not for your dissipating the remaining energy of that attack at the very end, I would be nothing but a pile of dust."

The disparity in strength between the Yeluo elder and Zhang Lie was so immense that the Yeluo elder didn't know how outmatched he was, but the clan head, who was slightly stronger, did. This was why he had surrendered after just one exchange, because he knew just how much his clan couldn't afford having Zhang Lie as an enemy.

The clan head lowered his head. "Please, honored fighter, my clan will do anything for you. I ask only that you spare our lives!"

The Yeluo fighters gaped.

"Clan head—" one fighter began, wanting to persuade him otherwise, but the clan head stared him into silence.

"If you want to die, I don't care—but don't bring the entire clan down with you!"

Zhang Lie sighed. "All I came here for was the recipe for a potion."

"A potion?"

"Yes, the one that this elder consumed recently."

"The Yeluo augmentation brew? Very well—I'll hand you the recipe as well as whatever supply of the potions we have!"

Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed. Everything would have been so much easier if he had spoken with the clan head from the very beginning! Of course, such a wily clan head wouldn't be willing to remain subservient forever, but no matter how wily he was, Zhang Lie knew a means of controlling the entire clan.

"Very good. Trust me: you'll be proud of this decision that you made in the future! I'll leave the production of the brew to you, since some of the herbs required are native to the Yeluo Valley," Zhang Lie continued.

There were quite a lot of poisonous herbs and insects in the Yeluo Valley. If Zhang Lie were to rely on human labor, the cost of making this potion would increase dramatically. The Yeluo clan naturally had thick bronzed skin and incredible resistance to poison. They were obvious candidates for the task.

The clan head lowered his head. "Being able to serve you is the honor of the Yeluo clan."

"For now, hand me your entire supply."

"Yes, of course. Please understand that we don't have a large stockpile of it—the brewing process is time-consuming and labor-intensive. Furthermore, I'll have to make you a copy of the recipe myself, so there may be some delay. Won't you come rest in our settlement for a little?"

"Very well. Lead the way!"

Chapter 347: The Musi Clan

Following the clan head, Zhang Lie and Hong Xi quickly entered the Yeluo settlement. There wasn't anything particularly interesting; indeed, from Zhang Lie's perspective, the buildings seemed a little shabby and rundown.

At the very least, the clan head was efficient and returned rapidly with three vials and a beastskin scroll, on which the recipe for the Yeluo clan's special brew had been copied in shoddy penmanship.

Having acquired the potions and recipe he had come all this way to obtain, Zhang Lie took out a superior-grade speckled mantis soulshard from his robes. "Here, a reward."

Zhang Lie grinned mysteriously at the clan head. "Do you know why I'm so strong?"

The clan head blinked. "It must be because of the depth and quality of your reserves of genetic energy, of course!"

"Oh? And what of my apprentice? Why do you think she was able to take down over a dozen of your fighters?"

The clan head frowned at her, then turned back to Zhang Lie. "Why?"

Zhang Lie pointed at the soulshard in his palm. "This, of course!"

The Yeluo clan head: ! ! !

The Yeluo fighters: ! ! !

The Yeluo clan head's palms trembled. "You mean, this is the secret behind the humans' rise in strength?"

"Indeed." Of course, it wasn't. The reason mankind was so strong surely wasn't because of soulshards alone; frameworks, techniques, gene fragments, and soulshards were all of utmost importance.

Hong Xi couldn't help giggling to herself as she watched Zhang Lie mislead the Yeluo tribesmen. Her body naturally wasn't as strong as the Yeluo fighters', but she was far superior in terms of frameworks, techniques, gene fragments, and soulshards.

Quite a few Yeluo fighters gathered around Zhang Lie and their clan head, unable to believe that such a small shard of material would possess the strength that Zhang Lie had displayed.

"Don't you want to test it out?"

The clan head picked up the soulshard and was right about to place it in his mouth, thinking of it as some kind of medicinal pill, when Zhang Lie reached out to stop him.

"Ah, stop, stop! It's a soulshard, and you need to connect to it mentally, not eat it!"

Very quickly, with Zhang Lie's guidance, the Yeluo clan head was able to activate and sense the effects of the soulshard for himself. Two scarlet mantis scythes materialized in his palms, the blades

serrated, the hefts speckled. The sight shocked the Yeluo fighters, particularly the clan head himself. He could sense the scythes almost like extensions of his own body, and he knew that they possessed a terrifying poison.

"Th-This is unbelievable! No wonder, no wonder! Does that mean that I can become as strong as you, or even stronger, one day?"

"You'll certainly become stronger, but if you want to become stronger than me—well, I have quite a lot of these soulshards."

The reason the Yeluo clan had been unaware of these soulshards was because the indigenous races could not obtain soulshards or gene fragments from killing genetic lifeforms. However, that didn't mean they couldn't use these soulshards after obtaining them; this wasn't a secret among the intelligent races of the second realm. Some such races even made it a point to capture and interrogate any humans and members of other non-native races so as to obtain the soulshards that they possessed.

This wasn't information that the secluded Yeluo clan was privy to, and Zhang Lie had taken advantage of this blind spot to make the Yeluo clan head believe that he would be able to overcome Zhang Lie if he just amassed sufficiently many soulshards.

"If you want to acquire more soulshards, then you had better produce more of these potions." Zhang Lie smirked: they had fallen for it all, hook, line, and sinker.

The Yeluo fighters' eyes turned ardent. If they could grow stronger just by amassing these soulshards...

Zhang Lie and the Yeluo clan head entered a cooperative relationship. Although the initial relationship between Zhang Lie and the Yeluo clan had been rather fractious, Zhang Lie finally managed to secure a means of production for the potion that would show great effect against the sura.

Zhang Lie stayed for a night in the Yeluo settlement, then left the next day. Along the way, he cast [Ninecarp Transformation: Fourth Form], picking up the dense runic tablet that fell from the skies and securing it to Hong Xi's back.

The first of the four runic tablets was the only one that Zhang Lie could fully control.

The tremendous weight forced Hong Xi to pant. "Master, have I done something wrong? Is this a punishment?"

"No, you haven't done anything wrong. In fact, I'm quite impressed with your performance against the Yeluo fighters."

"In that case, why—"

"This is a form of training. On our return journey, I want you to get used to bearing twice your own weight. Will you be able to handle it?"

"Yes, Master!" Hong Xi replied obediently. Over the course of their journey, she had witnessed Zhang Lie's strength, as well as her own development.

In the past, she would have easily fallen prey to a single superior-grade lifeform, but now, even if she were to encounter a peak-grade lifeform, she would be able to last a little while longer. Perhaps she still wouldn't be able to defeat one on her own, but a serious injury wasn't out of the question.

Carrying the runic tablet made Hong Xi's journey quite tiring. After all, they still encountered quite a few superior-grade lifeforms from time to time, but even then, Hong Xi didn't complain. She gritted her teeth, bore the runic tablet on her back, and fought off the lifeforms while moving as little as possible.

She had grown up being chased by enemies, panicking at anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Those of her clan perished one by one, and she could do nothing about it. Hong Xi, who had grown up under such circumstances, had learned an important lesson about the value of her own strength, so she had always tried her hardest on the path of cultivation. Unfortunately for her, her enemy was simply too strong—they had cut off the Hong clan's resources, and she had had to struggle for every bit of advancement she made.

Now that she had managed to take Zhang Lie as master and receive such specialized training, how could she not work hard?

Because of the additional weight on Hong Xi's back, the return trip was even longer than the outward trip. It took them more than a full month before they returned to Qi.

Back in Qi, Zhang Lie asked, "If I remember correctly, you have a brother, don't you?"

"Yes, Master!"

Zhang Lie nodded. "Once we return, head to the Zenith Dojo in Ning with him."

"Yes, Master!" Zhang Lie's words touched Hong Xi: this was essentially an offer to protect them both.

"Leave me with your contact information so that I can reach out to you if necessary," Zhang Lie continued.

"Yes, Master!"

Afterwards, Hong Xi returned to Earth, while Zhang Lie returned to the Qi barracks to see what the members of Team Zenith had been up to in his absence. Unfortunately, however, they seemed to be out on a mission, so Zhang Lie followed Hong Xi back to Earth as well.

In a rundown manor on the planet Tira, the first thing Hong Xi planned to do was to inform her brother of the incredible luck that had befallen her. She thought, Brother, I managed to reclaim [Eclipse], and I've even taken on Zhang Lie as my master! I'm going to revive the Hong clan!

However, when she pushed open the battered wooden doors, she found no one within. Hong Xiao wasn't home. Hong Xi searched all around, but she had an uneasy premonition.

She immediately called her brother on her transceiver.

"Surely nothing's wrong—surely my brother's only gone out hunting!" she mumbled to herself.

The call connected, but the voice on the other end wasn't her brother's. It was her nemesis, Musi Te.

"Hong Xi, have you finally found your way back home?"

Hong Xi's voice grew hard with anger. "Musi Te, where's my brother?"

Musi Te laughed. "We're good friends, aren't we? We found your brother, and I wanted to take the opportunity to reconnect with him."

From the transceiver came a weak voice, "Sister, run! Hide—don't let the Musi find—"

Before her brother could finish, she heard a series of frenzied, dull thumps, along with her brother's repressed groans.

Musi Te laughed. "Ah, my apologies, we may have gone a little overboard."

Hong Xi roared in anger, "Musi Te! If anything happens to my brother, I swear you'll suffer the same fate tenfold!"

Musi Te grinned. "Are you threatening me? My goodness. Do you really think the Hong clan's anything without the Eclipse Sage? If not for the fact that I'm interested in [Eclipse] myself, I'd long have taken care of the two of you."

Hong Xi's palms were trembling.

Musi Te continued, "Bring me [Eclipse] within five hours. Otherwise, who can promise what might happen to your brother?"

"That's impossible! I don't have [Eclipse]—how do you want me to hand it over?"

Musi Te chuckled. "Did you hear your sister, Hong Xiao? She doesn't care for you at all—your life's worthless to her!"

"Ahh—argh! Sis, leave! Don't bother trying to save me!"

Upon hearing the pained cries coming from the transceiver, Hong Xi clenched her fists. "Where do you want to meet?"

"By the warehouses at the ninth port of Tarkus. If I don't see you there by the deadline, well, feel free to dig around my manor's dog kennels for your brother's bones."

Musi Te hung up.

Hong Xi prepared to leave immediately after informing Zhang Lie of what had happened. He didn't pick up after repeated attempts to call him, so she had no choice but to leave him a message instead.

Chapter 348: The Ninth Warehouse

When Zhang Lie returned to Earth, Zhang Hong immediately summoned him to deal with a number of miscellaneous affairs related to the dojo, and then he had been swarmed by the alien researchers to ask about a technical detail or another.

Only when all that was finished did he remember that Hong Xi hadn't sent him a message since returning to Mars. When he glanced at his transceiver, he found that he had set it to silent some time ago.

"Ah, this damned habit of mine!" Zhang Lie cursed, then quickly toggled it on.

There were quite a few missed calls and messages. Hong Xi had called him thrice, and Su Feng, Yan Long, and the members of Team Zenith had all left messages.

Zhang Lie hurriedly listened to what Hong Xi had to say. As he did so, his eyes widened. For a moment, he forgot his strength, crushing the transceiver to pieces as he clenched his fist.

What a bold, reckless girl! Did she really think she could survive heading to the Musi clan by herself just because she was strong enough to be killing superior-grade lifeforms on her own?!

Zhang Lie ran off toward a teleportation array as Hong Xi made her way to the ninth port's warehouses.

The reason Musi Te had chosen that location was for two reasons.

First, the Musi clan was in the transportation business, and they essentially controlled the warehouses in the region. Second, this was a relatively deserted location, and there wouldn't be any bystanders around or help readily available if something were to happen.

As Hong Xi made her way into the largest warehouse in the area, she found her brother, Hong Xiao, trussed up in midair. His body was bruised and battered, his skin graying, and he looked inches away from death.

"Hong Xiao!" Hong Xi rushed over, her eyes filling with tears.

"Not just yet, Hong Xi!" A thin-eyed, thin-browed man sitting on a blood-red sofa situated at the center of the warehouse stood up. "Did you bring me what I asked for?"

This man was naturally the second son of the head of the Musi clan, Musi Te. Dozens of bodyguards stood erect beside him.

Hong Xi retrieved the manual containing [Eclipse] from her robes. "Let go of my brother!"

"This is the Musi clan's territory. Do you think you can bargain with us?"

"Let him go—or I won't hand this over to you." Despite her agitation, Hong Xi felt unusually calm. Her brother was far more important than [Eclipse]. What she gave up now, her master would surely reclaim.

Musi Te laughed coldly. "If not for our interest in [Eclipse], do you think the Musi clan would really have let the two of you live this long? Naive fool!"

Hong Xi gritted her teeth. "I'll count to three. Let my brother go by then, or else!"

Musi Te folded his arms. "Threatening me, are you? Not a smart thing to do on Musi territory, I should think."

Musi Te's bodyguards began to laugh from behind him.

"Do you really think that the Hong clan's as imposing as before, back when the Eclipse Sage was around? Scream if you want, as loudly as you can!"

Hong Xi narrowed her eyes. "I'll count to three. If you don't release my brother, I'll destroy this manual."

"Try it if you dare!" Musi Te pulled out a remote controller. As he pressed a button, the collar on Hong Xiao's neck began to tighten, and he keened in agony.

"Keep counting if you want—if you do, within three seconds, your brother's head will be rolling on the ground like a wintermelon!"

Hong Xi closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and crushed the electronic tablet into pieces.

"I told you not to force me into this." She dropped the remains of the cracked, ruined device, then smashed it into smithereens with [Fists of the Silent Sea].

Musi Te roared, "Hong Xi, I'll kill you!"

He was so incensed with rage that even his bodyguards were taken aback. In a flash of bloody light, Hong Xiao's left arm was sliced off his body.

Musi Te continued howling, "Bastard, you bastard! Do you know how much time and effort the Musi clan's put into hunting down [Eclipse]?! Neither of you will die yet, I swear it—I'll force the two of you to experience the cruelest forms of torture and punishment first!"

"Shut up!" Hong Xi's gaze turned malevolent as she saw her brother's arm being cut off. "[Eclipse] never belonged to the Musi clan. It's the property of the Hong clan, courtesy of the Eclipse Sage. As the scion of the Hong, I can do whatever I want with it!"

Hong Xi's inspired idea of destroying the tablet was naturally based on Zhang Lie's influence—to avoid being restricted to passivity. However, she had clearly not thought things through.

At the very least, Hong Xiao didn't seem mad at her. Still suspended in midair, he gritted out, "Good job, Sister! You've honored the Hong clan—our ancestor's framework and technique surely can't land in our enemies' hands!"

Musi Te narrowed his eyes. "Take down this crazed fool!"

"Do you really intend on killing me?" Hong Xi chuckled coldly. "If I die, you really won't be able to learn [Eclipse] any longer."

Musi Te frowned. "You must have already started learning [Eclipse]."

Hong Xi nodded, then tapped her head. "Indeed. [Eclipse] is right here. If you dare harm my brother any further, I'll commit suicide immediately."

Hong Xi knew very well that, even if she were to hand the manual over to Musi Te, the Musi clan wouldn't let them go. The enmity between the two clans had grown far too strong. It had begun in their ancestors' generation; by now, however, even the kind Hong Xi wouldn't hesitate to kill off the entirety of the Musi if she had such an opportunity.

The Musi clan would also do the same to any remaining members of the Hong clan, especially Hong Xi, who had already begun learning [Eclipse]. To the Musi, she was like a bomb that could explode at any moment.

As a result, the first thing she had to do was to destroy the manual for [Eclipse] in front of Musi Te's eyes, transforming herself into a possession that he had to acquire at any costs. To prevent her from committing suicide, Musi Te couldn't risk hurting her brother any longer. Furthermore, for the same reason, in order to obtain [Eclipse], Musi Te wouldn't kill her, either.

"Very well. I'll keep both of you alive for now."

Musi Te pressed his controller again, and the collar restricting Hong Xiao's breathing finally loosened up. He panted loudly for air.

Chapter 349: Musi Te

"Send my brother to the city of Ning on Earth, and I'll hand over [Eclipse]," Hong Xi continued.

Musi Te laughed. "I said the two of you could live, but I'm certainly not letting either of you go."

Hong Xi frowned, then suggested. "In that case, let my brother down. I'll be your hostage instead."

Musi Te cocked an eyebrow, then motioned for his bodyguards to do as Hong Xi suggested.

"Hong Xiao!" As Hong Xiao was pushed toward her, she strode forward, supporting his body as she stuffed a soulshard in his hand.

Musi Te grinned evilly. "Take good care of Hong Xi. Don't harm her—I plan on getting to know her well tonight!"

Now that Hong Xiao had been secured, Hong Xi would have some agency. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!"

The entire warehouse trembled, and the force of water from her fists sent some of Musi Te's bodyguards flying into the wall.

Musi Te was impressed by her strength. "Not bad! You've really improved quite a bit."

His bodyguards were all hunters from the second realm who were at over half their superior gene capacity, and even if they were caught by surprise, it was still quite impressive that Hong Xi had managed to send them flying with just one blow.

As far as he could recall, Hong Xi wasn't a particularly strong hunter. A few months ago, any of his bodyguards could have beaten the two siblings bloody. How had she become so strong? The conclusion was obvious—it had to be the power of [Eclipse]!

As expected of the Eclipse Sage's genius, to be able to enhance the abilities of even a useless fool like her... Musi Te's eyes gleamed. He had to acquire [Eclipse] for himself!

Of course, the greater part of Hong Xi's strength came from Zhang Lie's instruction, but that wasn't something she would reveal.

"Not bad, not bad! No wonder it's a technique my father wanted so badly—it's a waste to leave such a treasure in the hands of the Hong clan! Only the Musi clan will be able to make full use of its strength." He turned to his bodyguards. "You trash, be more serious!"

The bodyguards stumbled up and rushed toward Hong Xi.

"Hong Xiao, activate that superior-grade dragonscale turtle soulshard and protect yourself!" Hong Xi materialized a fan in her left hand and a sword in her right. She activated [Eclipse] and instantly reached the peak of her strength.

She waved her fan frantically, causing the winds to dance around her; her sword flashed as erratically as the moon, causing her enemies to become momentarily dazed. [The Elusive Moon] allowed her to avoid all the attacks directed her way.

In what seemed like the flash of an eye, Musi Te's bodyguards all dropped to the floor. Hong Xi pointed her sword at him. "Now, it's your turn."

Musi Te seemed a little surprised, but he couldn't help laughing. "You think you can take me on?"

Hong Xi waved her fan straight at him, sending a howling twister to swallow him up.

As the air cleared, however, she found Musi Te standing unharmed in the center of the twister. "A rather relaxing wind. Want to send more my way?"

"What?" Hong Xi could hardly believe her eyes. She waved her fan again, summoning another twister of wind with which to overwhelm Musi Te.

Musi Te dodged the attack. "Do you really think you can take me down just with a single soulshard of that caliber? Hand over [Eclipse] and stop trying to fight back, and I might consider making you my wench!"

Hong Xi gritted her teeth. Waving her sword, she sent countless sword slashes flying his way, all of which Musi Te deflected with ease with a gigantic shield that materialized from his left arm.

"Do you really think that you can beat me, scion of the Musi clan, in terms of accumulated soulshards? And do you really think that I'm weak just because I'm escorted by a posse of bodyguards wherever I go?"

Hong Xi's face couldn't help turn serious—she could sense Musi Te's aura growing stronger and stronger, as though it were about to erupt like a volcano.

"Do you really think I would still be a scion of the Musi clan if I weren't good at fighting myself? I don't like getting my hands dirty, but that doesn't mean I'm weak—in fact, none of my bodyguards are any match for me! Well? How does it feel to have your plans ruined?" Musi Te grinned as though he had already vanquished Hong Xi.

In truth, given the Musi clan's tremendous resources, they could even train a pig to fly. Among the pigpens of the Musi clan, Musi Te was just a fatter pig than most.

"Our young master's long since been undefeated in his generation—do you think that girl will be able to survive three blows with him?"

"Even three blows is more than I'd expect—I doubt it'd take more than one!"

"[Black Sun]!" Musi Te shouted.

The domain of [Black Sun] seemed to be a perfect counter to [Eclipse], and the fluctuations of genetic energy surrounding Musi Te's body grew stronger by a significant margin. This was the secret technique of the Musi clan, [Black Sun].

Unlike [Eclipse], which devoured the genetic energy in the user's surroundings, [Black Sun] augmented the user with the surroundings' genetic energy. Allegedly, the reason the Musi clan wanted [Eclipse] so badly was because it was an immaculate technique, the magnum opus of the Eclipse Sage himself.

In contrast, [Black Sun] was still an incomplete technique, one that was far less impactful on the battlefield than [Eclipse]. Furthermore, there seemed to be some mysterious connection between the

two inverted techniques, and the Musi clan believed that the synthesis of the two techniques could produce a marvel never yet seen, perhaps even something that would allow the Musi clan to gain complete control over the third realm.

As he activated his domain, Musi Te materialized a sharp, black polearm in his hands, one burning with netherworld flame. "Take this—[Glaive of Black Sun]!"

He shot a burst of fire straight toward Hong Xi, who attempted to deflect it with her fan and rapier. Her fan gleamed with a soft, silvery light, while her sword shone with reflected moonbeams. Fire and wind filled the room.

In the end, Musi Te's weapon and technique were stronger than Hong Xi's, and the flames roared toward her. Hong Xi activated her iris peacock soulshard, which pierced Musi Te's glaive. He had no idea just what that soulshard was, so he didn't deliberately avoid it.

With a sudden burst, the glaive flashed and reverted to its soulshard form, causing Musi Te's eyes to widen. He could sense that the connection between him and the soulshard had been temporarily severed.

The superior-grade iris peacock soulshard was a particularly versatile soulshard that Zhang Lie would have kept for himself if not for the fact that it couldn't affect soulshards of a higher grade. Furthermore, it wouldn't be able to sever the bond between soulshard and wielder for too long; Zhang Lie didn't think it would be all that useful to him, but it could well be an ace up Hong Xi's sleeve.

Musi Te clearly hadn't expected such a trick. While he was flustered, Hong Xi shot forward, waving fan and sword alike—but Musi Te's shield was able to deflect her blows.

"Let's see just how many other soulshards you have!"

Upon seeing Musi Te pull out yet another soulshard, Hong Xi repeated her trick, and Musi Te had no choice but to dodge. The two combatants' fight ended up in an unstable equilibrium.

As they clashed with glaive and sword, with wind and fire, a rainbow-colored beam shot toward Musi Te, dispelling yet another soulshard from his possession.

Musi Te was honestly quite shocked that Hong Xi had held out for this long; he was even slightly on the losing end. His face turned dark as his eyes gleamed with greed. How long had she had [Eclipse]? Surely not more than a few months—and she was like a different hunter entirely already! No wonder his father wanted it so greedily!

He had to acquire this technique at all costs!

Musi Te suddenly howled. Black flames rolled off his body, devouring everything in sight. The sturdy warehouse, built of reinforced material, even began to melt in the frightening heat.

"Die! [Midnight Sun]!" Black beams shot toward Hong Xi, evaporating all that surrounded them.

Hong Xi's hasty defense was no match for it, and her attacks broke apart in an instant. She activated her iris-peacock soulshard once more, but Musi Te didn't bother avoiding its beam as he swept downward with his glaive.

Chapter 350: Moonlight Fists

Just as the multicolored beam was about to hit Musi Te, he twisted in the air and let the beam hit his soulshard armor rather than his glaive. As his attack landed, the entire warehouse burst apart. The reinforced metal shattered and splintered like glass, and Hong Xi, in front of him, disintegrated to pieces.

Nevertheless, Musi Te frowned. The moment that had occurred, another Hong Xi had appeared to his right. [The Elusive Moon] was able to produce illusions that looked almost like the real thing; Hong Xi had used this technique to evade his attack. She stood in silence, a faint smile on her face, as she launched the sword technique she had prepared. It was too late for Musi Te to defend against the lances of moonlight sent his way.

With his armor temporarily unequipped, Musi Te was forced to take the blows with nothing but his body. Another soulshard fell to the floor—Hong Xi's iris peacock soulshard had struck again.

"I really did underestimate you," he gritted out.

Of course, he still believed that her strength largely derived from [Eclipse]. Without that wondrous technique, he was sure he would be far stronger than she was. He propped himself up with his glaive as he tried to stand up, but he suddenly stumbled, lost his balance, and fell back to the ground.

"How did our young master fall?"

"He must have been so agitated that he stumbled—surely he wouldn't lose to trash from the Hong clan?"

Musi Te found himself feeling weak all over, with most of the genetic energy drained from his body. Beneath him, the domain of [Eclipse] glimmered with white tendrils of smoke.

"This—the domain of [Eclipse]? When did it appear again?" Wasn't the Musi clan's [Black Sun] able to counteract [Eclipse] entirely? [Black Sun] did have some resistance to [Eclipse], but that was far from immunity. Furthermore, this resistance was most effective against hunters of the same or lower strength.

After experiencing Zhang Lie's hellish training, Hong Xi's understanding of [Eclipse] had reached an impressive level. Furthermore, during the battle, she had continuously used [Eclipse] to sap away at Musi Te's [Black Sun], and he would fall prey to her sooner or later.

After he stumbled, Musi Te laughed. "Interesting. It's been far too long since I had an opponent who was able to suppress me."

Hong Xiao shouted, "Musi Te, how can you still laugh at this stage?"

Musi Te grinned even more widely. "Why not? After my exchange with your sister, I've identified her weakness. Hong Xi, you aren't familiar with close combat, are you?"

Hong Xi was silent.

Musi Te roared in laughter. "It's all over for you, wench!"

Hong Xiao's eyes clouded with worry. He had also noticed that his sister had been holding Musi Te off by clever use of her soulshards and domain. Musi Te had to be right.

"The moment I get close to you, none of your techniques will be effective. Let's see if you can kill me first before I restrain you!" Musi Te's legs flared with black flame. "[Solar Flare]!"

He leapt up into the air, then swooped down toward Hong Xi like a flaming meteor. To everyone's surprise, Hong Xi neither dodged nor retreated. Instead, she dematerialized her fan and blade, then floated into the air like the moon goddess.

[Moon Seeker]!

She soared toward the black meteor.

"Is this girl crazy?"

"Does she really think that Young Master Musi wouldn't kill her just because she possesses [Eclipse]?"

"She's crazy, completely crazy, I say!"

Even Musi Te held back subconsciously. Defeating Hong Xi would be fine, but if he were to accidentally kill her, then the Musi clan's machinations all these years would be wasted.

That said, though he chose to relent, Hong Xi wouldn't do so. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Flash]!"

The skies shook. Rings of brilliant light gushed out of Hong Xi's slender wrists, passed through the two arms that Musi Te held up in defense, and struck his right cheek.

Despite Musi Te summoning a helmet-type soulshard at the very last moment, his right cheek caved in, and two teeth shot out of the open wound. His brain felt dazed; he had been beaten into thoughtlessness.

"This blow's for my brother. [Fists of the Silent Sea: Tremor]!"

Her fists shone again and again with rings of light. The next blow caved in Musi Te's chest and made him bleed from all his orifices.

"This blow's for my old housekeeper, who perished because of your clan! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Reflect]!"

A pulse of concentrated moonlight burst out of Hong Xi's right fist, shattering the armor-type soulshard shielding Musi Te's body.

If Musi Te were unable to defend against this rain of attacks, he might well die. His life flashed before his eyes. Musi Te tried to strike at her with the glaive in his right hand, but before he could do so, she broke his wrist.

Musi Te had been relegated to the role of a human punching bag. His guards, along with Hong Xiao, watched on with shock and awe.

Musi Te was completely wrong—Hong Xi was an unbelievable close-combat fighter! Before becoming Zhang Lie's apprentice, Hong Xi had indeed been weak at close combat, but Zhang Lie had worked with her to improve her skills tremendously ever since. Furthermore, he had imparted her with his own [Fists of the Silent Sea], and she had even come up with her own variations on the technique.

