

Walker 731

[Chapter 731 - Power And Solutions](#)

Having learned of this, Lin Mu felt as if his understanding was expanded.

"That's why there were no markers for the beasts, now I get it." Lin Mu spoke.

"Mmmhmm, Humans are the most likely to create upheavals in the world and have higher comprehension of the heavenly Dao, that's why the world might have added them first," Xukong replied.

"Then what's next after this senior?" Lin Mu questioned.

"The world Nexus is like the central part of the world itself.. You can think of it as a separate dimension itself that exists within the world. But it can only be accessed by someone that is ordained by the world or permitted by it.

Seeing the Xiaofan world's current state, I reckon the growth of the Northern tribes might have contributed to its level increasing." Xukong answered.

"How ironic... the ones that want to cause disaster are the ones that are causing the world to grow..." Lin Mu said, finding it strange.

"Such is the cruel game of fate... it will favor you sometimes and hate you sometimes," Xukong replied.

"Hmm... but this is also a good point, isn't it?" Lin Mu asked.

"To be honest, it can go either way," Xukong replied.

"What do you mean, senior?" Lin Mu questioned.

"Seeing as how the world is upgrading, if you manage to succeed the overall power of the world will upgrade too. The spirit Qi level within the world will rise and all the beings of this world will be blessed.

Their talents would elevate and there will be far more cultivators, thus further developing the world. But on the other hand... the Xiaofan world is in a sensitive situation. If the Northern Tribes manage to use the invader or even call more invaders, they might just plunder the world.

The world is like an egg. Once it hatches, it will be able to protect itself, but before that, if someone attacks it, it will just be ripe for the taking. The stronger invaders won't have a problem tearing down the world and taking all that it contains, including the people." Xukong answered.

Hearing this, Lin Mu was surprised. While he had learned about some things from the Lost Immortal's memoirs, there was no mention of such people.

"But for someone to do something like this, they would have to be very strong, right senior? Then there numbers should be less too." Lin Mu spoke.

"Unfortunately, there are cultivators that have turned their entire profession into plundering worlds. And that doesn't really need much other than being at the Immortal realm of which there will be plenty of cultivators in the higher worlds." Xukong replied.

Hearing this Lin Mu's brows furrowed, and he realized the level of danger they were truly in.

"That invader that we have right now might actually be the thing stopping the world from being discovered by the others as well. After all, if a thief has found a good loot, he won't expose the location and allow other thieves to steal it.

This, in addition to the world's barrier, are the two things that are hiding the world from the perception of the others. Once either of those is gone, it may become difficult for the world to survive if someone attacks." Xukong explained.

"Hmm... but we have to get rid of the invader. That is the mission that the world gave us." Lin Mu spoke, finding it to be difficult.

"That is also where the situation resides. After the invader is gone, the world should manage to strengthen itself too. The only problem will be the brief period of time when it will be vulnerable.

As long as it is safe during that time, nothing will happen and it will come out better." Xukong replied.

"I understand, senior... so for all this... I need to be strong." Lin Mu spoke.

"Indeed. To 99% of the problems in the world, strength and power are the solutions. As long as you have sufficient power, anything can be changed... even death... is not the exception." Xukong replied.

Hearing this, Lin Mu's eyes lit up and a new wave of excitement spread through him.

'So power is the absolute factor...' Lin Mu determined.

His gaze turned serious and a faint change occurred within his mind that was unnoticeable to Lin Mu and Xukong, as well. The Altar within the mysterious ring though, flickered as a few dark runes appeared above it for a few seconds before fading away again.

A couple of days passed and a certain? piece of news spread across the capital city.

The Former Adviser of the Hong Lin Kingdom, Adviser Chu had passed away.

Lin Mu who received the message from the King, sighed to himself.

"So he finally passed away..." Lin Mu muttered to himself.

"He did manage to last longer than he would have otherwise. You helped him live longer, so don't be down." Xukong replied.

"Still... he was at the Peak of the Adult Soul Stage of the Nascent Soul realm. If only he was able to break through, he would have had another thousand years of lifespan." Lin Mu spoke.

"Sometimes things cannot proceed as we want them to," Xukong replied.

Lin Mu stayed silent for a while as he processed his thoughts. After about an hour of pondering, Lin Mu spoke again.

"Adviser Chu ultimately died because he lacked power... even if he did not have physical power or his cultivation, he could have used other ways to overcome it... he did not even attempt it and neither did he ask for help from others..." Lin Mu muttered.

"I told you before, his body had deteriorated to the point where nothing would have helped him." Xukong reminded.

"No senior," Lin Mu interrupted, surprising Xukong.

"You said that power could do anything... even defy death. Then tell me, was there absolutely no solution to the man's situation?" Lin Mu questioned.

"Well... there was a solution." Xukong replied.

"Just one?" Lin Mu asked again.

"Well... solutions." Xukong said.

"See... he lacked the drive to find them." Lin Mu replied, as his expression turned cold.

[Chapter 732 - A Funeral And Tribulation](#)

Xukong did not know what Lin Mu was going through right now.

'He isn't like this normally... why's he acting like this?' Xukong wondered to himself.

He tried to check Lin Mu's mind but was unable to enter it. He felt like he was blocked and no matter what he tried he could not see anything within it. There wasn't anything within the shared mind space either so he was left with nothing.

~Sigh~

"He's growing and developing... I need to let him figure things out on his own as well..." Xukong shook his head.

Lin Mu sat there for a few more hours and only moved when another message was sent to him.

"Senior Lin Mu, will you be attending the funeral?" King Hong questioned.

.

~huh~

Lin Mu took a deep breath and stood up.

"I'm coming..." Lin Mu said before disappearing from the courtyard.

A few minutes later, he appeared at the royal palace. The vibe of the entire city was somber, and the people seemed to be in mourning. Though the ones that knew of the former adviser were very few, the people still joined in.

Most of the generations of citizens that lived in the city currently didn't even know of the former adviser and even less had lived during the time when he was the adviser. The ones that did live during their time were either old cultivators or the officials.

The funeral was carried out in a grand manner, befitting of the man's contribution and status. It lasted about twelve hours at the end of which the former adviser was finally buried in the royal cemetery, along with the other deceased advisers.

His memorial tablet was then placed in the royal shrine, along with the rest of the ancestors. Lin Mu watched the entire procession silently, without speaking a word. He learned a few things during it as well, but kept them in his mind for now.

A day after the funeral of the former adviser, Lin Mu felt another change in the area.

"It's time for the heavenly tribulation," Lin Mu said as he sensed the spatial fluctuations occurring in the sky.

~shua~

He disappeared from the courtyard and appeared in the sky. He squinted his eyes and looked up at the sky, using his spatial perception at the same time. There, he could see the cracks in the fabric of space and the tribulation energy that stirred within it.

Lin Mu estimated the time of the tribulation and knew that it was not long. He quickly contracted Jing Luo and the others about it.

"You can head on to the tribulation attenuation formation. I already have it ready and the control plate is kept in the abode there as well. You should be able to use it." Jing Luo spoke.

Jing Luo was currently in White River City. It was one of the major cities of the Hong Lin kingdom and was located to the south east border of the kingdom. It was also the only city that was not directly in the forest itself.

Jing Luo would not be able to come back, thus Lin Mu would have to do it himself. The two disciples Hua San and Hua Wu would be acting as the Dharma protectors during that time along with Adviser Liu as well.

"Time to get to it," Lin Mu muttered before he sped to the royal palace.

Using phase, he directly passed through all obstacles and appeared in the royal court. It was currently empty and other than the King there was no one else present there. Lin Mu was the first one to detect it, as even the King had yet to fully get the sense of it.

"King Hong... it is time." Lin Mu spoke.

King Hong opened his time and slight confusion could be seen in his eyes. But a second later, his eyes went wide, and he realized what Lin Mu spoke about.

'He knew before me? But isn't this my tribulation?' King Hong was surprised.

~Creak~

The door of the royal court opened and Adviser Liu appeared as well. Lin Mu and sent him a transmission as well, but he had still managed to reach here first.

"Senior Lin Mu's already here?" Adviser Liu was also surprised, but he quickly suppressed it and looked at his nephew.

He too, could feel the fluctuations of space around his nephew. They were very faint for him, but he knew that was a telltale sign of the heavenly tribulation. All Nascent soul realm cultivators would be able to sense such spatial fluctuation, but not on the level of Lin Mu.

"The tribulation attenuation formation is ready. We should leave. Hua San and Hua Wu have already on their way there as well." Lin Mu spoke.

"Alright," King Hong nodded his head.

Lin Mu waved his hand, and a broad sword appeared in front of him. He sent it to the King and spoke, "get on it, it'll be faster if I take you two there."

"Thank you, senior." King Hong replied with gratitude.

"Adviser Liu should get on too. I'm still faster than you as well. If we go normally, you will be left behind." Lin Mu added.

"As you say, Senior." The adviser said and jumped onto the broadsword as well.

Lin Mu had intentionally picked this spirit weapon since it was the widest and wouldn't have problems in accommodating two or even three people on it. Having done this, the three of them flew up into the sky.

~SHUA~

The commoners could feel a strong wind blowing for a few seconds as they saw a streak moving across the sky at great speed. They could not see what that streak was, but it was certainly the source of the wind.

Lin Mu and the other two reached the mountain where the abode was located in about thirty minutes. The speed at which they traveled was shocking to King Hong and adviser Liu.

While they had heard that Lin Mu was fast, they had not expected him to be this fast!

[Chapter 733 - The Tribulation Arrives](#)

~shua~

~thud~ thud~

The broad sword came to a halt on top of the mountain and King Hong and adviser Liu got down.

"I'll get the formation ready, King Hong can take his position." Lin Mu spoke.

"Alright," King Hong nodded his head.

"We're here too!" in the next moment, the voice of the two disciples could be heard as well.

Hua Wu and Hua San were already on their way back when they got the message that it was time for the heavenly tribulation. Thus they sped up and changed their destination to the mountain directly.

"Perfect timing, let's get started.." Adviser Liu said and all of them sat down in their respective positions.

Adviser Liu sat to the northern direction, while Hua San and Hua Wu sat in the east and west. About a minute later, Lin Mu returned as well and he had the formation controlling plate in his hand.

"Let's get this started, the clouds should start appearing at any moment now." Lin Mu said and took a look at the sky.

The spatial fluctuations in the sky were getting stronger and the crack in the space had widened. The only reason it was not visible to the naked eye was because the world would hide it and the world barrier assist in doing so.

~shua~

The formation plate lit up on Lin Mu's hand and he tapped on two points on the plate, activating the Tribulation attenuation formation. A circle appeared on the ground and at the center of it was none other than King Hong.

Then more runes appeared from it and created a square around the circle. At the corners of the square sat the Dharma protectors. Lin Mu took his place in the empty corner and the formation was finally ready.

This was the tribulation attenuation formation that was made for having four Dharma protectors. The number of Dharma protectors could be adjusted according to the need and availability of the people.

For King Hong, since there were four people who could act as one, Jing Luo had made one for four people. The corners of the square were the points that were just out of the range of the tribulation and thus it was the limit till one was supposed to be.

Once the formation was activated, it glowed for a bit before fading away. It would now reappear when the tribulation lightning struck.

~WOOO~

~RUMBLE~

The sound of wind blowing could be heard and a faint sound of thunder could be heard, despite the fact that there were no clouds in the sky.

'That's the spatial tear expanding...' Lin Mu recognized.

The sound was similar to that of thunder but was different in nature. Soon the winds started to get stronger and black clouds appeared in the sky. The clouds spread very fast and in less than a minute; the sky was fully covered in dark clouds.

"This is different..." Lin Mu muttered and furrowed his brows.

King Hong was already sitting with his eyes closed in a cross legged position and was mediating to reach his optimum condition.

"It might be a variant Tribulation," Xukong suddenly spoke.

Hearing this, Lin Mu was surprised.

"You sure, senior?" Lin Mu questioned.

"It's hard to tell exactly. But the delay in its appearance and the spatial tearing beforehand are two of the common signs." Xukong answered.

"But don't they only appear for people with unique physiques or cultivation techniques?" Lin Mu asked.

"Yes, that is usually the case, but there are always outliers. Perhaps the talent of King Hong is enough for the tribulation to change." Xukong replied.

"Hmm... if that truly is the case, then this tribulation attenuation formation does make sense to use.

And just as Lin Mu said this to senior Xukong, he heard Adviser Liu yell out something.

"Heavens! It's the same!" Adviser Liu said.

"You knew about this Adviser Liu?" Lin Mu questioned with confusion.

"Yes... this is the same tribulation that King Hong's father, my brother had. His grandfather and my father, the king of two generations ago, also had the same tribulation. It is this tribulation that both of them perished as well." Adviser Liu spoke.

"Huh? Is that why you two were desperate for a tribulation attenuation formation?" Lin Mu questioned.

"Indeed. This tribulation has haunted our family for generations. It's different from normal heavenly tribulations and affects the first born of the heir. That is the reason why I managed to break through to the Nascent Soul realm, but my brother that was far more talented could not." Adviser Liu answered.

"I see... but then if you have this tribulation, that means there is something special about you guys. There is no other way it would appear across multiple generations." Lin Mu replied.

"I don't know what it exactly is. But all of the kings have died to this very tribulation. Perhaps the only ones who managed to overcome it were the first three kings of the Hong Lin Kingdom." Adviser Liu explained.

Hearing this, Lin Mu was now quite intrigued and was wondering just what kind of a variant tribulation was it.

~Rumble~

The black clouds in the sky started to stir and move. Soon arcs of lightning could be seen swimming within the clouds. Though when Lin Mu looked at them, he found them to be slightly different from the normal tribulation lightning.

"Huh? Why is it of a slightly different color?" Lin Mu questioned.

Instead of the usual white-purple color of the lightning, it had a white-blue color instead. Its inside was white, while its edges were blue in color. Looking at it Lin Mu got a cold feeling on his skin.

"It is certainly strange..." Lin Mu muttered.

"That's the Aqua wisp Tribulation lightning!" Xukong suddenly spoke.

"You know about it, senior?" Lin Mu questioned, feeling curious.

"I do indeed. And I think I also know why they get this tribulation every time they try to break through to the Nascent Soul realm." Xukong answered.

[Chapter 734 - Aqua Wisp Tribulation Lightning](#)

Hearing that Senior Xukong knew about the reason Lin Mu was intrigued.

"I think the entire Hong clan might have a dormant physique that never managed to awaken. The first King Hong finding the use of the Hong Lin trees might also be due to that. We already know that they contain fire attribute spirit Qi, thus it makes sense.

The Dormant Physique is definitely of the fire attribute and thus, to oppose it, the Aqua Wisp Tribulation lightning has appeared. This is a dual attribute tribulation lightning and has the water element in addition to the Lightning." Xukong explained.

.

Lin Mu felt enlightened and didn't know that there were different elemental variations in the tribulation lightning as well. It was new for him and he was also surprised by the fact that the Hong clan had a dormant physique.

This was the first time he would be seeing another person with a unique physique.

"Is the physique they have an innate physique too?" Lin Mu asked.

"It is bound to be. If it were an acquired physique, all of their heirs wouldn't have had it either. Plus, it makes sense that only one heir in the family has it. Many physiques can only be passed on once by a person to a single offspring.

This is where the physiques differ from the bloodlines. The bloodlines can be used by an entire clan but physiques are limited to a few people." Xukong replied.

Lin Mu nodded his head and watched on, wondering just what kind of a physique it could be. Unless the physique was awakened, he would not be able to tell what it was.

"Wait... if the first three kings managed to survive this, then doesn't it mean that they knew what physique they had?" Lin Mu questioned.

"Not necessarily. Even if they managed to survive, there is a great chance they never awakened the physique or reached the point for that. Some physiques require a certain cultivation base to activate, while some can be utterly random.

I can't exactly tell what the problem is unless I know the name of the physique." Xukong spoke.

"Hmm... I see. Hopefully, he is lucky and we get a strong ally..." Lin Mu muttered.

To Lin Mu, this was both welcoming and a bit of disturbing information at the same time. If King Hong managed to live through this, he would come out far stronger than before and might even have his talent increased to a new level.

Lin Mu could only hope that something like that happened.

~RUMBLE~

About five minutes had passed since the appearance of the tribulation clouds and it was now time for it to start.

~BOOM~

The first tribulation bolt was quick and struck down without much wind-up.

~DENG~

The Tribulation attenuation formation activated and runes spread across the air, forming into a dome. The lightning hit the dome with a loud sound, making it tremble. The might of this lightning was certainly not something that normal one could compare to.

Still... the formation managed to come out on top and blocked the lightning before reducing its power by half. Once that was done, it passed through the dome and struck King Hong.

~Sizzle~

The sound of something burning could be heard as the lightning bolt passed through King Hong's body. The man was unyielding though, and did not let out a single sound. He held his ground and quickly resisted the lightning.

~pew~

"The first one is done." Lin Mu said.

"That's just the first one... we don't know how many he would be getting." Xukong reminded.

~gulp~

Lin Mu swallowed his saliva and felt lucky that he didn't need to go through a tribulation that was similar to this. The ones that he had used before were the normal tribulation lightning bolts, even if they had come from different beings.

One of them was taken from alchemist Bilao, one was taken from the Fire Fang snake and the last was taken from the Black Water snake. But the power of this single bolt was definitely stronger than that.

Lin Mu narrowed his eyes as he tried to sense the spirit Qi in the air. It was moving in a rather strange pattern and it was like the sea, ebbing and flowing.

"Something is different..." Lin Mu muttered.

~RUMBLE~

The rumbling thunder quaked in the sky as another bolt was charged up.

~BOOM~

The second bolt descended and struck the formation, making it tremble, but it still managed to hold well. The power of the bolt was reduced by half before it shot down to King Hong.

"Ugh..." The man let out a muffled grunt but held on, letting his spirit Qi strengthen his body.

~RUMBLE~

The third bolt charged up very quickly after the second one and struck down before the formation could fully block it.

~BOOM~

This time, only thirty percent of it could be blocked and King Hong received seventy percent of the bolt's power. One must know that the power of the bolts got stronger as they progressed and thus the third bolt was far more powerful than the previous too.

"ARGH!" this time King Hong let out a cry of pain and almost fell from his position.

Blood flowed down his head, and his clothes were now burning. The lightning had set them on fire and they were now an additional hindrance to the man.

~shua~

Adviser Liu noticed this and waved his hand, sending out a wind skill that extinguished the fire. But it was now that Lin mu noticed something.

"He's shivering?" Lin Mu muttered.

He could see that King Hong was shivering as if he was cold. And not only that, but his skin had also taken on a slightly blue tone as if out of blood.

"It's the Aqua wisp Tribulation lightning's secondary effect! It has managed to penetrate his meridians and is now clogging them up with water elemental Qi that will prevent his own Qi from circulating properly!" Xukong spoke up.

[Chapter 735 - Critical Action!](#)

Hearing senior Xukong's words, Lin Mu became concerned. He knew just how dangerous it would be for someone if their meridians got clogged up at a time like this. Withstanding heavenly tribulation lightning was no easy task and most that went against would end up dying.

Having one's meridians blocked basically made it so that they would be bearing the full brunt of the lightning with just their body. If it were a body cultivator or someone like Lin Mu who practiced both, they wouldn't have a problem, but for a pure spirit Qi cultivator, this was no less than a death sentence.

"Dammit!" Lin Mu cursed out loud.

Adviser Liu and the other two also heard this and knew that the situation was bad. They could observe the condition of King Hong as well and saw that he was not in the best state for this.

"What do we do, senior brother?" Hua Wu questioned Hua San.

Hua San pursed his lips, unable to come up with anything.. He didn't know just what could be done here without harming himself or the others. If they interfered without precautions, they may very well end up dying themselves.

Not to mention, they might trigger a punishment tribulation instead and cause even more problems for King Hong.

"I... don't know... only someone as knowledgeable as master or strong enough can do anything." Hua San answered.

"It's the curse! This is the curse that stops them from defending properly!" Adviser Liu recognized.

"I know! This is called as the Aqua Wisp Tribulation lightning and is a variant tribulation." Lin Mu informed them.

Thankfully, after the third bolt, the next bolt needed to gather again. The power within the tribulation clouds was seething and increased steadily. It was evident that King Hong would be having more than just three tribulation lightning bolts.

Usually even one was enough to crack one's core and hatch the nascent soul. Lin Mu needed three as well, but King Hong was in a different situation. Not only did his core affect the state of the tribulation lightning, but his dormant physique did as well.

"What in the name of heavens..." Adviser Liu muttered in shock after hearing the truth behind the tribulation.

He watched his nephew with a concerned look on his face. He wanted to help him survive the tribulation but knew that if he interfered now, the tribulation may only get stronger.

He then looked towards the only person who could potentially help in this time.

"Senior Lin Mu, you know what this tribulation is. You must have a solution too! Please! Please save my nephew!" Adviser Liu pleaded.

Lin Mu furrowed his brows. He truly wanted to help, but he was at a loss as well.

"Senior, do you have any solution to this?" Lin Mu questioned.

"Unless the water elemental spirit Qi can be purged from the man's meridians, it would be impossible for him to overcome this. Even if the tribulation lightning is blocked, he still needs to depend on himself to overcome this.

At most, you can buy him time and hope that he survives." Xukong answered.

Hearing this, Lin Mu knew he didn't really have many options. His mind ran at the speed of lightning as he went through numerous thoughts.

"WAIT! An obstruction in his meridians should be similar to the obstructions caused by pill toxins, right?" Lin Mu questioned as an idea came to his mind.

"Hmm... in this case, yes. They should function similarly." Xukong replied.

"I GOT IT! The toxin cleansing pill! A high grade one should do the trick and if not one, I can add ten more!" Lin Mu said.

Xukong narrowed his eyes and thought over it for a second.

"That may... actually work! But he will have to be undisturbed during this time so that the pills show their effect. He will also need to actively get his own spirit Qi, to push it out. So unless that is done, this option will not work either." Xukong replied.

"That can be done..." Lin Mu said as a dangerous glint shone in his eyes.

"Wait, what are you doing to do?" Xukong asked, feeling concerned.

"I'm going to block the lightning for him... I've taken it before and I sure as hell can do it again!" Lin Mu said.

"WAIT!—" But before Xukong could say anything, Lin Mu flew straight towards King Hong.

~sigh~

Seeing this, Xukong sighed to himself and shook his head.

"Youth... they will do as they see fit in the end... I suppose this will be a learning experience for him." Xukong muttered to himself.

'Besides, you won't let it go too far, would you... Xiaofan world?' Xukong said in his mind.

~shua~

Lin Mu moved like the wind and appeared right next to King Hong. Seeing this, Adviser Liu, Hua San, and Hua Wu were stunned.

"He... he's actually doing it..." Hua Wu muttered in disbelief.

"I can't even..." Adviser Liu was also shocked by the risk Lin Mu was taking.

Even if someone was a Nascent soul realm cultivator, interfering in a heavenly tribulation was not something that came without a price. Perhaps if this was a normal tribulation, the four of them could have combined their strengths to reduce the impact of the tribulation lightning, but that was not an option with a variant tribulation.

Besides, that was something done only for tribulations that had less than three bolts. In the case of King Hong, it had already reached four bolts and it didn't seem like the fourth bolt would be the last one either.

King Hong was listening to everything as well and felt touched when Lin Mu decided to risk his life to come to save him.

Lin Mu quickly took out the Toxin cleansing pills and shouted, "open your mouth, King Hong!"

King Hong did as he was asked and a pill was dropped into his mouth. He had not eaten this kind of a pill before and didn't know of its effects. But since Lin Mu was the one who had given him this, he was fine with it.

[Chapter 736 - Fearless](#)

King Hong had developed enough trust in Lin Mu now that he knew Lin Mu didn't mean any harm to him or his kingdom. All he wanted was strong and loyal allies that would help him stand against Gu Yao and the Northern Tribes.

He quickly swallowed the Toxin cleaning pill, which turned into a medicinal liquid and waited for its effects. They didn't take long to show either, and a warm sensation spread through his belly.

It started to spread all the way to his extremities and the cold he was feeling earlier was reducing.

"Focus on removing the blockages in your meridians, I'll handle the lightning!" Lin Mu said as he looked up at the lightning arcs streaking across the black clouds.

The blue white color of the lightning looked threatening, like the Axe of an executioner hanging over one's neck. One could tell that the heavens were angry and did not want King Hong to exist anymore.

It was as if his existence was against the rules of the heavens and it wanted to wipe him off the face of the world. Cultivation was doing against the heavens and that was exactly what King Hong was doing and all Nascent soul realm cultivators did..

Right now there was no fear within Lin Mu's heart... rather, there was a strange sense of excitement spreading within his body. He felt like he was made for this and anticipated the lightning.

~RUMBLE~

Unknowingly, a smile appeared on his face as he flew up. The sound of thunder accompanies the arcs of lightning that were forming into a rather large bolt. It was bigger than the previous three and its power could only be imagined.

~BOOM~

The air was torn apart as the lightning fell from the tribulation clouds. Lin Mu didn't falter and met the bolt head on.

~KABOOM~

A blinding flash occurred, forcing the rest to close their eyes. A couple of seconds later, the flash faded away and they could see again. But when they looked up at the sky, there were far more shocked than before.

"HOW!" This was the only word that was in their mind as they saw Lin Mu standing in the air.

His hands were crossed above his head as a brown layer of armor protected his body. The bolt of tribulation lightning was as if frozen above him. The tribulation attenuation formation had managed to reduce its festiveness by about forty percent, but even then, blocking it was no joke.

"He's... he's actively resisting it!" Hua San said in disbelief.

They watched on as Lin Mu pushed against the force of the lightning bolt.

~crackle~crackle~

The bolt tried to get past Lin Mu but could not. The armor made by the mortal strengthening scripture was strong enough to hold it back.

~Crack~

Still, the power of the bolt was quite strong and the armor started to crack as well. Lin Mu opened his eyes as well and saw the bolt. A stern expression appeared on his face as he conjured more power.

"BEGONE!" Lin Mu yelled as he pushed his hands apart.

~BOOM~

The bolt that was blocked by his hands was deflected to the side before striking a tree in the distance.

~shua~

The tree exploded instantly and was reduced to ash in a second.

~huu~?

Lin Mu took a deep breath as he looked at his arms. They were undamaged, but the armor of the mortal straightening scripture was cracked.

"I can do this again," Lin Mu said as he looked fearlessly at the sky.

~RUMBLE~

The tribulation clouds let out a thundering shake, as if they were infuriated. Arcs of lightning streaked across the clouds once again before gathering up into a bolt. This time, the speed was far quicker than before.

~BOOM~

The lightning bolt descend again and Lin Mu clashed against it.

"GAH!" Lin Mu grunted as the impact of the lighting made his body tremble.

He still held on forcefully and didn't falter.

"AAAAAHHHH!" Lin Mu shouted as he pushed the bolt away.

~KABOOM~

The tribulation bolt struck another tree, but this time spread to the ones around it as well. The small group of trees was quickly reduced to a pile of ashes with cinders glowing within.

~CRACK~

The armor made of Mortal Strengthening scripture cracked further, before the part on his arms dissipated entirely. The parts on his shoulders and torso were cracked the most, following his head and legs.

King Hong was feeling angry right now... he was angry at himself and angry at the world.

'Why is it that my clan has to suffer this!? Why is it that others have to suffer because of my suffering!? Why are the heavens punishing us when all we want to do is to protect the world!?'

WHY! JUST WHY!?' King Hong shouted in his heart.

The toxin cleaning pill Lin Mu had fed him was doing its part and had managed to remove half of the blockage in his meridians. But King Hong knew this was not enough.

He gritted his teeth as his anger overflowed. At this moment, he opened his eyes and looked up.

"LEAVE SENIOR LIN MU! YOU'VE DONE ENOUGH! I SHALL BEAR THE REST!" King Hong shouted.

Lin Mu saw the awakened King Hong and furrowed his brows.

"No, it's not enough! You are not ready!" Lin Mu replied.

"TRUST ME! THIS IS MORE THAN ENOUGH! IF I CAN'T EVEN BEAR THIS ON MY OWN WHAT KIND OF A KING WILL I BE?!" King Hong said with determination.

Hearing the voice of his nephew, Adviser Liu was awed.

"Brother... your son has become a true king..." He muttered.

Seeing the determination in King Hong's eyes and voice, Lin Mu wavered.

"Go back, this is enough. Any more and the punishment tribulation will truly descend," Xukong warned.

~Sigh~

"Okay, senior..." Lin Mu replied and blinked back to his previous position.

With Lin Mu gone, King Hong stood up and faced the sky.

"COME! DO YOUR WORST! I'LL TAKE IT ALL!" He taunted, his fury flowing like magma.

[Chapter 737 - Rage Of The Unwilling](#)

Right now, King Hong exuded a dauntless aura. It soared to the sky, as if clashing against the Tribulation lightning instead. Lin Mu observed it too and found the aura to be powerful, and even a little bit familiar.

'Why is it familiar?' Lin Mu wondered.

He observed King Hong who was facing the tribulation and saw his spirit Qi roiling.

"Survive!" Lin Mu said.

.

~KABOOM~

The Tribulation thunder descended and pierced the Tribulation attenuation formation's barrier. This time it barely managed to reduce it by 20% and King Hong faced eighty percent of its power.

"AAAAA!" King Hong let out a battle cry as he bore the force of the lightning.

They flowed in through his head and spread throughout his body. His robes were charred and his skin was burned in many places. His hair was either burned away or stood like spikes.

His eyes though shone with an unyielding light and he forcibly held his ground. His bones though, creaked under the pressure and his knees started to bend.

"I... will... overcome this!" King Hong said with determination.

Lin Mu looked at the man and tried to see just how far he was. He wanted to see if his core was anywhere close to hatching or not. But in the current situation, it was hard to do so.

"The tribulation should also be a good judgment, right?" Lin Mu muttered as he observed it.

His spatial perception activated, and he peered past the clouds. There he could see that the spatial crack from which the tribulation energy was entering this world was still there. It had shown no sign of reducing.

"Not over..." Lin Mu said.

"It may have ended at this bolt if you had not blocked the earlier bolts. This may have just made it more difficult for him." Senior Xukong spoke.

"We had no choice... it was either giving him the chance to survive for long on a harder difficulty or dying early." Lin Mu replied.

"Hmm... though his core should be close to being fully cracked. This single bolt was already as powerful as the first three bolts combined." Xukong spoke.

"Hopefully it's enough." Lin Mu replied.

He then went silent and watched on as the tribulation seared the body of the king.

~zisssss~

The lightning bolt was finally overcome by King Hong but it had left him in dire straits. His knees were half bent, and it now looked like he was in the horse stance instead. His eyes had also dimmed down considerably.

"HAA.... Haaa... Haaa..." King Hong took labored breaths as he tried to stabilize his condition.

That single bolt had managed to take all of his strength and stamina.

~Rumble~

The sound of thunder echoed in the sky again, as if taunting the king again.

"Ahahahah! Not over yet? COME ON! I'M FREE TO TAKE IT!" King Hong shouted in rage.

There was already water attribute tribulation Qi starting to settle in his meridians again. The efficacy of the Toxin Cleansing pill had already been used up and now the King had nothing to rely on.

Lin Mu sensed the change in the king and his spirit sense leaped forward like a harpoon. It pierced the body of the King and quickly entered his Dantian. The man didn't even realize that a spirit sense had probed him due to the state he was in.

"His meridians are damaged in several points and the water attribute tribulation Qi has returned... Dammit!" Lin Mu cursed.

He continued to the depths of his dantian and saw the state of his core.

"Huh? It's still not fully cracked?" Lin Mu was surprised.

Xukong took a look as well and saw that it was barely hanging by a thread.

"Only a bare smidgen left..." Xukong said as he saw the core that was cracked over 99%.

"So close... so close to the breakthrough..." Lin Mu said, feeling uneasy.

~Sigh~

"Things are like this in life... fate likes to play a lot and every being is a toy for it..." Xukong spoke.

Lin Mu's expression fell as he observed the King. The man had been staunch earlier, but the lightning bolt had sapped his energy. Lin Mu had started to like the king and had found him to be a good person.

Not only did he care for his people, but he also honored his promises. He was a man worry of honor. He was someone who Lin Mu would like to be friends with and having him in his alliance would be invaluable.

Lin Mu felt unwilling.

He felt it was unfair.

"No... no... he cannot die like this!" Lin Mu said as a mix of unwillingness and rage appeared in his eyes.

It was at this moment that a few words echoed in his mind.

'Ignite thy heart as a furnace, let your rage fuel your strength and unleash rampage upon the worlds!'

The burning heart sutra echoed in his mind, and Lin Mu knew what to do. Xukong was stunned by it as well, since he had heard the words as well.

"That... that is certainly the demonic path... that voice... that is not normal..." Xukong said to himself.

Lin Mu on the other hand, started to chant the Burning heart sutra. But the way he was using it was different this time. He was not using it on himself, but was rather targeting King Hong.

King Hong, whose eyes had dulled and whose vigor had wavered, suddenly heard a voice speaking in his ears. It seemed like it was coming from far, yet he could hear each and every word.

The only thing was he could not tell what the words were. They were in some unknown language. Still, the meaning of the words as something he was able to understand on his own.

It was as if these words resonated with him. They told him he was right to be angry. That he was right to be unwilling. It was the heavens that were forcing his hand and thus he would push back.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!"

[Chapter 738 - Dauntless](#)

Hua San, Hua Wu and Adviser Liu looked at the King, who let out a shout that was more close to a roar.

His entire demeanor had changed, and so did his looks. His body seemed to have swelled up as veins popped up on it. His eyes turned bloodshot and his muscles bulged. The vitality in his body was burning at a rapid rate as he let out a Dauntless aura that was many times stronger than before.

"Wh-what?" Hua San and Hua Wu were stunned.

"What's happening?" Adviser Liu was confused as well.

Just a few seconds ago, he was convinced that his nephew was going to die and there was nothing he could do. But now suddenly he seemed to have gained a second wind. Lin Mu observed it too and kept on chanting.

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He had not used the Burning heart sutra on anyone else other than him after his breakthrough and didn't know what level of an effect it would have. He had already seen the effect of the other sutras though and knew that their effects were enough to affect Nascent soul realm cultivators.

It was fine if he used the Calming and Severing heart sutras on other people as they didn't really cause any direct harm, but the Burning heart sutra was not exactly normal. It would put a strain on the body when used and would rapidly drain one's vitality at the same time.

For someone like Lin Mu who had massive stores of it, it was easy to use. Not to mention he had vital essence rather than vital energy in his body, which was a higher version that could last far longer.

But for others who had not even reached the tenth stage of the Body tempering realm, the amount of vitality within their body was limited, even if their cultivation base was rather high.

Though the boost that it gave in exchange for that was also significant.

Every inch of King Hong's body was exuding a power that was unseen before. Even when he had exerted all of his cultivation base before, he had not come close to this power level. But now it was beyond that.

It was as if rage fueled his strength and unwillingness fueled his heart. The restraints he was feeling earlier were freed and he didn't feel the pressure from the tribulation either. It was as if some shackles that were put on him at some time were broken.

Lin Mu who was observing the man using his spirit sense, realized that the water elemental tribulation Qi that was starting to block King Hong's meridians were forcibly being pushed out by the burning vitality of King Hong.

"I WILL DEFEAT YOU!!!!" King Hong let out a roar.

~KABOOM~

As if to reply to him, the Tribulation clouds gathered all of their power and sent out one final tribulation bolt. It descended at blinding speed, but King Hong did not waver. Instead of letting it fall on him freely, he punched out in retaliation and his fist was hit with the bolt.

~splat~

The skin on his fist was instantly charred by the lightning and the flesh direly exploded. His bones were exposed now, yet the man continued to push. It was as if the pain was a foreign existence to him and the only thing in his mind was to defeat the tribulation.

He didn't even think about surviving now, but rather wanted to show the heavens his unwillingness.

But of course, the power of the lightning was far stronger than before and continued to push through his hand. His skin kept on falling off as it got turned to ash and his flesh became mangled.

It spread from his fist, to his forearms to his shoulder, and finally to his torso. In a few seconds, it was about to reach his heart as well. Hua Wu, Hua San and Adviser Liu closed their eyes as they were unable to watch the cruel sight anymore.

But Lin Mu did not. He kept his eyes on the King and observed each and every instant of this time period.

To him, it would be unfair if there was no one to witness the King's actions now.

Alas, the force of the tribulation was not something that could just be overcome with will. The lightning had already spread to his neck and was about to reach his heart. The moment it reached either of them, the man would perish.

"Is this it?" Lin Mu muttered.

~HONG~

But just as he said that an almost imperceptible wave of aura spread out from King Hong. This aura was different from his own and had something else in it that Lin Mu found hard to identify.

~shua~shua~shua~

As the aura spread across the area, the Hong Lin trees started to rustle. Lin Mu looked around and saw that the trees were resonating right now. He could feel it even more because he had practiced the embrace of Hong Lin and was sensitive to it now.

"What... what is... the Hong Lin Trees are reacting?" Lin Mu muttered.

~poof~

Then a rather unexpected change occurred in the area. One after the other, the Hong Lin trees started to burn.

"Huh? Did fire spread when we were not looking?" Hua San was confused too.

But then the phenomenon started to spread at a rapid rate. In less than ten seconds, a radius over one kilometer was burning at the same time. Lin Mu, who had greater sensitivity, could feel the fire element spirit Qi spiking in the air.

Its concentration was rising rapidly and it was even more than when he had triggered the spirit Qi influx before.

~WHOOSH~

A wind started to blow and one could see tiny embers floating within the wind. They glowed in a red light and looked rather beautiful. The wind tried to blow them out, yet they kept on burning and let out their warmth and light.

All of these embers flew towards King Hong, shocking everyone.

[Chapter 739 - Crushing Pressure](#)

x

~shua~shua~shua~

The embers sped up, and soon it was as if a tide of embers was drowning King Hong. In less than three seconds, the man was completely covered in embers and looked like a flowing red man without any features.

Adviser Liu didn't know if this was good, but in the current situation, he could only think bad. His heart shuddered, and he just hoped that some miracle would happen.

~Crack~

All of a sudden, a resounding crack was heard and King Hong's fist, that had been frozen in one place started to move.

"It's... it's rising!" Hua Wu Shouted.

~Huala~

The aura of King Hong appeared again, but this time, it had transformed. Previously, the dauntlessness in his aura was like a secondary factor, but now it seemed to have fully assimilated within it..

"BEGONE!" King Hong's voice echoed.

~BOOM~

The tribulation bolt was forcefully dissipated by the King and it disappeared.

~shua~

Wind started to stir as the spirit Qi in the air became volatile.

"Wha-what's happening?" Hua Wu was concerned.

"Are... are the tribulation clouds angry?" Hua San was in a similar state.

"No," It was at this time that Lin Mu spoke.

"It's time..." Lin Mu muttered.

~HONGLONG~

The spirit Qi in the air started stirring as a vortex formed above the King. Since the fire attribute spirit Qi was concentrated and was present in the highest amount, the air was tinted fire red.

The spirit Qi started to pour into King Hong at a rapid pace as his cultivation base rose.

~KACHA~

An audible crack was heard and the moment it did, a heavy pressure exuded from King Hong's body.

"HE BROKE THROUGH!" Hua Wu exclaimed.

"Qiqiang broke through.... QIQIANG BROKE THROUGH!!!" Adviser Liu said out loud with joy.

But this was merely the start of the change. The pressure exuding from the man kept on increasing and soon it reached a state where it was getting uncomfortable for Hua San, Hua Wu and Adviser Liu.

Seconds passed by and after about two minutes, it was hard for them to even breath.

"This... ugh..." Hua Wu grunted in slight pain.

Lin Mu was the only one who was fine in all this and noticed their state. King Hong's aura was still increasing and he had already broken through to the Nascent soul realm. But the spirit Qi infusion was far from over.

"Come over to my side!" Lin Mu called.

The three men heard him and hesitated since they were supposed to be Dharma protectors.

"Come on, your work is over. If you stay there, you will just get injured." Lin Mu spoke again.

They nodded their heads and went over to Lin Mu in the next second.

~shua~

Lin Mu took out the formation array controlling plate and tapped on it a few times. Hundreds of runes appeared in the air in the next moment as the entire formation array was revealed.

"Let me make it a bit more accommodating." Lin Mu said before waving his hands in the air.

Runes started to fly around and arranged themselves into a different format. The Tribulation attenuation formation had already been broken earlier due to the increased power of the Tribulation and thus Lin Mu was basically recycling the remnants.

While his skill was not enough to make a tribulation attenuation formation on his own, he did have enough skill to remake it into something of a defensive formation. Tribulation attenuation formations fell into a defensive category of formations any way and the complexity only came from the fact that they needed to process tribulation lightning.

Other than that factor, they could work in any defensive formation once the necessary parts were removed. And the thing was, the tribulation lightning damaged that very part which processed the lightning.

That was also why normal defensive formations and spirit tools were either not effective at all or were very less effective against tribulation lightning due to its inherit property of piercing against all defenses.

There were numerous foolish cultivators who had thought that they could hide somewhere strong to stop a tribulation, but that was just being ignorant. Even if someone hid all the way inside the depths of the earth, hundreds of kilometers deep, the tribulation lightning will still find its way there.

If anything, the lightning will merely feel some resistance, but for that, the tribulation clouds will just increase the power of the tribulation to compensate for the weakening over the travel period.

In fact, there were several species of spirit beasts that lived underground and actually never went to the surface. There were many that also reached the Nascent soul realm and would break through underground. They still managed to experience tribulations there.

And as Lin Mu had already experienced, hiding away in a different world or plane would not work either. Tribulation lightning would literally tear through space to hit you. Thus, manipulating the defensive part of the formation was far more easier for Lin Mu.

But as he was doing this, Hua San and Hua Wu were watching on in surprise.

"Senior Lin Mu is proficient in formations too?" Hua Wu said.

"I'm just learning, I'm barely a beginner." Lin Mu replied.

But hearing this was just even more stunning to Hua Wu and Hua San.

'Casually manipulating runes of a broken formation and re-purposing without the use of assertive spirit tools is a beginner? Then what are we? Less than beginners?' Hua San couldn't help but think.

"Hmm.... This should be enough." Lin Mu said.

He then pulled his hands apart and pointed them in six places around them. The runes turned into six flags and planted themselves on the six points Lin Mu had pointed at. Then strings of runes joined up from the six points and formed what looked like a tent around the four of them.

"Hexapole Tent Defensive formation?" Hua Wu recognized.

He then looked at his senior brother in confusion before coming close to him and speaking.

"Does the tribulation attenuation formation even use the same lower formations as that of the Hexapole Tent formation, I don't think I've seen this before in our records?" Hua Wu asked.

Hearing his junior brothers' words, Hua San furrowed his brows.

"No... it's not. This isn't even the normal Hexapole Tent formation... the runes... they're all different..." Hua San said after observing it for a few seconds.

"The runes are different?" Hua Wu said, as he focused on the runes specifically.

Once the runes turned into the components of the formation, it was hard to tell what they actually were. It was either because they became too small to see, or that they would merge directly. But Hua Wu and Hua San were Nascent soul realm cultivators and thus had a high enough sensitivity to observe it in detail.

"Wh-what?! What script is even this?" Hua Wu was confused.

Lin Mu heard their little conversation and knew that they were unable to recognize the Dao Script.

'So even the top sects do not know about it fully...' Lin Mu thought to himself.

He quickly finished up the formation and the pressure that was on the three men was lifted. Lin Mu himself didn't feel it at all and could stand there freely for days with no problems. But for them, it was still harder.

~pew~

Adviser Liu took a breath of relief once the pressure was lifted from him, and his back straightened. He had not even realized the level of pressure he was in and felt that he was starting to hunch over.

"That should be enough," Lin Mu nodded his head.

He looked back at King Hong and saw his cultivation base continually increasing. He tried to use his spirit sense to probe it, but met a block when he got closer.

"Huh? How?" Lin Mu was surprised.

So far, his spirit sense has been strong enough to go past several formations as well. But in front of King Hong it was like it had met a steel plate, unable to pierce through. The aura around King Hong was continually forcing his spirit sense away.

It was like he was trying to swim against the river and it was only getting more difficult as time passed by.

King Hong who was now fully encapsulated within the embers, was hard to see. More and more embers flew in from the area around them as the Hong Lin trees continued to burn.

The area that they were burning in had continued to expand and now the entire mountain they were on was bare of Hong Lin trees. All of them had been turned to embers, yet not a single spec of ash could be seen where they were.

Instead of that, only plain ground was visible. Seeing the strange state of King Hong only one thought came to Lin Mu's mind.

"It's his dormant physique... it is awakening." Lin Mu muttered in realization.

~Crack~

The sound of coals crackling could be heard as a long crack appeared in the encapsulated form of King Hong.

[Chapter 740 - Dauntless Ember Physique](#)

Everyone watched on with rapt attention as the cracks kept on increasing on the 'cocoon' made out of embers.

~Crack~crack~crack~

~SHATTER~

Once the cracks fully covered it, a fist broke through the cracks, fully breaking the cocoon apart. From within appeared a naked man with a domineering appearance. His muscles were filled with overflowing vitality and his long amber colored hair swayed with the wind.

There were red lines that looked like flowing magma going down from his head, and then spreading all over his body. Two of the lines spread out from his neck, onto his shoulders and then onto his hands all the way where they split to join his ten fingers.

The same was the case with his legs as well as the red lines spread and joined his toes. On his back, the red lines formed a rather simple pattern that looked like a burning flame. On his chest, the lines joined up at his heart to form another pattern which Lin Mu could read.

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"Dauntless..." Lin Mu read the character that was written in Dao script.

It was now that Xukong suddenly spoke up.

"Oh? It's this physique?" Xukong said.

"Senior, you know about it?" Lin Mu questioned.

"I do, of course. This physique once belonged to a peerless cultivator oh a high leveled world. Relying on it, he defeated his foes and established his hegemony. Later on, he became a great emperor.

It has been several thousand years since his death and now the physique has returned." Xukong said, thinking for a bit before continuing.

"The name of this physique is... The Dauntless Ember Physique. It allows the owner to become like the ember that never goes out no matter how many winds blow nor if water tries to douse it.

The ember will go on and so will the person. This physique contains an immense vitality such that even the Xiantian physique is outclassed by it. But of course, that is understandable since the Xiantian physique is an acquirable physique and can be gained by anyone." Xukong expanded.

"Dauntless Ember Physique, huh..." Lin Mu said before a smile appeared on his face.

"EXCELLENT!" Lin Mu exclaimed.

Everyone heard his voice and looked at him, including King Hong, whose appearance had changed significantly. Other than his facial features, his body was quite different, including his hair that had become amber red as well.

~RUMBLE~

But just as he said this, the sky rumbled all of a sudden.

"Huh, what?" Hua San and Hua Wu were surprised.

They looked up and saw thunder seething within the clouds.

"How can this be? The tribulation was over!" Adviser Liu was shocked.

"What is happening, senior?" Lin Mu questioned.

He was observing it with his spatial perception as well and could see that the crack from which the tribulation energy was leaking had actually expanded.

"AH! I should have expected this. The Dauntless Ember Physique is not something that should have normally appeared in a low leveled world like this. That may have also been why all of the heirs of the Hong clan died to the tribulation.

The heavenly tribulation could not allow it to exist in a world like this. If this was a higher world, they would not have so much trouble. In fact, if they were in a higher world, they might have become a great clan.

The previous owner of the physique was cursed and died without any heirs, thus his dynasty ended, but the current Hong clan is vastly different." Xukong answered.

"Another tribulation?" Lin Mu said as his brows furrowed.

King Hong also looked up and anger appeared in his eyes.

"You tried to strike me down and were unsuccessful... I broke through and you still want to try again... NEVER!" King Hong let out a bellowing shout.

He clenched his right fist, which had fully recovered. It was this very fist that had been destroyed by the tribulation lightning earlier, but now it was fully healed and even better than before.

His fist was like a hammer within which immense energy was condensed. King Hong raised his fist and punched at the sky with all his might.

~BOOM~

Before the tribulation lightning could even get ready, a red pillar of light pierced the tribulation clouds.

~shua~

The tribulation clouds were forcefully dissipated and the blue sky was fully revealed again.

This was a scene that was not only witnessed by Lin Mu and the rest but even the citizens that lived around the area and in the capital city. The light of the red pillar was bright enough to catch everyone's attention.

Adviser Liu and the Hua brothers were stunned upon seeing this as well.

"Forcefully dissipating tribulation clouds? HEAVENS!" Hua Wu exclaimed.

With the tribulation clouds gone, King Hong descended to the ground. Adviser Liu hurriedly walked towards him and handed him some clothes. King Hong's spatial storage treasure had been handed to adviser Liu because there was a great chance of it being destroyed.

King Hong quickly dressed in some simple robes for now and then walked towards Lin Mu. Till now he had spoken a word to anyone rather than the sky and they were feeling a bit tense.

He came to a halt in front of Lin Mu and looked at him.

~clap~

He cupped his hands and bowed deeply before speaking, "You have my eternal gratitude, Senior Lin Mu. Not only have you given me a chance to live, you have given all my descendants a chance at survival.

You have given me the solution to our curse!"

One could hear the deep veneration within his voice.

~pat~

Lin Mu placed his hands on the man's shoulders and lifted him up.

"You do not have to thank me. It is you who managed to do this and came out on top. I'm pleased that you survived." Lin Mu said with a smile.

King Hong smiled as well before a serious expression appeared on his face.

"Regardless, I shall help you in any way possible. We shall defeat Gu Yao and the Northern Tribe!" King Hong declared.