

U. Warlord 401

Chapter 401: Obtaining a Labor Force

"Does anyone know where Zhang Lie is now?"

No one had an answer to that question. Only the governor and the special forces troops of Qi even knew that Zhang Lie was planning to build a new settlement; the three thousand hunters who had chased after Zhang Lie hadn't known where they would be going, either.

That was why Zhang Lie had been touched by their willingness to follow him anyway.

At that moment, Zhang Lie and his party were heading toward the capital of the sura. Ever since Zhang Lie had claimed the capital for himself, it had become devoid of people, and the rest of the kingdom had been slowly consumed by its neighbors.

He had only been gone for half a month, but the capital already seemed to be turning into ruins.

Zhang Lie announced, "Starting from today, we'll build our own settlement right here."

Su Hong asked, "Right on top of the foundations of the sura's capital?"

"What do you think? The foundations here are sound, and we'd only need to build on top of it— we have the base of a settlement right here."

With the destruction of this sura kingdom, the nearby kingdoms would surely expand their lands, but it would take them quite some time to do so. By that time, Zhang Lie would have taken full control of the capital.

Su Hong shook his head. "It would be almost impossible for the three thousand of us to build a settlement here. Just repairing these walls would take us a full month, let alone restore the buildings all around."

Furthermore, was a settlement with just three thousand people meaningful? Since they had a teleportation apparatus with them, wouldn't a secret base suffice?

Of course, Su Hong didn't mention those reservations.

Zhang Lie reassured him, "Don't worry, we'll have more people here soon, along with specialists who are familiar with city building and planning. You're all warriors, so it would be wasteful to have you all take part in the construction efforts."

"People? From where?"

"They'll show up soon enough—just give them some time. You must all be tired after rushing here from Qi, so why don't all of you go rest? Take whatever house you want—as you can see, there are plenty of vacancies. There aren't any dangerous lifeforms around, and no sura would waste their time coming over here. It should be quite safe. I'll be heading out for some time."

"For how long?"

"A week or two. I'll be returning with those who will construct this settlement."

Zhang Lie had decided to return to the Yeluo Valley and bring the entire Yeluo clan over.

He turned to Sun Mengmeng and instructed, "Sun Mengmeng, along with the rest of Team Zenith, install the teleportation apparatus in a secure location."

"Yes, Captain!" the members chorused.

Zhang Lie spread a pair of black wings as he soared into the sky and quickly vanished from sight.

The three thousand hunters watched on, but not for long. Su Hong reacted quickly, clapping his hands for attention and glaring at all of them. "What're you all waiting for? Find a house to stay in!"

When Zhang Lie landed in the Yeluo Valley, he found the Yeluo clan head waiting for him.

Zhang Lie cut to the chase. "I intend on building a settlement, and I'd like your clan to move over."

The Yeluo clan head's eyes widened. "Congratulations, human warrior! However, we of the Yeluo have lived here our whole lives, and transplanting the entire clan on your whims is a difficult request. Furthermore, the herbs we need for our special concoction only grow in this valley."

The clan head seemed rather displeased, but Zhang Lie wasn't open for negotiation.

"I won't accept any excuses. The environment there is better than it is here, and these herbs can be transplanted. Just leave a few warriors behind to take care of them. Furthermore, I'm not making a request, but a demand. Either you accede, or I'll destroy your clan."

Zhang Lie flared his genetic energy, sending frightening ripples into the air and causing even the Yeluo clan head himself to shudder. He didn't dare oppose Zhang Lie.

In the highest authorities' palace in the Milky Way, Amurong was laughing so hard he had tears coming out of his eyes. "Haha, Zhang Lie was expelled from Qi, haha!"

His plan had succeeded! The greedy hunters of Qi had evicted Zhang Lie almost of their own accord, and Zhang Lie's reputation would surely fall as a result.

Amurong summoned his secretary over. "Where did Zhang Lie go after leaving Qi?"

His secretary tapped on the tablet he was holding. "He left with a band of hunters, allegedly to build his own settlement."

"To build his own settlement?! Ridiculous—how could they succeed with just a motley crew? Let him be."

Succumbing to Zhang Lie's threats, the Yeluo clan prepared to migrate en masse.

"Shall we set out now?" The Yeluo Valley was usually quite dangerous, but Zhang Lie easily handled any enemies that came his way.

A new post appeared on the hunters' forums.

"I have news, fresh news! I've finally found where the champion of mankind, Zhang Lie, went!"

"Really? Wonderful, I've been waiting to find out!"

"How do you know where he went?"

"I heard it from a friend in Qi. He was one of the three thousand hunters who went to sack the sura's capital and followed Zhang Lie out of Qi. Apparently, the moment they realized Zhang Lie was going to leave Qi, they all gathered up and followed him away. Guess where Zhang Lie went!"

"If I were Zhang Lie and had been treated so terribly by the hunters in Qi, I'd join the sura and sack Qi myself."

"No, Zhang Lie's not like that! If he didn't feel some sort of responsibility for mankind, he wouldn't have returned to Qi to repel the first sura invasion."

"I have no clue where he would be. Tell us, where's Zhang Lie and what's he doing?"

"He's gone to build a settlement!"

"What, a fifth human city?"

"That's a very Zhang Lie thing to do, isn't it? First slaughtering a sura king, then building his own city... I'm not sure anything that Zhang Lie does will be able to shock me any longer."

"Wait, he's building a city with just three thousand people?"

"...I'd respected Zhang Lie, but isn't he a fool? Doesn't he know how much manpower is required to maintain a city?"

"He must be addled!"

"Isn't it normal? A strong hunter needn't be particularly intelligent; he might have done it on a whim without considering the idea carefully."

"Wouldn't those around him stop him?"

"Even if they did, I don't think he'd listen. That's how the strongest hunters are—arrogant and prideful, and unwilling to listen to others."

"Do you know where Zhang Lie's city is located?"

"Apparently, it's where the old sura capital was."

Chapter 402: Rebuilding

Back on Earth, Chu Feng and Yun Bing smiled as they heard the news.

"We've finally found you, Zhang Lie!" At that moment, they instantly and simultaneously decided that they would be heading toward the old sura capital.

While Zhang Lie was gone, Su Hong and the other hunters began clearing the rubble and fallen buildings from the aftermath of Zhang Lie's invasion. Quite a lot of buildings had collapsed as part of the raid, and Su Hong thought that it would be a good idea to get started immediately.

Only when they actually began the process did Su Hong realize how taxing the work was. The buildings and size of the capital were about five times larger than those of Qi, and the restoration process was commensurately tedious.

If not for the fact that they were all genetic hunters, they would have collapsed from exertion.

With the rubble mostly cleared, Su Hong intended on building a simple stone wall where the original walls of the capital had once stood, so as to not make it look so dilapidated.

"Su Hong, there's a group of aliens heading this way!"

Su Hong rushed to the watchtower at the center of the city.

"What race is that? Everyone, get ready for a fight!" Su Hong shouted.

"That won't be necessary." Zhang Lie's voice came from behind him.

Su Hong turned around, his eyes lighting up. "Thank goodness you're back in time, Zhang Lie! There's what seems to be a hostile group of aliens approaching us."

Zhang Lie chuckled as he shook his head. "It's fortunate that I came back to warn you all ahead of time, then."

Su Hong: ???

"Those are my men."

Su Hong gaped. "They're your friends, Zhang Lie?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "More like my subordinates. Don't treat them like enemies; we'll be cohabiting this city together."

"You have alien subordinates?!"

"What's so strange about that?"

"I'll make sure everyone knows immediately." Su Hong vanished like a puff of smoke, while Zhang Lie returned to the Yeluo clan and led them within the former capital of the sura. When they saw Zhang Lie's new settlement, they began to gape, as though they were country bumpkins who were visiting a city for the first time.

In some sense, they were: almost none of the younger generation of the Yeluo had left their valley, and even among the older, only the clan head and elders frequently stepped outside. Thus, everything they saw was filled with novelty.

Quite a few of the Yeluo were looking all around them, their eyes sparkling. They had lived in a remote valley all their lives, and they had hardly seen the likes of a city as grand as the former sura capital, despite the aftereffects of Zhang Lie's invasion.

Their annoyance at having to leave their valley dissipated immediately.

"Clan head, can we really live here?"

Zhang Lie responded, "This will be a place to live for all of you."

The Yeluo's eyes brightened.

The clan head, on the other hand, reacted strangely to the sight. The other members of the clan might not know where they were, but he knew it very well—this was the capital of a sura kingdom!

Zhang Lie was a human, but he had brought them to a sura capital—and yet there were no sura living here, only humans. Had he been secluded from the world for too long? Had the humans somehow defeated the sura?

Zhang Lie instructed the Yeluo, "The western part of the city will be where you live. Choose whatever house you want. You'll be responsible for the forests and hills in that direction as well.

The clan head asked, "Where is it? How much land will we have?"

Zhang Lie retrieved a map and sketched out a region roughly by eye. "From there to here, up to this wall. The houses in this region are more or less furnished, so you should be able to live comfortably for the moment."

The Yeluo tribesmen yelled in excitement.

Zhang Lie specially instructed the clan head, "Make sure to curb your fighters so they don't start a clash with the human hunters."

"Of course. I'll make sure that no fights ensue."

Zhang Lie nodded. "I'll leave you in charge of defending the perimeter of the city, as well as posting guards in its interior."

"Leave it to me." The clan head beckoned his tribe to him as they left for the western part of the city.

Zhang Lie then rose into the air and inspected the changes to the city, the rubble that had been removed, the streets that were now cleaned up. He patted Su Hong's shoulder. "You've worked hard while I was gone."

Su Hong still seemed rather shocked by the Yeluo. "Are those all your subordinates, Zhang Lie?"

No human had ever been able to suborn an alien race before, so when he saw them all obeying Zhang Lie's orders, Su Hong was shocked by the sight.

Zhang Lie replied calmly, "As long as you're strong enough, you can control the entirety of the second realm."

He called for Hong Xi. "You went to the Yeluo Valley with me, so the Yeluo know you slightly better than the others. Go talk with their clan head and have him provide you with a list of the members of his tribe and their names."

"Is there enough manpower for this settlement?" Su Hong slowly recovered from his shock. "There are only about a thousand of these so-called Yeluo tribesmen, with four thousand of us in total. I'm not sure we'll be able to keep this city running like that."

Zhang Lie shrugged. "I'll just go find more alien races."

Su Hong's eyes widened. "Do you have any more alien subordinates, Zhang Lie?"

"Not at the moment, but I can easily find more. Have all three thousand hunters assemble. We'll roam around the vicinity of the capital and see what we find."

The men quickly gathered.

"Depart!" Zhang Lie set off with the three thousand hunters, as well as the members of Team Zenith.

"Where should we go?" Su Hong asked.

"I know that there's a tribe of rock spirits nearby. They're a very interesting race, with the ability to manipulate all forms of earth. They'll surely be a great help when it comes to rebuilding the capital."

Zhang Lie navigated them to an unusual forest of rocks. Rocky spires pierced the sky, each the size of a gigantic redwood. The spires were so densely packed that they resembled a forest.

Zhang Lie brought the hunters within. Suddenly, the earth began to quake, and the rocks began to disintegrate in front of them. The hunters all pulled out their weapons as they warily looked around, but Zhang Lie remained calm and unperturbed.

The rocks reassembled into a stone giant. "Tiny creatures, why have you come here?"

Su Hong gaped. "How will you subdue such large creatures?"

The rock giant in front of them was at least thirty meters tall, shocking even the most seasoned hunter.

Chapter 403: The Rock Spirits

Zhang Lie smiled. "Don't worry, I have my own tricks for negotiation!"

The stone giant repeated, "Tiny creatures, why have you come here?"

Zhang Lie strode forward decisively. "I'd like to see the leader of your clan."

"Scram!"

"You aren't going to ask why I'm here?"

"Our clan leader won't pay attention to the affairs of the tiny, let alone your words."

"I recommend you listen to me."

"On what grounds?"

"To avoid the extinction of your clan."

"And what news could a puny creature like you bring that could destroy our clan?"

"That news is me."

The rock giant stared at Zhang Lie for a moment and, upon understanding his words, began to laugh. "Haha, do you think you tiny creatures can do anything against my clan? I could squash you all with my foot!"

"I'll repeat myself: I want to see your clan leader."

The rock giant replied seriously, "And I'll repeat myself as well: you don't have that right."

With a gigantic boom, the rock giant flew through the air like a missile, his momentum only depleted after knocking down five or six rock spires.

Everyone looked at Zhang Lie in shock, not expecting him to make a move so suddenly.

Zhang Lie's punch caused the entirety of the rock forest to react. Rocks began to fall from the nearby spires, each transforming into a rock giant and surrounding Zhang Lie and the others.

The hunters' faces turned serious, but Zhang Lie seemed as calm as before. "I want to see the leader of your clan," he repeated.

A rock giant howled. "After beating one of our kind, why should we grant you that privilege?"

Zhang Lie frowned impatiently. "I'm tired of repeating myself. I want to see the leader of your clan. Don't force me to make a move."

The rock giant snorted. "Don't you realize you're encircled by all of us? The only way you'll get to see our clan leader is if we squash you into a human pancake first!"

"Do you all have rocks for brains? Can't you understand what I'm saying?"

Hong Xi whispered, "Master, they do have rocks for brains..."

"It looks like you'll all need a good beating before you're willing to listen."

"Ha! Can a tiny creature like you take us down?" The rock giants began to rampage as they made to attack the gathered hunters.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Zhang Lie sent a horde of dragons soaring into the air, howling as they swooped down and bombarded the rock giants, whose bodies burst apart as the dragons exploded.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Zhang Lie himself shot forward like a bullet.

Two strikes from Zhang Lie alone had cleared a large patch of land all around them.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Zhang Lie's fist pummeled the rock giant in front of him, smashing its body to smithereens. The giant fell to the ground. Zhang Lie stepped on its chest as he thrust his palm within the cracked rock and pulled out a black creature.

The creature was like a lump of coal, its body as squishy as a pile of jelly. When Zhang Lie pulled it out of the chest of the rock giant, it began to tremble, and all the rock giants around him stopped moving.

"Hold it!" A rock giant studded with jewels and golden veins walked out from the rock forest.

"Are you finally willing to make an appearance, leader of the rock spirits?" Zhang Lie asked slowly.

The rock spirits were an interesting race: their status in their clan was determined by the amount of gold and jewels within their "bodies". The rock giant in front of him, glowing resplendently in the sunlight, his body filled more with jewels than with rock, was undoubtedly their leader.

"Let go of my kin, and I'll let you leave peacefully."

Zhang Lie was clutching onto the true form of a rock spirit.

Hong Xi gasped. "This is what a rock spirit actually looks like?"

Zhang Lie explained, "The rock giants you see are really just rock formations that the rock spirits control. Their true selves are these stubby, fragile pieces of coal. The reason they always make fun of other races for being tiny is because of an inferiority complex that results from their being even tinier themselves."

Su Hong gaped. "I would hardly have imagined it!"

"More accurately, this is more like the heart of a rock spirit. As long as its heart remains intact, a rock spirit can regenerate with a sufficient quantity of raw material around. This was why the rock giants were so agitated when I removed this rock spirit's heart."

If he were to exert even the slightest amount of force, the rock spirit's heart would crumble, and it would die.

The leader of the rock spirits said, "You might be tiny, but you seem to understand a lot about our race."

Zhang Lie shrugged. "It has nothing to do with my size. I simply overheard a few important pieces of information about the rock spirits in the past.

"Now that I'm here, will you let go of the spirit in your hands?"

Zhang Lie tossed the rock spirit aside; he had no intention of threatening the entire clan with the life of one spirit.

Kidnapping a rock spirit and threatening the clan into compliance was a dishonorable method, one that Zhang Lie would hardly deign to use. Furthermore, the rock spirits would hardly work for him willingly, and their construction would be shoddy and prone to failure.

The clan leader announced, "Human, on account of your clemency, we'll allow your companions to leave safely."

"I have something to inform you."

"What?"

"I have a city to construct, and I need the manpower of your clan."

The rock giants began to laugh. "Haha, who do you think you are? Why would we follow your demands? You're a puny human with a tiny brain! Why should we do as you say?"

Chapter 404: Strangers in a Strange Land

The leader of the rock spirits declared, "We rock spirits have a pleasant life here, and we have no intention to leave."

"This is not a discussion, but a command. If you don't leave of your own accord, I'll force you to do so," Zhang Lie emphasized.

A rock giant thundered, "Enough, you puny creature! Even the sura don't dare force us to do anything, let alone anyone like you."

"We rock spirits won't be anyone's slaves—not the sura, and not yours!"

"Why should we leave just because you demand it?"

The leader of the rock spirits boomed, "Human, it looks like you don't understand my words. The reason I appeared here was not to listen to your daydreams, but rather to warn you to never appear here again!"

"Teach him a lesson, clan leader! Expel him from the rock forest!"

A rock giant called out, "Accept your death, puny human! You'll die to just one blow from our chief!"

"Our leader's the strongest rock spirit around—he could beat all of us combined."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "We'll see about that."

The leader of the rock spirits leapt up into the air. As his rock body barrelled downwards, sped up by the force of gravity, the air itself seemed to cavitate along its trajectory.

"[Rune: Activate]!" Zhang Lie raised his hands into the air as the image of a dragonturtle appeared behind him. The tablet of anti-gravity hovered in the sky, slowing the leader of the rock spirits' fall.

A pair of wings sprouted from Zhang Lie's back as he flew up into the sky. A blood moon shone beneath his feet, and his crimson domain extended all around him. With a dark sun to his back, his aura seemed to grow by an order of magnitude.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]." Summoning the first and second forms of his [Ninecarp Transformation], the water- and darkness-attuned genetic energy combined into a sticky, inky glob. The serpent rushed out with Zhang Lie's fist and darted straight toward the rock giant's chest, corroding it and turning the rock black.

The rock giant struck back, but Zhang Lie evaded the blow nimbly with his wings. A shortsword appeared in his hands.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Sword energy manifested in the form of a wave that threatened to sweep over the rock giant, who shielded himself with both arms in front of his head. Zhang Lie's strike caused sparks to fly as it landed on the rock giant's adamantine arms, leaving a deep cut in the mineral.

The rock giant grabbed a nearby spire of rock and swung it around as though it weighed nothing more than a piece of straw. A titanic wave of air swept by Zhang Lie as he leapt straight up into the air.

Zhang Lie raised his arms again, manifesting the image of a dragonturtle as the tablet of gravity struck the rock spire the rock giant was holding. He leapt up onto the rock spire and dashed toward the rock giant.

With a fist, the rock giant flung the rock spire aside. Zhang Lie leapt up and brandished the shortsword in his hand.

"[First Form: Parting the River]!" The sword slash that seemed as though it could cut through anything headed straight for the rock giant. The threat of death, which the rock giant hadn't held for many years, flared up from deep inside his chest.

The rock giant slammed a fist on the ground, causing a large pillar of rock to shoot up. This was the special power afforded to the rock spirits: they could gather energy from the earth and transmute it into spirit-refined rock.

Even that pillar of rock did nothing against Zhang Lie's attack. The rock giant's eyes widened with fear. He tried to lift an arm to block the blow, but Venombane sliced through it as easily as though it

were a block of tofu. The attack landed directly on the rock giant's corroded chest, causing fragments of jewels and minerals to fly all over. The other rock spirits were agape.

Rock spirits were renowned for their defense, and it was a matter of pride for them. Their leader had the best defense among any of them, but even that was nothing in front of Zhang Lie.

The leader of the rock spirits stepped back, a deep gash on its chest so wide that its core could be seen.

Zhang Lie charged forward, his sword gleaming with sword energy, as though he were preparing to pierce through it.

The leader of the rock spirits panicked and began to run, pillars of rock appearing wherever he stepped.

Zhang Lie flew up into the sky and followed him, easily evading the rock formations that sprang up. He finally activated his two tablets of stasis, causing the leader of the rock spirits to falter and marking him for death.

Zhang Lie's sword pierced its chest, but he held back right before it would have shattered its core. He chuckled coldly. "You might be big, but that doesn't mean you're strong."

He sheathed his sword and hovered in midair as he looked down on all the rock giants. Compared to them, he was a far smaller figure, and yet all the rock giants inclined their heads to look at him.

"Submit to me, or die."

The rock giants slowly began to kneel on the ground. Despite their overwhelming physical appearance, they were inwardly rather weak-willed: upon seeing their leader being defeated in direct combat, none of them dared to fight against Zhang Lie.

Perhaps if Zhang Lie hadn't known about the rock spirits' true forms, they would have rallied around their leader, but somehow, Zhang Lie knew of the secret that no one else did. Not only that, Zhang Lie even knew that they would be able to discard their bodies in times of crisis.

But since Zhang Lie knew their secret, if he really wanted to, he would be able to slaughter their race to the last.

It was far too difficult for the rock spirits to increase in number: this was an effort that took decades, even centuries. Furthermore, the rock spirits themselves didn't want to die.

"We've finally arrived!"

Outside what was once the sura capital were two stick-thin hunters, their clothes shabby and their faces haggard.

They cried upon reaching the city, a testament to what they had suffered along the way. They had almost given up a few times, and almost been eaten a few more times. Only with an unbelievable effort of willpower had they finally reached their destination.

"We're finally here, Zhang Lie, finally!"

Just as they were about to walk into the city, a group of aliens walked out.

"Who are you?" The two hunters were instantly shocked.

Wasn't this supposed to be Zhang Lie's new city? Why were there aliens around? Had they ended up in the wrong place, or had Zhang Lie's new city been taken over by an alien invasion already?

Chapter 405: Subduing the Rock Spirits

Or were the stragglers' sources of information mistaken? Had they ended up in an alien race's city, rather than Zhang Lie's conquered sura capital? Or perhaps the news they had read online was mistaken, and Zhang Lie had never intended on building a city in the first place...

The two hunters were quite confused.

By the rock forest, the leader of the rock spirits finally recognized his new reality.

The resplendent jewels studded into his giant form had all been knocked off, and the golden veins running through his body had all been tarnished. If Zhang Lie weren't mistaken, the rock spirits would quickly find a new leader to replace him.

After all, the strength of these rock spirits depended on the quantity and quality of unusual ores, minerals, gems, and jewels their bodies possessed.

The leader of the rock spirits frowned.

"Human fighter, it's less that we're unwilling to leave and more that we can't leave. We rock spirits live off of these rocks; without a sufficient quantity of rocks in our vicinity, we would starve of hunger."

Zhang Lie's eyes were piercing. "I don't expect there are many such rocks left in this rock forest, are there?"

The leader of the rock spirits began to hesitate.

"If there were more, you lot wouldn't be undergoing mass hibernation," Zhang Lie pronounced.

Hong Xi's eyes widened. "Is that what they were doing before we came to the rock forest?"

When they arrived, none of them had seen any of the rock spirits, only piles upon piles of gigantic rocks. Each of those rocks had transformed into a rock giant upon their arrival.

Zhang Lie replied coolly, "There are more rock spirits than you think. Most of the gigantic rocks we saw on our way in actually had rock spirits embedded at their very center. However, some of the rock spirits have already died of hunger, and they'll forevermore remain nothing but a rock. Of course, most are still alive, and they're conserving their energy by doing nothing."

The leader of the rock spirits sighed. "You know far more about the rock spirits than I could ever have guessed. I'm very curious about how you came by this information."

Zhang Lie smiled. "That's unnecessary information. I think the rock spirits are suffering from a serious shortage of rocks, aren't they? Otherwise, we would have been encircled by far more than a hundred rock giants. There's nothing to admit or deny any longer. The quantity of rocks in this forest has diminished to the point where it's impractical to sustain the rock spirits. I assure you, your clan will benefit by joining my city."

"You have a large quantity of rocks at your disposal?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Not in large quantities, no, but I own an extremely large territory. I can promise you your fill of all the rocks that lie within it."

The rock spirit's eyes brightened. If that were really the case, the rock spirits would be saved.

"How large is this piece of land, and how many rocks lie within it?" the rock spirit continued.

Zhang Lie smiled with his teeth. "You would do well to remember that this is not a negotiation."

Indeed, Zhang Lie had made his point clear from the beginning: either the rock spirits joined his city, or he would annihilate them all.

"Su Hong, help the leader of the rock spirits count how many rock spirits remain in his tribe."

Su Hong nodded.

The leader of the rock spirits sighed. "I need to discuss this with the rest of my clan. Can you give me some time?"

"You'll have three days, nothing more."

That night, the hunters chose to camp out in the rock forest. Zhang Lie lay on a giant rock as he glanced up at the starry sky. A shadow suddenly appeared by his side.

Sun Mengmeng exclaimed, "Ah, so you're here! I was searching all over for you."

Zhang Lie knew who it was from her voice alone.

"Yes, what's the matter?"

"I'm bored. Would you like to chat?"

"Haha, very well. What do you want to talk about?"

"I simply don't understand why the rock spirits acted as they did. They were out of sustenance, so why would they continue to waste away here? Why not search for a new source of rocks?"

"The races who live for centuries on end have a different perspective on life than we humans, after all. Perhaps they've grown used to being sedentary, just like tortoises."

"But even tortoises would start running if they faced a threat to their lives!"

"It's because the number of rocks in the region has been dropping steadily, rather than precipitously. Initially, perhaps they thought it would be sufficient for the entire clan to cut back on their rock intake, but as the quantity of rocks in the vicinity dropped more and more, they became less and less able to send scouting expeditions into the distance. Either for lack of ability or lack of courage, they chose to remain here and await death instead."

"How do you know all this, Zhang Lie?"

"This is all just a hypothesis. If you want confirmation, ask the rock spirits when you see them."

When Sun Mengmeng did so, she found that Zhang Lie had been entirely correct.

Three days later, the rock spirits were prepared to migrate en masse. They dug up all the rock veins remaining in the rock forest, dividing them equally among every member of the clan as they set out toward the former sura capital.

The rock spirits seemed prepared to die halfway along their journey, but it ended far more quickly than they had expected. As they stepped past the city gates, the rock spirits were all astounded.

The leader of the rock spirits asked, "Does all this land belong to you?"

"For the moment, I suppose."

The rock spirits were all jubilant—with such a large piece of land, there was sure to be a sufficiently large quantity of rocks to keep them going for a long time.

They began to cheer.

As expected, the rock spirits found a gigantic quarry near the sura capital, one large enough that none of the rock spirits needed to hibernate any longer, and one which would allow them to start working for Zhang Lie.

This was within Zhang Lie's expectations: the sura capital would have been built in a place with an abundance of natural resources around them. Perhaps there weren't as many rocks in this particular quarry as there had been in the rock forest, but there were likely multiple such quarries all over the land.

These rock spirits could each be assigned to a different quarry to serve as guards. After all, as long as they had a handy source of rocks, they could transform into rock giants that would never be defeated.

When the twenty-meter tall rock giants appeared in sight, the Yeluo clan were all shocked. They looked at each other gravely, as though they were preparing to die on foreign soil.

As the giants continued to approach, some of the fighters asked, "Chief, shouldn't we run? It's not like this is our valley, after all, and there's no need to defend it to the last."

Chapter 406: A Potpourri of Races

The chief of the Yeluo clan snorted. "Don't you think that man would punish us if we ran?"

The Yeluo turned silent. That man was a demon in the guise of a human; if the Yeluo were to run, he surely wouldn't let any of them go.

The chief sighed. "At the very least, if we all die here, he'll avenge us."

"Not bad! You didn't run despite seeing a potent foe. My impression of the strength of the Yeluo wasn't mistaken,"

Zhang Lie's voice suddenly called out from a distance. The chief, startled, looked all around for the source of the noise before noticing Zhang Lie on the shoulder of one rock giant, quietly observing the Yeluo who were guarding the city walls.

"I'm glad you're all taking guard duty so seriously."

The chief of the Yeluo sighed in relief. "Honored fighter, you should have informed us before your return! We were half-scared to death."

"But if I had done so, how would I have been able to test your integrity?"

The chief swallowed a gulp of saliva. "What would you have done had we run?"

Zhang Lie continued to smile. "I wouldn't have killed you, of course, but you would find your quality of life significantly diminished."

The chief shuddered upon seeing Zhang Lie's smile, and he dreaded to think more about what would have happened if he had listened to one of his fighters' suggestions.

The leader of the rock spirit said, "Human fighter, if there's nothing more, we'll be returning to the quarry."

Zhang Lie beckoned to him. "Have a few rock spirits remain behind to help with the rebuilding of the city."

The leader of the rock spirits didn't dare to disobey.

The Yeluo chief reported, "After you left, two humans showed up in the city, allegedly in search of you. Their clothing was all but a pile of rags, and they had wounds all over their body. Because they were both humans, we didn't dare make a rash decision. They're both in the city right now—apparently, they made their way over from Ming."

"From Ming?" Zhang Lie thought about it for a moment, but he didn't know anyone there.

"Bring me to them."

The most expedient solution, of course, was to see them for himself.

Turning to the hunters behind him, he commanded, "Su Hong, direct the rock spirits to where they would be more useful. The rest of you, thank you for your hard work."

Su Hong shouted, "Rock spirits, follow me!"

He led the rock spirits to the gaps in the wall left behind by Zhang Lie's invasion. As the rock giants placed their palms against the ground, large pieces of spiritually infused rock protruded out of the earth, rose out of the ground, and began patching up the gaps.

Meanwhile, the Yeluo chief led Zhang Lie to the two human stragglers that had found their way into his city.

Glancing at their haggard forms, for a moment, Zhang Lie had no idea who they were, though it was clear they had suffered tremendously over their journey.

On the other hand, when they saw Zhang Lie, their eyes reddened immediately.

"Zhang Lie, we've had such a hard time trying to search for you!"

Only when he heard their voices did Zhang Lie realize their identity. "Chu Feng, Yun Bing! What are the two of you doing here?"

Chu Feng raised his head. "We've come to be your followers, of course."

Yun Bing nodded. "You'll accept us, won't you, champion of mankind?"

"Of course!" Zhang Lie replied. "But how did you make your way over? We haven't even had a chance to connect our teleportation apparatus to the global network yet."

Chu Feng replied, "Once we saw that you had been expelled from Qi, we rushed over from Ming."

Yun Bing almost cried. "You don't know how much we've suffered! We almost died quite a few times."

"How strong are the two of you now?"

"We've filled our mutated gene fragments to capacity, and we have around fifty superior gene fragments each."

"No wonder you almost perished!"

Superior-grade lifeforms roamed the second realm, mutated-grade lifeforms were more common than dogs, and there would even be peak-grade lifeforms appearing from time to time. It was a miracle that the two of them had managed to arrive in Zhang Lie's new city alone.

"You had both better thank your ancestors for their blessings."

Chu Feng grinned. "Well, what's done is done. Is there anything we can do to help you out?"

Zhang Lie nodded seriously. "Actually, there is."

"We'll do anything."

"Don't worry, you'll definitely be able to accomplish this task: the first thing you need to do is to recuperate, and then to raise your strength. To be frank, the two of you are weaker than the three thousand hunters with me, let alone Team Zenith. Take your time and grow stronger first."

Chu Feng and Yun Bing lowered their heads. They had thought that Zhang Lie would be starved of manpower, but it turned out that they were both wholly unnecessary!

They couldn't help being a little disappointed.

"Don't think too much of it. I'm very touched that the two of you braved so much danger to make your way here, and there'll be a lot of work for the two of you once you've both rested."

After meeting with Chu Feng and Yun Bing, Zhang Lie returned to Earth and messaged Yan Long, officially submitting an application for his new settlement to be considered a human settlement.

Yan Long was very surprised by the information that Zhang Lie relayed. "You're really planning on building a new city? How's the progress?"

"It's fine, but I need skilled architects and engineers."

The city was filled with hunters and fighters, none of whom would be much help for what Zhang Lie had in mind.

Yan Long replied immediately, "I'll contact the governor of Qi and have him send a few men."

"No, that won't do. Xiao Zhengyang mentioned that there are quite a number of men from the world federation in influential positions in Qi."

"In that case, I'm not sure how I can be of help."

Regardless, Zhang Lie thanked Yan Long for his help and promised to contact him if he had any ideas. He returned to the city. With the rock spirits' help, the reparation of the city walls was swiftly concluded. The repaired portions were rather rough around the edges, but the walls were far more functional than before.

As he walked through the streets, he suddenly saw Chu Feng directing a few men.

"No, no, not like that! Follow the blueprint."

Zhang Lie walked over. "What are all of you doing?"

"There are a lot of broken and run-down buildings around here, so I'm helping fix them, as well as refurbishing a proper house for myself."

Zhang Lie noticed the blueprint in Chu Feng's hands in amazement. "You studied architecture?"

"A little. As you know, we scions from the large clans have to dabble in all sorts of things to stand out from our peers."

"Do you know how to repair city walls?"

Chu Feng glanced around him. "I think it shouldn't be too difficult with the foundation we have."

"Very well. In that case, let me officially instate you as the lead architect of this city!"

Chapter 407: Luring the Wood Spirits Away

"Ah, great!" Chu Feng said. Immediately afterward, when he processed just what Zhang Lie had said, he hurriedly shook his head. "No, Zhang Lie, why don't you find someone more professional?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "You know what the second realm's like. Most of the hunters who are able to make it to the second realm are fighters. There may be a few architects sponsored by one country or another, but the closest settlement from here is Qi. You know that my relations with the hunters of Qi have soured—I'm sure Xiao Zhengyang would be willing to help me recruit a few, but we wouldn't be able to assess whether they came bearing ill intent.

"On the other hand, I trust you implicitly, and I don't care for anything more than securing the walls at the moment. We can discuss the rest in the future."

"I suppose that's reasonable..."

After chatting with Chu Feng, Zhang Lie then beckoned the members of Team Zenith and the three thousand hunters over.

"We're heading out for our next target."

Su Hong asked, "Where to, this time?"

"We've more or less resolved the issue of the architecture of the city, so there are two important matters to address next: food and potions. We can obtain food by hunting and rearing genetic lifeforms, which won't be a huge problem. Potions, on the other hand, are vital—they're crucial for raising our hunters' strength and for emergency treatment as necessary.

"In order to keep our hunters in good fighting condition, we'll need a large quantity of herbs, which means large-scale cultivation. Thus, we'll be heading to the southern forest in search of a very special race, the wood spirits."

Hong Xi asked, "The wood spirits? Are they like the rock spirits, with their bodies covered in wood rather than rock?"

"No, they're a rather special race. Their bodies aren't made of wood, nor of flesh. In some sense, they're like plants. Anyway, once we head to the southern forests, you'll be able to see them for yourselves."

The hunters quickly made their way to the forest, but contrary to their expectations, it wasn't completely vibrant and green.

Half the forest was normal, but the other half seemed to have blackened. The moment the hunters walked into the forest, they were attacked by a number of rampaging, pitch-black creatures. They were no match for the seasoned hunters; by the time they got deep into the forest, Zhang Lie and the others had already taken down a dozen such waves of these lifeforms.

Hong Xi asked, "Just what are these creatures?"

"Corrupted genetic lifeforms."

"What?"

Zhang Lie pointed into the heart of that part of the forest which had blackened. "There's a very special peak-grade lifeform over there whose ability is so potent that it's affecting its environment. The creatures around it will be corrupted and start to rampage, with their abilities all enhanced as a result. If we allow this creature to grow much stronger, it'll eventually devour the entirety of the forest and ascend into a disaster-grade lifeform, one whose goal will be to take over the entire second realm."

"Isn't it a catastrophe waiting to happen, then?"

"Not quite," Zhang Lie murmured, raising his head. "But for the moment, considering your circumstances, you can interpret it that way."

Hong Xi frowned. "Who are you talking to, Master?"

Zhang Lie ignored her. He continued speaking into the air, "Do you hear me, wood spirits? There's no need to hide. We aren't enemies; we can be allies instead. I promise I'll be able to help you."

"Who might you be?"

Skeins of light massed together into the form of a green humanoid, its voice a harmonious blend of male and female.

Zhang Lie announced himself, "We're humans, and we've just built a settlement nearby. We'd like to invite your clan to live with us."

Hushed whispers came from behind the green humanoid, who listened to them before telling Zhang Lie, "This is an affair too important for us to address. Enter: come speak with our shaman."

Following the green humanoid, the hunters stepped even deeper into the forest, where Hong Xi and the others finally caught a glimpse of the wood spirits.

They came in all sorts of shapes and sizes, the largest ones being about the size of human children, with glowing green skin and a pair of radiant emerald eyes.

Their bodies seemed to radiate a nurturing warmth. They were unclothed, their bodies formless. When they rested, their bodies seemed to merge with the plants and greenery surrounding them.

The smallest spirits were palm-sized, and those spirits glowed like fireflies.

After they entered the wood spirits' village, the green humanoid that had been their guide dissipated. According to its instructions, they would be able to find the shaman in the deepest part of the village.

As they walked farther and farther within, they saw a gigantic tree whose leaves were shrouded by clouds. It was hundreds of meters tall and of a breathtaking age.

Above the hunters was a tree hollow, from which a wood spirit wreathed in green stepped out. Unlike the other spirits, this one seemed to have a crown of light on its head. It was clear that this was the shaman of the wood spirits.

"Wherefore have you come, humans?"

Unlike the wood spirits they had seen, the shaman and their accompanying guards had weathered faces and piercing eyes, ones which had lost the innocence of the other wood spirits.

A pair of black wings sprouted from Zhang Lie's black as he flew into mid-air. "If I resolve the problem in the other half of the forest, will you allow half of your tribe to come to my human city?"

The shaman of the wood spirits frowned. "I will not treat my people like a transaction."

One of the shaman's guards had hair so long it was touching the ground. Their face was weathered, the vitality in their bodies flickering, as though they didn't have long to live.

That said, 'long' was relative—this particular wood spirit would probably have at least a century of life left. After all, the wood spirits were a long-living race, and those of their kind tended to be able to live for millennia.

"We have a peaceful, idyllic life here. No spirit would be willing to leave with you."

Hong Xi shook her head. "I don't think so. Who knows how many of your spirits might want to explore the outside world? There's nothing but trees and more trees in the vicinity—on the other hand, in our city, we have piles of rocks that can move on their own, all sorts of herbs and plants, and a city made out of hewn rock!"

The spirits that had gathered all around them did seem quite enticed by Hong Xi's description. Their innocent eyes flashed like crystal. "Moving rocks, really?"

Hong Xi nodded fervently. "And we have all sorts of food and toys, and more novelty than you've ever dreamt of!"

The wood spirits began to chatter to each other as Zhang Lie covertly gave Hong Xi a thumbs up. The wood spirits were innocent and naive; in other words, they were easy to lure away.

The shaman frowned. "Silence." His eyes turned hostile. "Are you trying to lure away my kith and kin?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "No, nothing of the sort. We simply want to make a transaction: I'll help you address the problem in the other half of the forest, and you'll allow us to leave with whichever spirits are willing to accompany us."

Chapter 408: Taking Responsibility and Quitting

Given how excitedly the wood spirits were chattering away around Zhang Lie, he believed that at least two-thirds of the wood spirits would be willing to leave with him.

"We will not accept such a transaction."

Zhang Lie smirked. "Is that so? As far as I'm aware, the wood spirits are ill-suited to combat, and the creature in that direction has already taken over half the forest. At this rate, I can't imagine that you'll be able to hold out."

"That's none of your concern."

"If I don't step in, I'm afraid the wood spirits will go extinct. Haven't you considered how many of your kin will have to die if you try to fight against those corrupted beasts?"

Even the shaman's guards seemed to have doubtful looks on their faces—it was apparent that the wood spirits really didn't have a good grasp of the situation at all.

"Let me handle the problem," Zhang Lie wheedled. "If I die, then the transaction is annulled. But if I succeed, you'll allow me to leave with whichever spirits are willing to leave with me. Isn't that a fair trade?"

The shaman finally relented. "How am I to believe your word?"

"Do you have a choice?"

The shaman turned silent. Only after long minutes did he finally reply, "You are correct, human. The wood spirits will need outside help to clear the forest of this threat."

One of their guards frowned and murmured, "Shaman, is this wise? Who knows what these humans are planning?"

"More than anyone else here, you know the perils our tribe is facing. Against any other foe, we would have means by which to defend ourselves, but this particular creature is anathema to us. If we don't do anything quickly, our tribe will surely perish. Even if we meet it head-on in a direct confrontation, many of us will surely lose our lives. In that case, why not seek outside help and preserve as much of our tribe as we can?"

Their guard had nothing to say in their defense.

The shaman turned back to the hunters. "I hope that you will keep your word."

"Leave it to us."

Zhang Lie left with his hunters.

"What do we do now?" Hong Xi asked.

"There's no rush. We'll find a place to make camp and set up a defensive perimeter. Prepare for a long fight."

The wood spirits clearly didn't seem to believe that they would be able to resolve the problem, and Zhang Lie wasn't fully committed to doing so just yet. No—he wanted them to feel like they had no choice but to depend on him first.

At this stage, only half the forest had been corrupted, and the wood spirits didn't yet have an acute sense of the danger they were facing.

As such, Zhang Lie decided to drag matters out until the wood spirits truly had a sense of their perilous straits.

He and his hunters caped out in the nearby forest. During the day, he would go out and clear away some of the corrupted lifeforms, but at night, he would remain in his campsite without any intention of heading into the corrupted forest.

The wood spirits watched on from afar, but they weren't impartial observers. From time to time, they would lure a few lifeforms over to Zhang Lie's main camp, causing a fair bit of trouble before Zhang Lie and the others took them down.

When the elder who had lured the corrupted lifeforms over saw that the humans were unharmed, he clicked his tongue. "Useless pieces of trash!"

Beside the elder, a guard murmured, "Elder, surely we shouldn't do this? The humans are here to help us cleanse the forest, after all."

The elder scoffed. "Who knows what these humans are plotting? They're not wood spirits, and I don't believe they'll work wholeheartedly for us. Better that they all die facing the corrupted lifeforms!"

Zhang Lie walked out of the camp and glanced at the tree in which the elder was hiding, causing the elder to jump as though he had been discovered.

When Zhang Lie did nothing more, however, the elder exhaled in relief. "Hmph! Indeed, these humans can't see through our magnificent racial talent of being able to hide within trees!"

With Zhang Lie and his hunters stalling for time, and the elder's continued mischief, the forest became more and more corrupted.

Eventually, the wood spirits couldn't sit still any longer, and the elder was sent out to urge Zhang Lie to work faster.

"What do you mean by this? You've been sitting here all day without dealing with the root cause of the problem at all!"

Zhang Lie snorted. "The lifeforms we've dealt with over the past few days would have been enough to slaughter your entire tribe."

The elder was so angry that they were waving their arms and legs around, but the shaman had warned them not to strike the humans. Just as the elder was prepared to continue arguing, a shrill cry came from the distance, much like the whistling of a steam locomotive.

The elder's eyes bulged. "What's going on?"

"It looks like the rampage started early, then."

The elder turned to Zhang Lie in shock. "Do you know what's going on, human?"

"Open your eyes wide and you'll see!"

A horde of corrupted, pitch-black lifeforms were rushing to the uncorrupted half of the forest. Some among them were as large as boulders, and Zhang Lie announced confidently, "These are superior-grade lifeforms."

The wood spirits were shocked to see what was going on.

"A full-scale frontal attack, too," Zhang Lie murmured, as though he were just a bystander.

"A full-scale attack?"

"Now that the creature's corrupted more than half the forest, it thinks that it can take the other half down in one fell swoop as well. There's no reason for it to wait and amass more strength any longer."

What Zhang Lie didn't say was that the creature had undoubtedly noticed Zhang Lie and the other hunters' presence, and it didn't want to wait until even more reinforcements arrived.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!"

Sun Mengmeng loosed an arrow, which transformed into a firebird and swooped down into the middle of the corrupted beast stampede.

The elder thundered, "Human, did you know this was going to happen?"

"More or less."

"In that case, this happened because you humans were so slow to act!"

"If you humans had rushed in earlier, there wouldn't have been a problem!"

"It's all your fault, humans!"

The wood spirits that accompanied the elder began criticizing Zhang Lie and the others.

"Indeed, it's our fault. We'll take responsibility, pack up, and leave, then. Let's annul the transaction between us. Everyone, pack up!"

The elder immediately became flustered—it was clear the wood spirits wouldn't be able to deal with this on their own. Without Zhang Lie and the others, their tribe would go extinct.

"What are you doing?!"

"We're packing up and leaving, of course," Zhang Lie replied. "Didn't you claim that we were the cause of the stampede? In that case, we're willing to take responsibility and leave!"

The elder's face turned red. "How do you expect to take responsibility by leaving? If you agree that you're responsible, then clean up the mess you've left behind first!"

Chapter 409: The Wood Spirits Accede

Zhang Lie folded his arms. "It looks like you still don't understand your circumstances. This forest was originally your land, not mine. We humans are able to walk away if we want to, but you spirits have to bring your homes with you."

"We had offered to slaughter the corrupted lifeforms as a transaction, not a promise or guarantee. These circumstances are too dangerous for us, and we don't believe we'll be able to gain much benefit by staying. There are countless alien races in the second realm, and we don't necessarily need you wood spirits."

The elder began to panic. "Y-you despicable humans, you didn't focus on the task at hand! You might have killed a few of those corrupted creatures here and there, but you didn't strike at the root cause!"

Zhang Lie suddenly reached out, grabbed the elder between his fingers, and lifted him up from the ground. "Don't think I don't know what you were doing. If not for you luring the creatures over to our camp every so often, would things have progressed to this extent?"

The elder shook in panic. "No, that's impossible! No other race can notice us when we've melded into the trees, let alone when we're in our forest!"

"Ha! That's nonsense—those lifeforms that you tried out this trick on were likely just far too weak. In my eyes, even when you've melded into the forest, you're as bright as lamps in the darkness!"

Zhang Lie threw the elder onto the ground and shouted, "Let's go!"

Suddenly, a green glow appeared before Zhang Lie, one which condensed rapidly into a humanoid: the shaman of the wood spirits. "For my elder's wrongdoing, I will personally apologize."

Zhang Lie didn't seem to care very much. "I accept your apology."

Turning back to the gathered hunters, he repeated, "Pack up and let's leave."

The hunters who were still fighting off the corrupted creatures sheathed their blades and stepped aside, allowing the creatures easy access to the wood spirits. The shaman's face paled. "Do humans forfeit their promises so easily?"

"Do you realize what you're saying?" Zhang Lie snorted. "How many of us humans will we have to sacrifice to save the lot of you?!"

"I do understand, but if you leave, sir, the wood spirits will go extinct."

"Oh, you realize that now, do you? In that case, what were you doing all this time?! You did nothing to help us out, and you even allowed one of your elders to mess with us. You disrespect us, distrust us, and expect us to give up our lives for you?"

"Once again, I apologize for my elder's actions. I was entirely unaware of what the elder had planned."

"Do you think a simple apology absolves you of responsibility? Are we nothing more than your tools?"

The hunters didn't know why Zhang Lie was so intent on leaving. After all, the Zhang Lie they knew didn't give up easily.

Furthermore, he clearly placed considerable emphasis on the genetic lifeform that occupied the corrupted half of the forest. If they didn't take care of this problem now, it could well become a disaster-grade lifeform, one which would terrorize the second realm.

In that case, why was Zhang Lie behaving so erratically? The hunters all came to the same conclusion: he was trying to extract as much benefit as he could from the wood spirits.

As though finally realizing the magnitude of the problem, the shaman of the wood spirits knelt on the ground and bowed down to Zhang Lie. "Please, Zhang Lie, you're the only hope of salvation for our kind. Our powers are eminently ill-suited to handling these beasts. We need your strength and numbers!"

In the span of a few seconds, the stampede of corrupted beasts would rush into the territory of the wood spirits, and the humans had all stepped aside to allow that to happen.

The shaman of the wood spirits was frozen with fear, and countless wood spirits deep in the forest cried out upon seeing the beast tide.

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

Zhang Lie threw out one lone punch, so strong it warped the space all around his fist. Ripples of energy spread out from him and formed into massive waves, destroying the corrupted lifeforms approaching them.

One lone punch had cleared out a huge swathe of land, toppling a dense shroud of trees that covered up the sky. Sunlight shone into the newly formed clearing.

Zhang Lie glanced impatiently at his transceiver. "I'll count to ten. Convince me within that time!"

The shaman of the wood spirits stared agape at Zhang Lie, not having anticipated his tremendous strength. Just one punch from him had destroyed the stampede that would have overwhelmed the entirety of the wood spirits.

Zhang Lie had hardly shown off any of his own strength during his stay at the forest; he had allowed the six hunters behind him to do so. Each of the six was easily able to suppress the corrupted lifeforms. The shaman had believed that they were the strongest humans around, that even their leader, Zhang Lie, could hardly be much stronger. However, Zhang Lie's punch had toppled that assumption.

Zhang Lie was far stronger than any of the six behind him.

The shaman of the wood spirits was resolved to keep Zhang Lie here. Only he would be able to save the wood spirits from their plight.

The elder, upon seeing Zhang Lie's punch, was likewise shocked. To think that they had been arguing with Zhang Lie just moments before! It was lucky that Zhang Lie hadn't made a move on them.

"Nine!"

Zhang Lie began counting the seconds.

The shaman of the wood spirits was about to continue speaking when the elder interrupted, "Isn't it enough that our shaman is kneeling down to you?"

After a wave of fear came crystal-clear clarity. The fact that Zhang Lie hadn't killed the elder when he could very well have done so meant that he didn't want to do so, and this gave the elder the courage to speak up.

"Eight."

The shaman of the wood spirits yelled, "Silence! You've hurt our tribe enough!"

"Shaman, we can't submit to these other races! If we do, that means we've lost entirely!"

"Seize the elder! His presence is no longer tolerated here!" the shaman cried out. The guards waiting by their side immediately leapt into action and dragged the elder away.

Hong Xi murmured, "Shaman, I suggest you keep that elder under close supervision."

Sun Mengmeng wondered, "How did someone like them end up as an elder of the tribe?"

The shaman of the wood spirits winced. "I apologize for the disturbance. The elder suffered a near-death experience at the hands of an alien race, and ever since then, he's been understandably cautious."

"Seven."

Zhang Lie continued counting down.

The shaman of the wood spirits came to their senses: they didn't have much time left. They proclaimed, "As per our agreement, all the spirits who are willing to leave with you can do so. I will personally help convince more spirits to do so, and I guarantee that at least half the tribe will leave with you."

Chapter 410: The Best Opportunity

"Six."

The shaman of the wood spirits gritted their teeth. "The wood spirits will fight with you. We can only control trees and plants, but we'll do so at your bidding wherever necessary."

This was one of the reasons Zhang Lie believed that the wood spirits distrusted them.

It was true that the wood spirits were eminently unsuited for a direct confrontation: if the corrupted creatures' claws were to strike the trees they occupied, the trees would become corrupted and swiftly blacken. If the wood spirits didn't extricate themselves from the trees in time, they would die within them.

The wood spirits' true forms were almost as fragile as those of the rock spirits, but the entire forest was filled with trees. As long as they took control of the safer trees behind the humans, they would have been able to provide invaluable support.

However, the shaman of the wood spirits hadn't seen fit to send any of the wood spirits to the humans to assist them. On the other hand, they had allowed an elder to do as they pleased. Otherwise, Zhang Lie wouldn't have been so upset, and the wood spirits wouldn't be in such dire straits now.

"Five."

The shaman of the wood spirits racked their brains. "We will hand over the spiritual herbs we've collected all these years!"

The hunters behind Zhang Lie licked their lips in excitement. Spiritual herbs! They had all heard from Zhang Lie that the wood spirits were singularly talented at cultivating plant life, and they had protected such a large patch of forest for all these years. They simply couldn't imagine how many herbs the wood spirits had collected in all that time.

If nothing else, it was clear that that number would be astronomical: it might very well dwarf the number of herbs they had gathered from the sura king's treasury by several times.

"Four." On the other hand, Zhang Lie didn't seem very tempted.

The shaman of the wood spirits continued making more and more enticing offers. "I will personally join the delegation headed toward your city."

With the shaman themselves going, far more of the wood spirits would go along with Zhang Lie.

"Three!"

The shaman cried out, "What more do you want?!"

As the corrupted lifeforms drew ever closer, howling at the air, they knew that they didn't have much time left.

"Two!"

"The entire tribe of wood spirits will follow you!" they shouted. With the forest destroyed to this extent, there was little value in staying.

Behind Zhang Lie, the hunters' eyes widened in amazement.

"One!"

The shaman gritted their teeth. "I, along with my entire tribe, will swear loyalty to you!"

Zhang Lie finally reacted. "Very good. Don't forget that promise, or your entire clan will pay a hefty price."

The shaman slumped on the ground lifelessly as they drew breath. Their tribe was finally saved.

Zhang Lie strode up to the beast stampede and shouted, "Hunters, we strike now!"

The members of Team Zenith, along with the three thousand hunters that had accompanied Zhang Lie, began to make their move.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Sun Mengmeng loosed a flight of arrows into the sky, ones which burst into scarlet fireballs in the middle of the beast stampede.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!" Yang Ze sent wave after wave of energy heading their way, inundating and wiping out the beasts.

"[Dragon's Triumph]!" Li Feng raised his greatsword high into the sky, allowing it to catch and reflect the rays of the sun. The sword began to glow larger and larger until a dragon of light spawned from its midst. All the corrupted creatures it touched melted like snow.

Just the three hunters' skills had taken care of the larger part of the corrupted stampede; the remaining hunters made easy work of the rest.

Only then did the wood spirits realize that the band of humans in front of them had been hiding their skill all along: they had never seriously tried to deal with the problem, but had only pretended to slaughter a few corrupted lifeforms.

They didn't know whether to be relieved or angry: angry that they hadn't done their best from the outset, relieved that the problem that had plagued them for all this time wouldn't be a problem any longer.

A gigantic black bird rose up into the skies. Its beady eyes surveyed the members of Team Zenith as it swooped down and tried to strike at them. Its speed marked it as at least a superior-grade lifeform.

"[Heaven's Judgment]!" Fang Yi's spear struck the bird with the power of wind and storm.

Covered in a domain of moonlight, the bird could feel its strength being sapped from it. Fang Yi's spear pierced its wings and caused feathers to fall.

"[Golden Divide]!" Sun Xiaowu leaped high into the air as he chopped off the bird's head with his blade.

Hong Xi stepped forward with her moonlit domain. Behind her was a black sun, much like Zhang Lie's own. Pure-white moonlight shone underneath her feet, making her look like a fairy who had descended from the heavens.

Fang Yi and Sun Xiaowu both gave Hong Xi a thumbs up: her domain had noticeably weakened the bird enough that both their blows had easily landed.

Hong Xi smiled. Her domain expanded until it surrounded a large portion of the corrupted lifeforms, dramatically weakening them and hence increasing the speed at which they were slaughtered. With Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng's guidance, the three thousand hunters made quick work of the remaining beasts.

Just then, two superior-grade lifeforms, a lion and a rhinoceros, rushed out of the stampede. The members of Team Zenith tried to give assistance, but someone got there before them.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" A punch so intense that it warped the space all around it flew toward the two creatures, turning them into ash. Zhang Lie commanded, "Team Zenith, spread out and block the stampede. Hunters, charge forward!"

As Zhang Lie rushed into the stampede, the horde of creatures parted around him. None of them were willing to get close to Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie strode casually through the creatures as though he were taking a stroll. Any creature that tried to sneak toward him found a fist disintegrating their body.

"Indeed, now was the right time to strike," Zhang Lie murmured, glancing at the corrupted lifeforms surrounding him.

He had bided his time not just to force the wood spirits to submit to him, but also to make the corrupted stampede appear.

Had Zhang Lie struck earlier, the peak-grade lifeform would realize the danger that Zhang Lie and the others possessed and go into hiding. Trying to find that hiding spot would have been a Herculean task; in comparison, it was far easier to wait until the lifeform made its move before striking back.