

U. Warlord 421

Chapter 421: Fortified by Rage

The elder of the crag eagles honed in on a golden roc. As he slid past the roc, blood began to spray out of its neck like a faucet that couldn't be closed. The roc tried to shriek, but it was no longer able to make noise.

The elder was a considerable fighter in his own right, and his skills dwarfed even the crag eagle chief's. Furthermore, he, Zhang Lie, and Yu Xuanguang were launching sneak attacks while their opponents were stunned and disoriented, and it was particularly easy for them to land their hits.

The next moment, before the golden roc realized precisely what had happened, a claw had pierced through its back and crushed its heart.

Yu Xuanguang's attack emulated the elder's. Blood sprayed out of the roc's neck, but it still managed to let out a piercing cry.

Yu Xuanguang's eyes widened. "This isn't good—the wound was too shallow!"

The rock giant shouted, "You idiot! Can't you even kill a bird properly?"

Yu Xuanguang wouldn't have made such an elementary mistake under ordinary circumstances, but he was unable to use his skills fully on account of his injuries. He hurriedly tried to give the golden roc another blow, but it was too late. He had missed his best opportunity to launch a killing blow. The golden roc began to flap its wings, conjuring a storm out of thin air, as it retreated.

The elder rushed over to help, but the wary roc noticed his advance and shot a flurry of feathers toward him to deter his advance. The elder dodged the knife-like feathers, but the golden roc sent him flying with a swipe of its claws.

In a contest of brute strength, the golden rocs were far superior to the crag eagles.

Yu Xuanguang rushed toward the golden roc, aiming to rectify his mistake, but the golden roc dodged his claws with a casual flap of its wings and struck back with its own. The injured Yu Xuanguang reacted slightly too slowly to be able to defend himself.

"[Rune: Seal]!" The image of a dragon turtle appeared before Zhang Lie as he raised an arm, sending the sealing tablet crashing down on the golden roc's head and forcibly canceling its attack for a moment.

The crag eagles had been so caught up in their attack that they had forgotten about Zhang Lie, but it was Zhang Lie who, at the most critical moment, tipped the scales of battle in their favor.

He sauntered up to the golden roc, not because he was much faster than it was, but because he could predict what it would do next. Indeed, he had anticipated the outcome of the fight with the three golden rocs, a result of years of experience from his past life.

Of course, the elder and Yu Xuanguang played an important role in the affair as well—without their presence, Zhang Lie wouldn't have been able to predict the rocs' actions so easily. He, who had been watching the two crag eagles' fight, was able to strike at the precise moment in which he would have the most impact.

Sweat beaded on the elder's forehead. It was lucky that the golden rocs had appeared before the crag eagles could attack Zhang Lie en masse, or their clan would surely have perished that day.

Yu Xuanguang was likewise shocked. His legs couldn't stop trembling, and he wondered at his foolishness in challenging the youth before him. If they really were to fight, he would have died an ugly death—and likely dragged the rest of his clan down with him.

Both the elder and Yu Xuanguang were very glad that Zhang Lie was their companion, rather than an enemy.

On the other hand, the rock giant seemed wholly unperturbed by Zhang Lie's actions: he knew of Zhang Lie's strength, after all, given how badly Zhang Lie had beaten him himself. Furthermore, he even came to realize that Zhang Lie was far from using his full strength at that point.

Venombane thrust into the wound that Yu Xuanguang had created, cleanly beheading the golden roc with a flick of seemingly casual effort. The fight had lasted, all in all, no more than a few dozen seconds.

With the three golden rocs dead, the elder and Yu Xuanguang let out a relieved smile. Their clan would be at peace once again.

However, Zhang Lie didn't seem quite so casual. "Elder, you mentioned that there were five golden rocs, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"I killed one, and we've now killed three more. Where's the last roc, the strongest of them all?"

The first elder's smile was wiped clean, and his wings and claws turned cold.

The answer was made clear, moments later, without the elder speaking a word. Giant golden wings covered the sky as a shadow fell on Zhang Lie, the rock giant, and the two crag eagles. They raised their heads to see a golden roc swooping down toward them.

His body was so massive that it was larger than the three slaughtered rocs' combined. It glowed a bright, fiery golden, and his feathers looked as sharp as whetted knives. The radiance of this golden roc alone marked him as a strong enemy, one that would be a more challenging foe than the three rocs they had slaughtered.

Zhang Lie, who had once fought against a disaster-grade lifeform, was certain that the golden roc in front of them was at the threshold between peak- and disaster-grade.

Upon seeing his family's fate, he shrieked in agony and rage, causing even Zhang Lie and the others to clutch their ears in pain. His eyes turned blood-red: there was no doubt that his family had been killed by this motley crew. Hatred caused him to swoop down on them at extreme speed.

The rock giant began to pelt him with rock after rock, but it was unable to stop the roc's advance. The roc flew so quickly that it broke the sound barrier, as though it were a fighter plane. The rock giant continued sending rock after rock his way, but the golden roc made no effort to dodge. His body flared golden, and the rocks broke down even before they could impact his body.

He would slaughter the tiny lifeforms in front of him who had killed his family!

The roc had lost all semblance of logic in his rage. Against Zhang Lie and the others, the golden roc's advance was a poor decision. With his speed, he would have been a troublesome foe indeed in an indirect confrontation, but now...

Chapter 422: At Death's Door

"[Rune: Control]!" Zhang Lie raised an arm into the air and sent the gravity and anti-gravity tablets crashing down by the roc's side.

The space around the enraged roc suddenly became distorted, and the roc found himself unable to control his body. Sapped of his momentum, he began to float steadily downwards like a leaf caught in a breeze.

Zhang Lie had long since discovered that these two tablets were a lethal deterrent against an opponent's aerial attack.

The golden roc tried to escape the domain formed by the two tablets with his willpower, but Zhang Lie had no intention of letting him go.

"[Rune: Seal]!" Another runic tablet crashed down onto the golden roc's head, sealing his movements and slowing his thoughts.

The elder and Yu Xuanguang attacked simultaneously during this window of opportunity. As they flapped their wings, they conjured a gigantic hurricane that smashed into the prone roc. The feathers on the golden roc's chest began to fall as blood dripped down the wound. The golden roc cried out in mid-air; the elder and Yu Xuanguang's combined attack had left quite a mess of superficial injuries on the roc's chest, but that was it.

The golden roc's sturdy and resilient feathers had prevented them from dealing him a serious injury. As he flapped his wings, he easily swept the elder and Yu Xuanguang aside.

"As expected of a golden roc about to break through to disaster-grade!"

The combined attack of the elder and Yu Xuanguang would easily have sent one of the three previous golden rocs to their deaths, but this particular specimen clearly possessed ridiculous defense.

The rock giant leapt into the air, sending a fist barrelling toward the roc, who swiped at the rock giant with his claws. The sound of their clash sent waves rippling through the air.

"[Rune: Resonate]!" Zhang Lie sent all four runic tablets down on the golden roc, surrounding him from all four cardinal directions as they resonated and sent pulses of black genetic energy all around them.

The golden roc's actions were forcibly restricted for a few precious moments; Zhang Lie would take full advantage of this opportunity.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" An underworld river hurtled into existence as Zhang Lie sliced at the wound that the elder and Yu Xuanguang had created, then sent the full force of his attack through that wound.

The golden roc coughed out blood, falling from the sky as the ground beneath him was pelted by his blood. His radiant golden feathers had been dyed a garish red; after taking two of Zhang Lie's blows head-on, it was moments from death.

And yet, when he crashed onto the ground, he found himself facing the glassy eyes of his slaughtered kin. The golden roc stumbled forward with bruised chest and battered wings. The rage cleared from his eyes; tears began to fall instead. He looked at his family and rubbed his head against their cold bodies.

Zhang Lie spoke not a word as he stepped forward with his blade.

Sorrowful though the scene in front of him might be, Zhang Lie didn't spare the roc any compassion. The peak-grade golden roc had eaten an immeasurable number of other lifeforms to get to where he was, and he certainly hadn't spared any compassion for his prey.

Suddenly, the roc began to peck at his own family's bodies, gulping them down.

The rock giant shivered. "He's eating his own kin?!"

Yu Xuanguang murmured, "Is the idea for his family to always remain close to him, even in death...?"

The elder shook his head. "To think it would stoop to such a level."

The other three members of his party reacted with shock and disgust, but Zhang Lie with shock and panic. Without any hesitation, he raised Venombane and sent it crashing down onto the golden roc's body.

Just then, however, the roc's body flared with a frightening golden light, one so intense that Zhang Lie's blade was deterred from its original trajectory. His body was pushed away as the golden roc sent a torrent of feathers slicing toward him, which Zhang Lie had to block with his sword.

The golden roc continued gobbling down his family members faster and faster. As he did so, his feathers grew more and more lustrous, and his wounds began to recover.

As he retreated, Zhang Lie shouted, "Stop him!"

By that time, the elder, Yu Xuanguang, and the rock spirit had all noticed that something was amiss.

The rock giant barrelled through the howling winds with its sturdy body, while the elder and Yu Xuanguang again launched a combined attack against the roc. With a flap of his wings, the roc sent two slashes of wind at the two crag eagles, dissipating their attack and sending them flying into the distance.

In just that short period of time, the golden roc's body had grown massively, and he had easily defended against all attacks sent in his direction.

Thanks to the two crag eagles, however, Zhang Lie had another opportunity to strike at the golden roc.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" A blood dragon wrapped around his body and swooped into the skies. Golden feathers blocked its ascent, but the blood dragon knocked them all aside with its momentum. It hurtled toward the golden roc and began biting and tearing at its body.

Sensing life-threatening danger, the golden roc darted aside, but the blood dragon continued to pursue him. While he fought the blood dragon off with his claws, Zhang Lie struck at his neck with Venombane.

The golden roc hadn't expected that the blood dragon would be nothing more than a decoy for Zhang Lie himself. He barely had time to do anything more than tilt his head. The sword flashed as it struck the golden roc's eye, blinding him as the golden roc cried out in pain. His feathers glowed with a frightening radiance.

Zhang Lie retreated immediately; just that burst of golden light from the golden roc had charred half the fur of his blood wolfman form.

"Just what happened?" the rock giant wondered aloud.

Zhang Lie's face turned serious. "The golden roc was at the boundary of peak- and disaster-grade."

The rock giant gaped. "He advanced after eating his own family?!"

By that time, the elder had returned to his senses. "Not only that—our attacks also pushed him closer and closer to that boundary. His family's death gave him the will to advance, and our subsequent attacks pushed him so hard that his body's latent potential was activated. He lacked only the energy to continue with his advancement, so..."

Chapter 423: The Golden Roc

Yu Xuanguang nodded in comprehension. "I see! It's because his family's flesh and blood is a perfect match for his race, so it's an easy and potent source of energy for him to absorb."

The rock spirit still remained somewhat confused; all it understood was that the golden roc had become particularly strong.

"Should we run?" it suggested.

"No, we can't!" everyone else cried.

The elder stared at the golden roc as though it were death itself. "The golden roc will surely seek revenge on us crag eagles if it lives. Even if I die here, I can't let the golden roc escape.

Yu Xuanguang agreed. "We killed his entire family. If we let him go now, he might kill our entire tribe."

Zhang Lie likewise refused—after all, he was the hunter with the most information about these disaster-grade lifeforms in all of the second realm at present. It wouldn't be so easy for the golden roc to ascend to disaster-grade.

Zhang Lie guessed that it was at most at the level of the guardian deity of the sura kingdom he had crushed, a pseudodisaster-grade lifeform. Of course, such a lifeform was already worthy of his attention. If he were to let the golden roc grow some more, the roc might very well ascend to a true disaster-grade lifeform—and if it were to do so, a calamity would strike the entirety of the second realm.

The most urgent problem was the human city of Ming, which was situated the closest to their current location and which would thus suffer the greatest casualty. Zhang Lie didn't much care for the life and death of those alien races foreign to him, but he couldn't ignore Ming.

The golden roc's gene fragments had yet to stabilize, and only a small portion had turned into disaster gene fragments. Although it was somewhat of a pity to kill the golden roc now, when he would otherwise be able to obtain disaster gene fragments, it was certainly best to strike while the roc was weak.

The roc's injured eyes began to crystallize. Zhang Lie knew that he couldn't delay any longer.

"[Rune: Resonate]!" Zhang Lie had just raised his arms when the golden roc made his move, swooping down toward Zhang Lie like a scythe of wind.

"How fast!" Zhang Lie shielded himself with his blade, but upon impact, he still stumbled a few steps back.

The elder and Yu Xuanguang flapped their wings as they tried to harry the roc, which spread his wings wide as he launched a flurry of blade-like feathers in their direction. The two crag eagles were forced to retreat.

The rock spirit rushed forward and made to punch the golden roc, ignoring the feathers embedded in its rock armor. The golden roc grabbed onto the rock spirit's arm and flew into the air as the rock spirit shouted, "Hey, what're you doing?!"

"[Rune: Gravity]!" Zhang Lie raised his arm high and sent a tablet hurtling down toward the golden roc, but he dodged agilely.

The rock spirit slammed an arm into the golden roc's claws.

"[Rune: Float]!" Another runic tablet crashed down. Before the golden roc could evade the attack, Zhang Lie made another move.

"[Rune: Control]!" The two gravity-controlling tablets began to hum in resonance, forming a local domain of warped gravity. The golden roc stumbled for a moment, but owing to his previous experience with this technique, quickly corrected his trajectory.

The elder and Yu Xuanguang took this opportunity to rush into the air, moving so fast they seemed like twin beams of light. Silvery-white and black feathers filled the air.

The golden roc tossed the rock giant toward the two crag eagles, who cried out in mid-air, "Argh! Catch me!"

The two crag eagles smoothly split up along either side of the incoming projectile, then attacked the golden roc from two antipodal directions.

Meanwhile, the rock giant fell toward the ground like a meteor with such force that its body embedded itself into the ground upon impact.

No one had the time to worry about the rock giant now. The aerial battle continued in full force. As the golden roc flapped his wings, golden feathers shot out from him in all directions, giving the elder and Yu Xuanguang no opportunity to strike.

"[Rune: Seal]!" Zhang Lie successfully sent a tablet crashing down on the golden roc's head, temporarily sealing his consciousness and creating a window of opportunity, which the elder and Yu Xuanguang took full advantage of.

Sparks flew into the air as they struck, but unfortunately, the golden roc's defense had also risen by another level. The two crag eagles, who had once been able to injure the golden roc, could barely cause a superficial injury now.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" Venombane trembled as a dragon of blood rose into the air, its howl echoing and reverberating throughout the mountain.

The golden roc whirled quickly in the air, shaking off the elder and Yu Xuanguang, before swooping down to meet the blood dragon head-on. His claws shredded the blood dragon's head, then clashed against Zhang Lie's Venombane.

Waves of energy rippled from the impact.

The elder and Yu Xuanguang could only watch from a distance, without daring to get closer; the fight between Zhang Lie and the golden roc had reached another level entirely.

The golden roc's body suddenly glowed with resplendent light, and it looked almost like a miniature sun. Its fledgling disaster-grade domain activated.

"[Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!" Zhang Lie gritted his teeth and bore with the overwhelming light and heat as he struck with one of his strongest blows.

The golden roc tried to defend against the line of sword energy with his claws, but this time, it was the golden roc who was sent rearing back, blood dripping from the impact.

Zhang Lie chased after the roc at full force. After two more confrontations, the golden roc's claws began to shiver, and the inner bones began to crack. The golden roc roared in pain. He didn't seem to be able to hold out, but Zhang Lie was faring worse.

A crack appeared on Venombane's blade. Unable to withstand the high-intensity clashes, that crack propagated and split the blade in two. Venombane dematerialized and returned to Zhang Lie's soulspace as a cracked soulshard.

The golden roc took this opportunity to strike, but Zhang Lie didn't seem panicked at all. He sent his hand, like a blade, into the golden roc's unwounded eye.

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

Chapter 424: An Unexpected Gain

With his other hand, Zhang Lie struck the golden roc's lower jaw, sending a blood dragon howling into the air.

"[Rune: Resonate]!" All four runic tablets fell around the golden roc. The formation activated, trapping him within a domain of darkness.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Zhang Lie cocked back his left arm, channeling his genetic energy into the attack, and sent its full force at the golden roc.

Amidst the bombardment of a hundred dragons, the golden roc was forced to the ground in a daze.

A golden sword appeared in Zhang Lie's hand, the manifestation of a peak-grade golden roc soulshard which Zhang Lie had obtained from this roc's family.

"[The Boundless Blade: Dragon's Wrath]!" A wave of blood drenched the golden roc and morphed into a blood dragon.

The golden roc flapped his wings and rose into the air. Zhang Lie chased after him, successfully sending the sword into the unguarded back of his neck.

"[The Boundless Blade: Requiem of the End]!" Black genetic energy covered the blade's tip and ravaged the golden roc's body from the inside out. The golden roc struggled in pain; crystalline flecks of blood sprayed from the wound.

As Zhang Lie sent more and more energy barreling through the blade and into the wound, the golden roc's body was pierced through all over by Zhang Lie's sword energy. It looked like a cactus, the spikes of which were manifested blades of energy that had pierced his body from within.

[You successfully killed a peak-grade golden roc and obtained its soulshard. By consuming the flesh of the peak-grade golden roc, you may receive one to ten peak gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie's eyes brightened. Today really was a lucky day; he had obtained yet another soulshard, and from the strongest of the rocs at that.

The golden roc fell to the ground. The elder and Yu Xuanguang followed, barely able to believe that they were alive. Watching the battle, they thought that they were moments away from perishing.

Their attacks were completely ineffective against the golden roc, and they wouldn't be here now if not for Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie drew his sword, stabbed into the golden roc's injured chest, and drew out the roc's heart.

The arteries and veins surrounding the heart had already crystallized, as had the bones around the roc's chest cavity. If Zhang Lie and the others had struck just a bit later, the consequences would have been disastrous. Once the golden roc's body turned crystalline, Zhang Lie would have been unable to kill it without using his trump cards.

He stowed away the golden roc's heart and materialized the soulshard he had received. As expected of a pseudodisaster-grade lifeform, the golden roc's soulshard was completely different from the other golden roc soulshard he had received.

It manifested in the form of a set of paired blades.

The larger of the two blades was a broadsword that gleamed golden, the rays of light that emanated from it burning as hot as the sun.

The smaller of the two blades was a shortsword that could be incorporated into the larger blade or stripped from it and used independently. It too was lustrous, filled with what seemed to be a boundless heat.

Even Zhang Lie couldn't have expected that the unusual conditions surrounding the golden roc's death would have generated such an interesting soulshard. He was a little curious as to what would have happened if the golden roc had successfully ascended into a disaster-grade lifeform.

His domain would have increased dramatically in strength and stability, and it would have gained a secondary manifestation. If both qualities could be captured in the derived soulshard, they could exist simultaneously and augment each other, just like his [Eclipse] and [Black Sun].

If that were the case...

Well, Zhang Lie was already very satisfied with what he had received. After all, he was still only a second-realm hunter, and he was unwilling to face an unharmed disaster-grade lifeform proper.

Such a lifeform would be far too dangerous to deal with; just the slightest carelessness could result in his death.

Zhang Lie dematerialized both his golden roc soulshards, but the effect of having two different soulshards from the same species in his soul space led to a strange phenomenon that even he couldn't have predicted.

The two soulshards resonated with each other: they drew close and began to merge.

Under ordinary circumstances, soulshards from the same species wouldn't combine; this was clearly borne out by his experiences in the first realm. So what could have caused this effect? Could it have been that they were both peak- or higher-grade soulshards from the same source, from lifeforms connected by blood?

The chance of a soulshard condensation wasn't high; it would be lucky for Zhang Lie to have gotten one such from over a dozen lifeforms. Obtaining two from a family of five was incredible luck.

The two soulshards' merging process seemed as though it would take quite a while. Zhang Lie made a mental note to check up on it from time to time.

The elder and Yu Xuanguang made their way over to thank him. "Zhang Lie, it's all thanks to you that we were able to slaughter the golden rocs and make it out alive."

Zhang Lie thought to himself, In my past life, it's clear that neither of you did. The crag eagles' death must have been the catalyst that sparked the golden roc's evolution.

Zhang Lie's appearance now had changed the course of history, but he didn't make a special note of it. "Don't forget our transaction."

The elder took out a wooden box. "Actually, the spiritual herb you wanted is right here. I was intending on handing it over to you before our fight with the golden rocs, but I hadn't planned on meeting the golden rocs halfway."

Zhang Lie retrieved the box, opened it to see a perfectly preserved starcloud fruit, and revealed a rare, unguarded smile. He had obtained yet another ingredient for Potion #4! In his estimation, he would only need three more ingredients before he could start the concoction process in earnest.

"Zhang Lie, you must be tired. Would you like to return to Mt. Wanren to rest before you leave tomorrow?" Yu Xuanguang offered. "Please give me the opportunity to apologize for my disrespect."

Zhang Lie glanced at the time and nodded. He released Whitey and allowed it to absorb the remnants of the golden roc's soul before keeping the carcass, then took to flight.

Before he went too far, however, he suddenly called out, "I feel as though I've forgotten something."

The elder replied, "That must mean that that something isn't too important, so forgetting it doesn't matter."

"Indeed, that's sensible!"

Beneath them, from the gigantic crater the stone giant had created, an arm of stone rose into the air. The rock giant groaned, "Lord, I'm right here! Please save me!"

Chapter 425: Full Haul

Zhang Lie pulled the rock giant out of the ground, then brought him to the golden rocs' nest to have a look at what they would find. The short detour was fruitless for Zhang Lie, but the rock giant was overjoyed to find all sorts of jewels and minerals in the nest with which it could upgrade its armor.

That night, at Mt. Wanren, Yu Huantian clutched a cup of wine with his left wing and a meat skewer in his right. He called out, "Come, let's celebrate the demise of the golden rocs! Eat your fill!"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "I was the one who brought the golden roc back, and I was the one who roasted the meat you're consuming now."

Yu Huantian grinned at him. "Those are minor details—let's not worry about them!"

The elder called out, "Huantian, don't be insolent to our honored guests!"

Mt. Wanren was lit up from foot to peak with bright lights, the path up the mountain trailed by red lanterns and multicolored flowers. The aroma of roasted meat wafted throughout. Two golden rocs were being simmered in a clay pot.

Zhang Lie would have handed over all five golden rocs' carcasses if he could, but this was precious meat from peak-grade lifeforms, and he was already being rather generous by giving two of the five to the crag eagles. After all, for the crag eagles, eating the golden rocs' flesh was of limited importance beyond nourishment. Humans, on the other hand, would be able to add to their gene fragments by doing so.

Zhang Lie, the elder, and Yu Xuanguang all sat at seats of honor overlooking the party. Given the role that Zhang Lie played in defeating the golden rocs, his status in the crag eagles' tribe was almost on par with the elder and the chief themselves.

Yu Xuanguang stood up and announced, "First, let me thank Mr. Zhang Lie for helping us out on this expedition. Without his presence, we would have been unable to take down the golden rocs. From the bottom of my heart, Mr. Zhang, a toast from me to you. Without our aid, the crag eagles could well have perished."

No, it isn't just a possibility, but rather a certainty. That was what happened to you in my past life, after all. Zhang Lie murmured inwardly.

"Second, I would like to apologize to Mr. Zhang." Yu Xuanguang lowered his head. "I want to apologize for my insolence and lack of courtesy yesterday. No matter what, I shouldn't have struck you without understanding what was going on first. If not for Mr. Zhang's leniency, I would be dead now. Today, if not for Mr. Zhang's help, I would be dead a second time. Taking all this into account, I sincerely apologize to you, Mr. Zhang."

Zhang Lie nodded in acceptance; in truth, he had barely minded.

"Now, I'm sure this is a joyous occasion for everyone, so I'll shut up and we can get started with the festivities!"

The crag eagles began to laugh as the elder announced, "Serve the meat!"

The lid of the gigantic stone pot was opened, and a mouthwatering fragrance drifted out. Everyone was served a bowl of meat broth; Zhang Lie, the elder, and Yu Xuanguang's bowls were particularly large.

"With this, I announce that the crag eagles have triumphed over the golden rocs!"

Everyone dug in with gusto. As he ate and observed the crag eagles, he noticed a strange phenomenon. The crag eagles' feathers were gradually gaining a golden tinge. The crag eagles who had undergone the most drastic transformation were those who had partaken in Zhang Lie's own feast the day before.

In particular, Yu Huantian's wings had both turned a shade of lustrous gold, and even his claws seemed to have turned golden as well.

Is this genetic mutation? Perhaps genetic evolution? The golden rocs were particularly compatible with the crag eagles. It was likely that, upon consuming sufficient golden roc flesh, the crag eagles would be able to assimilate the golden rocs' racial characteristics and merge them with their own, with some variance between members of a species.

No wonder the golden rocs had preyed upon the crag eagles! The crag eagles had to be particularly nourishing food for them, and reciprocally, the golden rocs would be particularly nourishing for the crag eagles.

Zhang Lie turned to the elder and Yu Xuanguang, who were seated beside him. Yu Xuanguang's feathers had turned a dusky gold, but the elder's appearance had hardly changed. Perhaps it was because he was old, and he hardly had any potential for evolution remaining in his deteriorating body.

The elder smiled as he glanced at the crag eagles seated before him and observed the changes to their bodies. The transformation didn't seem to shock him at all—the wily old fellow had clearly predicted what the golden rocs would do to the tribe of crag eagles!

That said, Zhang Lie didn't really mind. He had obtained what he wanted, after all. He took a gulp of the broth and heard in his head,

[The soulshard merging process has concluded. You have obtained a post-peak-grade golden roc soulshard.]

The 'post-' prefix meant that the soulshard was at a level intermediate between peak- and disaster-grade.

Yu Huantian asked, "Zhang Lie—no, Mr. Zhang, where are you from?"

He hurriedly changed his mode of address toward Zhang Lie upon seeing the elder glaring daggers at him.

"A human city—ah, well, not just one of humans anymore. It's a city composed of many different races."

The elder looked at him in surprise. "To think there are such cities! It sounds like quite an interesting location."

"I can't say whether it's interesting or not, but I believe that, one day, it'll be known throughout the second realm. And I believe that day will come soon."

Yu Huantian sidled up to him. "Is there anything fun to do within?"

"There are a few fun human inventions, a race that can grow and nurture spiritual herbs and greenery, and... well, that's about it." Zhang Lie didn't mention much about his city, but it had already caught the interest of the crag eagles hanging around Yu Huantian.

After the feast, Zhang Lie summoned the newly minted post-peak-grade soulshard that he had just received. The combined soulshard seemed fascinating, but he didn't want to test it out so close to a populated region.

He left the soulshard in his soulspace, then remembered that he also had the golden roc's heart in his storage pouch.

The heart looked crystalline, but it was actually still somewhat gelatinous in his hand. There was a clear difference between the heart that Zhang Lie had consumed in the first realm and the one he was holding now.

However, the fact that the crystallization process had already begun might give him an unexpected surprise.

Zhang Lie took a satchel of spice out of his pouch, sliced the heart up, seasoned it with some pepper, and then fried it.

With a hopeful heart, he consumed the dish.

[For consuming the meat of a disaster-grade golden roc, you received 1 disaster gene fragment.]

Zhang Lie almost couldn't believe his ears. He really had received a disaster gene fragment!

However, even after consuming the entire heart, all he got was that one point. It looked as though the golden roc was about to ascend, but in reality, it had likely been far from it.

That said, even a single disaster gene fragment was a huge increase to Zhang Lie's abilities, and this trip was well worth it.

Given how much Zhang Lie had grown in the meantime, absorbing this sole gene fragment went much more successfully than it had in the first realm. Zhang Lie was slightly feverish for a few moments, but that was it. When his body cooled back down, Zhang Lie smiled in satisfaction.

Chapter 426: Returning to the City

Not only had he obtained a key ingredient for Potion #4, he had even managed to secure one disaster gene fragment and a post-peak-grade soulshard.

One disaster gene fragment was more impactful than ten peak gene fragments, and Zhang Lie could sense his abilities taking a great leap forward. In an instant, his [Ninecarp Transformation] had reached mid-fifth stage.

The next day, Zhang Lie and the rock giant headed back to their city. However, just as they were leaving Mt. Wanren, hundreds of shadows darted out from the mountain, led by the now-golden Yu Huantian.

Zhang Lie asked, "What are all of you doing here?"

All the crag eagles that had followed him were tinged with gold—they were those who had partaken in Zhang Lie's feast the day before.

"We're leaving with you!"

"What?" Zhang Lie seemed a little shocked.

"We can't just eat your food without doing anything, can we? Didn't you say you had a city of your own? I'm sure you're lacking some aerial forces like us."

The rock spirit said, "You intend on returning with us?"

"We ate your meat, so we're your warriors now!"

Zhang Lie's mouth spasmed. "Didn't you already repay me for that?"

"But not for the meat from last night."

"Did your chief and elder agree?"

Yu Huantian nodded. "They agreed and informed us to follow you well."

The other crag eagles added, "They also said we would surely benefit by following you around."

"And my dad told me to follow you and make sure I repent for the offense I've shown you!" Yu Huantian called out.

Zhang Lie laughed. "Very well, then."

There were already three different races living in his city; one more was no big deal.

After consuming the golden rocs' flesh, the crag eagles' latent potential had been unlocked. They would be excellent aerial fighters given their wings, and Zhang Lie was indeed lacking their like.

Seated on the rock giant's shoulder, Zhang Lie and his new retinue spent a month traveling back to the city.

When they saw Zhang Lie with a group of birdmen, the guards patrolling the city wall were no longer surprised. "You've taken in a new tribe, Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Lie clutched his face. "I wasn't expecting to, either."

"I'll inform the two clan leaders immediately, as well as Su Hong and the hunters of Team Zenith!"

Over the two months during which Zhang Lie had been gone, the city had transformed in its entirety. The walls of stone had been rebuilt, and the streets were now completely clean and repaved with stone.

The crag eagles flew overhead, glancing all around them—they had never been in a city before.

"Look, the walls really are made of rock!"

"What's that? How could the rocks be so uniform?"

"Oh, I've seen that! It's like the log cabin the elder lives in!"

Zhang Lie's return quickly spread among the residents of the city. Green trails of light flashed from outside the city as the wood spirits gathered with Su Hong, Team Zenith, and the Yeluo to welcome Zhang Lie's return.

"Welcome back, Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Lie nodded, then jumped off the rock giant. "You've all done very well. In just two months, the city looks as good as new."

Everyone smiled upon receiving Zhang Lie's praise; their hard work hadn't gone unnoticed.

"But there's no need for all this ceremony. Please, feel free to go back to what you were doing before."

The only people that remained were the chief of the Yeluo, Su Hong, the members of Team Zenith, the shaman of the wood spirits, and Chu Feng and Yun Bing.

Zhang Lie instructed, "Sun Mengmeng, could you have a look at what lodgings are available? Let's find a place for the crag eagles behind me to stay."

Yu Huantian shook his head. "No, there's no need. We won't get used to living in enclosed spaces."

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "Where do you want to sleep?"

Yu Huantian pointed at the city walls. "Right there is fine."

Zhang Lie frowned. "You want to build nests atop the watchtowers?"

Sun Mengmeng shook her head. "There are only sixteen watchtowers in total. Will the nests be able to accommodate all of you?"

"We can sleep right on the city walls themselves, too."

Su Hong refused. "That would cause significant problems to the defense of our perimeter."

Yu Huantian harrumphed. "With us around, what else do you need for defense? The crag eagles will ensure that no enemy will be able to approach the city walls."

Zhang Lie crossed his arms. "I think you'd better find some other place instead. There are a few hills and mountains nearby."

The shaman of the wood spirits smiled. "Why don't you come live alongside me for a while?"

Yu Huantian peered at her. "Who are you, old fogey?"

The shaman frowned. "I'm the shaman of the wood spirits. Surely you've heard of me?"

"Nope!" Yu Huantian replied.

A crag eagle beside Yu Huantian whispered, "The elder's mentioned them before, I think. They're a race that can nurture the cultivation of greenery and herbs."

"Oh, you mean they're farmers?"

It took all the shaman's patience and good upbringing to not explode. "You may understand it that way. To be more precise, we enhance all manner of life, with a particular emphasis on plant-based lifeforms."

Yu Huantian shrugged. "Are there hills or mountains in your vicinity?"

The shaman shook their head. "We live in a forest."

Yu Huantian shook his head. "We'd better not. The morning dew will dampen our feathers."

"Really? We hosted crag eagles in our forest from time to time while the relationship between our clans was harmonious, and they've never had a problem."

Sun Mengmeng suggested, "Perhaps it would be alright if they were to replace their nesting material every now and then so it doesn't become damp. That's what most birds who live in forests do."

"Actually, there's a better solution," Chu Feng pointed out. "We'll just have the rock spirits build them a small rock forest around."

"Truly?"

The rock spirits could raise spires of rock out of thin air. They wouldn't be as tall as the watchtowers, of course, but they would easily be tall enough to match the height of the city walls.

Zhang Lie turned to the rock giant. "Do you think your tribe can handle this?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. I'll let the others know."

Zhang Lie could hardly have imagined that the two clans, who had long been enemies of each other, would end up living in the same city in peaceful coexistence.

Zhang Lie instructed, "Yu Huantian, why don't you and the other crag eagles go along with the rock giant? See if those accommodations suit you."

After the crag eagles and rock giant left, Zhang Lie said to the others, "Will you show me around? I'd like to see what you've done over the last month."

They walked through the streets. Chu Feng said, "Over this period of time, with the combined effort of the Yeluo and the rock spirits, we were able to repair the city walls and repave the streets."

Zhang Lie nodded. "Very good. Thank you for all your hard work."

They were nearing a crowded part of the city where a market had been set up. There were stalls from the wood spirits, the Yeluo, and the humans, and some rock giants would pass by from time to time.

Zhang Lie seemed rather surprised. "You set up a bazaar too?"

Chapter 427: Surprise After Surprise

Sun Mengmeng smiled. "This was Yun Bing's idea. Each race has special racial characteristics and different needs, and she suggested the bazaar so that it could enhance the rate at which goods flowed from race to race in order to make this city truly come alive."

Zhang Lie nodded. "Very well done, Yun Bing! You're right—a city should be prosperous, not just a random gathering of people."

Yun Bing blushed. "I didn't learn any architecture, unlike Chu Feng. All I studied was business, and upon seeing these citizens bartering with each other, I had the idea of constructing a bazaar."

The Yeluo chief added, "It's been much more convenient since this bazaar was set up."

Zhang Lie and the crowd walked through the bazaar to the shock and awe of many shoppers within.

Humans sold soulshards, the wood spirits sold herbs, the Yeluo sold their potions, and the rock spirits their labor and large lifeforms that they had captured. The bazaar was lively but orderly, and it was clear that Yun Bing had put no small amount of effort into planning it.

Yun Bing elaborated on her thoughts. "Every race buys and sells something different. The humans sell soulshards in hopes of obtaining the flesh of genetic lifeforms and rare herbs and potions."

The shaman of the wood spirits murmured, "The wood spirits have been very interested in human inventions like playing cards and children's toys. I was also surprised to learn just how compatible the Yeluo's potions are to our race."

The Yeluo chief added, "My tribe wants the flesh of all sorts of genetic lifeforms, soulshards, and spiritual herbs, and we sell the potions unique to the Yeluo clan."

The Yeluo were particularly talented alchemists and potioners, thanks to the original location of their tribe deep within the Yeluo Valley, and quite a few recipes had been passed down from their ancestors.

Yun Bing concluded, "The rock spirits only need rocks, minerals, and gems, but they're far more capable of killing genetic lifeforms than the other races around. They can produce tons of regular lifeforms and quite a few mutated-grade lifeforms. One or two superior-grade lifeforms have shown up before as well."

As expected of a nomadic tribe that had once done whatever they pleased within the second realm! If not for the fact that their rock quarry had been near depletion, Zhang Lie was certain he wouldn't have been able to take the rock spirits down so easily.

Indeed, considering their rock armor, they were very well suited to combat. Once they ate enough rock, their bodies would be as sturdy as adamantium—and even if they were somehow taken down, they would be able to make it back alive unless their cores were smashed apart.

Given Yun Bing's limited power in the city, the fact that she had nevertheless managed to get all the clans to work together had to have required inordinate effort on her part.

"Thanks for your hard work."

Yun Bing smiled. "It's nothing much. Sun Mengmeng and the others helped me a lot."

Without Team Zenith's authority, Yun Bing could hardly have managed the Herculean task on her own.

"It's good that we were able to find so many examples of properly maintained markets and bazaars as reference—otherwise, the market would surely have become disorderly very quickly." Yun Bing

had been relying on real-world examples of successful markets when designing the one in Zhang Lie's city, and she had requisitioned the help of her clan to do so. "To be frank, the hardest problem we've had was to get the rock spirits to understand and obey the rules of the bazaar."

The rock spirits all had rocks for heads, and it was difficult for them to wrap their heads around complicated and abstract thoughts.

Zhang Lie couldn't help smiling as he thought of the rock giants trying to thumb through a leaflet of rules and instructions.

"In the end, we were only able to teach a few rock spirits about the rules of the bazaar, and they'll represent all their tribe members within it."

"What currency are you using?" Zhang Lei sounded very curious.

Only with currency would the city be able to move away from a bartering system to a trade-based system. Human cities like Qi used government-issued points, but points were clearly worthless to the alien races.

Sun Mengmeng retrieved two coins from a pocket, one gold and another silver. Both were delicately engraved. "These are what we're using now."

Gold and silver? Zhang Lie picked up the two coins and sniffed them—they smelled like medicinal herbs rather than precious metals.

One side of the silver coin was engraved with Zhang Lie's face, and the other with Venombane. One side of the gold coin was likewise engraved with Zhang Lie's face, and the other with a city.

Zhang Lie crushed apart the coin to find a smattering of bone powder. "This is... the bone of a mutated-grade lifeform, as well as one of a superior-grade lifeform?"

Yun Bing nodded. "The rock spirits consume gold, so we didn't think it would be appropriate to cut down on their food reserves."

Sun Mengmeng continued, "Many in the bazaar were already trading with genetic lifeforms as the common denominator, so we decided to use their bones as our common currency."

Yun Bing and Sun Mengmeng traded off. "The currency is specially prepared using herbs from the wood spirits, then dyed with a recipe from the Yeluo. That's how we made them gold and silver. In the current market, ten thousand silver coins correspond to one gold coin. The main issue is that we're quite lacking in superior-grade lifeforms, so we haven't been able to produce more gold coins."

Sun Mengmeng took over. "Our next step was to introduce paper currency, but we didn't want to do so without your approval. Furthermore, we don't have the technology to create paper currency that others can't replicate."

"What can you buy with a silver coin?"

"Ten tons of regular-grade lifeforms can be exchanged for one silver coin, and a ton of mutated-grade lifeforms for a hundred silver coins. A hundred silver coins can buy you a regular-grade soulshard, and a gold coin a mutated-grade soulshard."

Zhang Lie looked on with interest as he saw a hunter chop up meat from some genetic lifeform on the spot, turning it into a fresh serving of some street snack or another.

If he were to let the city develop as it was now, would there be a day during which humans could obtain gene fragments without needing to brave the danger of uncharted territory out in the wilderness of the second realm?

Zhang Lie could hardly have predicted that the city would develop to this extent in the two months during which he had been gone.

Chapter 428: Renhuang

Zhang Lie said, "I don't have any plans to manufacture paper currency as yet, but we're not in a hurry to do so. Send a few hunters to the nearby human cities and purchase a few storage-type soulshards."

The most problematic part about currency was that it would be difficult to transport. Purchasing a pound of mutated-grade lifeforms would cost a significant bag of silver coins, but this problem could be temporarily resolved with a storage-type soulshard.

Yun Bing nodded. "I was thinking of something similar."

All humans either hunted for or bought a storage-type soulshard for convenience, and this wasn't a novelty to them. The alien races, however, had no such privilege.

The shaman of the wood spirits and the chief of the Yeluo's eyes' brightened. They had obtained such soulshards from the humans they had come into contact with at great expense, but there hardly were enough for the rest of their clan. Having more such soulshards would be a tremendous boon for their kind.

Yun Bing continued, "We've also started collecting tax."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I don't need any such tax. What would I do with these coins?"

Yun Bing disagreed. "Taxation is a necessary part of maintaining the market. Even if you don't need the money, the city will benefit if we spend these coins on your behalf. After all, we'll need hunters and warriors to defend the city. This can't be a fully volunteer-based system, and we need to pay them a decent salary for doing so. After all, by defending the city, they're losing valuable time during which they could be hunting."

"In that case, I'll leave the finances of the city and this bazaar to you, Yun Bing," Zhang Lie announced, convinced by her arguments.

Subsequently, accompanied by the chief of the Yeluo, he toured the Yeluo's new laboratory.

"It looks like you still have quite a few hidden recipes up your sleeve," he commented to his surprise.

The Yeluo were marketing a few potions of particular value: rapid-healing potions, antivenoms, antitoxins, repellents, and so on. There were quite a number of female or old workers manning the laboratory and the production lines.

The chief of the Yeluo smiled. "We got a few tips from Miss Yun Bing and managed to increase our throughput to a few hundred vials of potions a day."

After that, the shaman of the wood spirits brought him to the forests and the nearby farmland that Sun Mengmeng and the others had requested.

The wood spirits were radiating a gentle green light as they passed through the fields, speeding up the growth of the herbs and plants in the region.

The shaman said, "We're growing all sorts of spiritual herbs here, enough for the entire city to use, and we supply the Yeluo laboratory directly."

After going through the entire city, Zhang Lie returned to the sura king's palace. "I really can't believe all of you did so much within two months. I'm amazed by your diligence, and I'm glad you're all so capable."

Sun Mengmeng and Yun Bing glanced at each other. "Zhang Lie, there's something we'll need you to make a decision on."

"What is it?"

"Your city's name, of course. We haven't been able to come to a consensus on what name to choose, and we'd like for you to make a decision."

"What names have you thought of?"

"Initially, we wanted to call it the city of Lie."

Zhang Lie nodded: that seemed reasonable.

"However, the wood spirits and the Yeluo tribe vetoed that idea."

"Why?"

"Because it's no longer a city just of humans, and the single-word naming scheme used for human cities wouldn't be suitable."

"In that case, what name would you propose?"

"After some deliberation, we've settled on one name."

The shaman of the wood spirits, chief of the Yeluo, members of Team Zenith, Chu Feng, and Yun Bing announced simultaneously,

"The city of Renhuang!" [1]

Zhang Lie frowned.

Such a name didn't bring back good memories for him. After all, it was because those hunters of Qi had addressed him as a champion of mankind that he had ultimately been forced out of the city.

Sun Mengmeng added, "I know what you're worried about, Zhang Lie, but our situation is different now. What you experienced in Qi won't happen again, and I personally think this is a very suitable name."

Zhang Lie sucked in a deep breath. "Very well. if you're all in agreement, we'll call this the city of Renhuang."

Li Feng asked, "In that case, is today our founding day?"

"It certainly is!" Sun Mengmeng replied. "Shall we have a celebration?"

Chu Feng rushed off into the distance, shouting, "I'll bring some decorations over to drape throughout the city!"

The chief of the Yeluo smiled. "I'll let my kinsmen know to help as well. Not only did our governor return, our city has finally been named."

The shaman of the wood spirits flew off. "I'll let my clan know of this joyous occasion!"

"And I'll inform the rock spirits," Li Feng added.

Sun Mengmeng murmured in excitement, "We were already planning on a feast to celebrate your return—now we might as well make it even larger, to celebrate the founding of this city!"

Zhang Lie suddenly shouted, "Hold it!"

Everyone stopped moving.

Zhang Lie stepped out of the palace and took out the three golden rocs' carcasses. "This is a gift I brought back from Mt. Wanren."

Were these... peak-grade lifeforms?! Those present had all seen peak-grade lifeforms for themselves, but none as large as the golden roc that had almost ascended to disaster-grade. It was a few times larger than even ordinary peak-grade lifeforms. They couldn't imagine how Zhang Lie had managed to slay such a massive beast.

"This should be enough for a feast for the entire city. Ah, right, take this one as well."

He also pulled out the cactus-like plant-based lifeform that he had slain within the wood spirits' forest.

Everyone present began to salivate—they would all have a taste of these peak-grade lifeforms' flesh for themselves!

Chapter 429: The Sura Empire

The crag eagles were rather satisfied with the rock spires that the rock spirits had created, but they weren't used to the height—the crag eagles were used to far more elevated perches.

Upon finding out that Renhuang was hosting a celebration on account of its founding, the crag eagles immediately motioned to attend.

"Of course we have to attend this celebration too!" Yu Huantian shouted.

A large pot was brought out from who-knew-where, and the meat from the peak-grade lifeforms that Zhang Lie had slaughtered was simmering inside.

All the citizens of Renhuang gathered in the central plaza of the city. The rock spirits emerged from their quarry, and the wood spirits from their forest.

The rock giants dwarfed everyone else around. The wood spirits hovered in the air, glowing green. The Yeluo fighters' bronzed skins and hulking forms made them a sight to behold. The crag eagles flew through the air.

In front of the palace, Zhang Lie announced, "Thank you for all your hard work, everyone. You've put in a lot of effort to transform this from a war-torn capital to a brand-new city! I know many of you didn't come to this city willingly, but from your happy, expectant faces, I can tell that you've come to feel like you're part of it. From today onwards, this city will have a name: Renhuang.

"To all of you, I'd like to offer you a toast—in gratitude for your work, and with the promise of more to come!"

The humans, Yeluo, wood spirits, rock spirits, and the newly introduced crag eagles all began to cheer.

"Now, time for the feast!"

Sun Mengmeng and the others climbed up a ladder to reach the gigantic stone cauldron's lid, where they used a long ladle to scoop portion after portion of meat broth to everyone present. Besides the peak-grade meat broth, there were all sorts of delicacies available to everyone present.

Everyone, human and alien alike, smiled blissfully. They were particularly glad that they had chosen or been coerced to accompany Zhang Lie to Renhuang.

If the humans had remained in Qi, they would never have advanced beyond second-realm hunters with maxed superior gene fragments. In fact, many of them wouldn't even have reached such a threshold, let alone obtain any peak gene fragments at all. They would risk their lives just to get a paltry few mutated gene fragments, and they might even die to a sudden attack or ambush from a superior-grade lifeform.

Even killing a regular or mutated-grade lifeform wasn't easy for most second-realm hunters. Many hunters died from inexplicable bouts of carelessness, of a confluence of an unlucky set of random events. Their every battle was filled with danger at every corner. So too was the wilderness of the second realm. Who knew where genetic lifeforms lay in wait?

Some hunters died after chance encounters with multiple lifeforms in a row, or by encountering hostile tribes while escaping from a group of genetic lifeforms. If these hunters were particularly unlucky, they might find themselves facing a superior- or even peak-grade lifeform.

Living in the second realm meant accepting peril at every corner.

In Renhuang, however, everything seemed far simpler. These hunters could amass enough gene fragments to secure a good foundation just with regular and mutated-grade soulshards that they couldn't use anymore, and they would even be able to hire a team of bodyguards in battle.

The Yeluo were particularly good at providing this service. They were talented fighters and charged a rather cheap price for what they offered—for killing a group of genetic lifeforms, they would be satisfied with receiving just a single soulshard or two, and the human hunters could walk away with the lifeforms' flesh.

The celebration in Renhuang mirrored the celebration deep within sura territory.

In a sura country to the extreme west, millions of sura were gathered outside their monarch's palace, shouting so loudly they could be heard from miles away.

"Longevity to the monarch of stars! The sura shall never fall!"

"Longevity to the monarch of stars! The sura shall never fall!"

"Longevity to the monarch of stars! The sura shall never fall!"

Their chant echoed in the air. The buildings almost seemed to tremble with the collective shout of the sura as they celebrated their kingdom's victory.

They stood in a plaza whose center was a statue of a sura. He wielded dual blades with sharp, serrated teeth, giving off a fearsome aura that seemed to be transmitted even in the form of a statue.

Within the palace, a gigantic sura monarch sat on his throne.

The palace was so large that it was dozens of times the size of Zhang Lie's city. The sura monarch's throne room was lined with statue after statue of past sura emperors, and at their center was a statue hundreds of meters tall.

It was cut out of a gigantic piece of blood jade and depicted a sura with three heads and six arms, a different weapon in each arm. By his back was a wheel of light. The statue stood in front of a stained-glass window, and when light shone in through that window, the deity depicted in the statue seemed to radiate with an inner glow.

This was the deity worshiped by the sura: the asura.

Before the asura was the monarch's throne, crafted out of blood jade and gold. A nearly ten-meter tall sura sat on the throne, wearing bone-plated armor that seemed to suck in all light. His face was calm, but the aura surrounding him seemed so fearsome that those who looked upon him began to palpitate.

A minister wearing blood-colored robes knelt at his feet with parchment in his hands. "Your majesty, our forces report an overwhelming success! The three sura kingdoms that have attacked us are now nothing but dust.

Our kingdom is strong enough to rule over the entirety of the second realm, and you are the ruler of that kingdom. It is my humble suggestion that this kingdom be titled the heart of the sura empire."

Another minister added, "Millions of sura have gathered outside the palace to cheer for your victory, your majesty. With the citizens' hearts and minds united, this kingdom will surely prosper for another millennium!"

"No, no—while your majesty is alive, our kingdom will prosper for millennia! Your majesty shall usher in a new age for the sura!"

The sura monarch, the monarch of stars, was unperturbed by his ministers' flattery.

"To celebrate our grand victory, send word to my nine godsons to have them return for a feast. How have they been?"

The ministers glanced at each other. "Eight of the princes are doing well, but the ninth..."

The sura monarch smiled. "What's the matter? I recall he had a certain fondness for human males. How is he?"

The minister lowered his head until it was touching the ground. "Your majesty, while we were being besieged by the three neighboring sura kingdoms, he... was killed. We believed it would be inappropriate to reveal that information to you while the war was ongoing."

"Bastards!" the sura monarch roared. His anger manifested as a wave of cutting wind which shook the entire palace. He slammed a palm down on his armrest and crushed it into pieces. His aura rippled through the room, blowing around the weaker ministers and cracking the pillars that held the palace upright. The minister in blood-colored robes hurriedly pleaded, "Please calm down, your majesty!"

With a deep breath, the sura monarch restrained himself and sat back down. "Who dared touch my godson? What sura would disrespect me so?!"

The official's legs had turned to jelly as he reported, "Your majesty, please forgive me. I hadn't paid too much attention to the report because the sura king had been captured alive."

Recently, the sura king's body had finally given out, and his vitality was so depleted that no spiritual herb could save him. He died impaled on a wooden stake.

The minister in blood-colored robes urged, "Tell us what you know!"

"Yes, minister!" The reporting official clambered up from the floor. "Your majesty, as you suspected, no sura would dare touch your godson. He was killed by a group of humans!"

The sura monarch snorted. "That's impossible. I'm well aware of my godsons' strength. How could humans take any of them down?"

"It's true, your majesty, I swear on it! According to our latest reports, not only did those humans take over your godson's former kingdom, they even recruited a few alien races to rebuild its capital from scratch!"

"Insolent! They clearly think nothing of me." The sura monarch clenched his fists tightly.

The minister dressed in blood-colored robes murmured, "No one human could slaughter a sura king. Your majesty, I suspect your godson was too caught up in his hobbies and pleasures and fell prey to a devious scheme!"

"An ignoble death for a sura, but a crime against my godson is a crime against me. If I don't take revenge, all sura will scorn my name," the sura monarch pronounced.

He thought for a moment. "What of my godson Xuechi? He isn't too far from the captured sura kingdom, is he?"

"That's right, your majesty, he's the closest among your godsons!"

The sura king commanded, "In that case, let Xuechi seek revenge for his brother. Instruct him that he is to bring me that human's head within ten days."

The official prostrating himself on the floor exhaled in relief and was just about to stand when a flash of blood-colored energy streaked past. No one saw how the monarch had struck, but the official noticed his surroundings somehow all rising into the air.

No—his body was dropping. He turned around to see a pair of legs behind him.

The official who had lost both his legs flopped onto the red-colored carpet, blood pulsing out of his stumps and dying the carpet a darker shade of red.

The sura king spoke slowly, "You have no right to decide which information is pertinent to me, and which is not. If not for your loyalty to the kingdom, you'd have lost your head, not your feet."

The official who had lost both his legs keened in pain as he cried out, "Thank you for sparing my life, your majesty!"

"Long live the monarch of stars! While he rules, the kingdom shall not fall!"

The officials gathered in the palace all knelt and bowed down to their monarch.

Chapter 430: Prepare to Die

In the kingdom of Xuechi, within the sura king Xuechi's sleeping quarters, the odor of blood spread throughout the air. In the center of his palace was a pool of dark-colored blood, in which the king had immersed himself to take a bath.

"Your highness, there's been a missive from the monarch!" An old official walked toward the edge of the pool.

"What news does he bring?"

The official replied, "It's with regards to the destruction of the kingdom of Xueju, your highness."

Xuechi pondered the matter over for a moment. "Ah, yes. Xueju was captured, and you wanted me to absorb his kingdom into my own. I've sent troops over to do so; how's their progress?"

"They've consumed the entire border, and they're spreading deeper into the kingdom as we speak."

Mobilizing large numbers of troops was a slow process, and the troops had already made impressive progress as they were.

Xuechi stood up and donned a black robe lined with golden thread. On the robe's back was sewed the figure of a three-headed, six-armed sura.

The elder glanced again at the contents of the missive and gasped in shock.

Xuechi poured himself a cup of wine and swirled it around. "What's the matter?"

The official replied with a stammer, "According to the missive, the sura king Xueju was killed by a h-human!"

The wine that Xuechi had just imbibed sprayed out of his mouth toward the unfortunate official. He began to laugh so much that he wheezed. "Y-You, surely you're joking!"

The sura official shook his head. "No, your highness!"

Xuechi continued to laugh, so much so that he couldn't hold his cup straight. "Killed by a human! Truly?"

It was little wonder that Xuechi was shocked: in the eyes of the sura, humans were nothing more than cattle, nothing more than pigs, dogs, sheep, or cows. Perhaps an ordinary sura might have fallen to an exceptional human, but they were talking about none other than a sura king!

In other words, it was as if a tank that could dominate the entire battlefield had been destroyed by a pig. Comparing a sura king to a tank was an insult; no, each sura king was more like a galactic cruiser. How could a pig take down a galactic cruiser? The very thought was ridiculous.

"Let me have a look." Xuechi grabbed the missive and skimmed through its contents.

As he read on, his face turned dark. "The humans dared take over the capital and make their own city from it? How dare they! When have we sura ever been polluted by these humans?!"

The official hurriedly retrieved a suit of battle armor for Xuechi. It was so dense and heavy that even the official could barely carry its weight.

After Xuechi put on the armor, he instructed, "Have a few more humans slaughtered and their blood fed into the pool. It's getting cold."

The official blinked a few times. Wasn't Xuechi about to set off to take on the humans? What was the point of filling up the pool some more?

"Summon my bloodwinged dragon riders! When I come back with the heads of these insolent upstart humans, I want a hot blood bath!"

The official was simultaneously shocked and confident when he heard that Xuechi was mobilizing the pride of the kingdom of Xuechi: the bloodwinged dragon riders.

Initially, the hunters who had followed Zhang Lie from Qi were rather displeased by the presence of alien races in the city, considering how Qi had once been invaded by hostile races. After living with them for some time, however, they began to change their minds and perspective.

Not all alien races were bad; indeed, trading with them could lead to untold fortune.

A few children's toys and trinkets could be traded for spiritual herbs from the wood spirits, and pieces of gold and minerals for freshly killed genetic lifeforms from the rock spirits. They were even occasionally able to buy superior-grade lifeforms' flesh from time to time.

No longer did they need to rely on dangerous hunting to form a good foundation in this realm—no, they could defray some of that labor to the alien races instead.

For this, they had to thank Miss Yun Bing, along with the members of Team Zenith.

Those who wanted to go out hunting could hire a few mercenary bodyguards to make it safer, and those who didn't want to go out at all could become guards within the city. The guards earned a decent wage for their labor, and they would be able to buy genetic lifeforms from the bazaar with that coin.

It was no longer difficult to increase the number of their gene fragments—the task had gotten much simpler. Zhang Lie and the city of Renhuang was the root cause behind that simplicity, and those hunters who had chosen to follow him here were very proud of their decision.

As the Yeluo drank a bowl of meat broth, they could feel strength and warmth filling their bodies.

Many among them had been unwilling to move from the Yeluo Valley, but some were rather curious as to what the outside world was like. They were worried whether they could get accustomed to

living here after being in the valley for so long, and they found, to their surprise, that their standards of living were actually higher in Zhang Lie's city.

They lived in houses of stone, which were much more comfortable than those of wood. They would be able to acquire food and other resources without having to battle against poisonous insects, and they were even able to obtain the soulshards that would otherwise have been impossible to obtain.

Even the Yeluo themselves didn't realize just how valuable the recipes their ancestors had left for them were—a small vial could be exchanged for soulshards and food. The chief of the Yeluo drank himself drunk daily with the wood spirits' alcohol, praising Zhang Lie day in and day out.

The wood spirits didn't eat meat, but they were very fond of the Yeluo clan's herbal concoctions. They sat and sipped as they enjoyed the joyous atmosphere around them. This was quite a different experience from living in a peaceful, idyllic forest, but few of the wood spirits would have wanted to return.

The rock spirits sat around the plaza, each gnawing on a massive boulder. Ever since they arrived in the city, they had never once gone hungry.

The crag eagles were particularly excited to consume yet another feast, and especially the meat of the golden rocs.

All sorts of meat was being roasted by the side of the plaza, and everyone could take their fill. The leader of the rock spirits had brought a freshly slaughtered superior-grade lifeform with him as a gift.

Zhang Lie glanced all around him as human, wood spirit, Yeluo, rock spirit, and crag eagle interacted in harmony, and he too smiled brightly.

Sun Mengmeng suddenly tugged on Zhang Lie's hand. "Come, Zhang Lie, come here and dance with me!"

She pulled him toward a campfire, where a group of people were already dancing. This was a celebratory custom from the Yeluo clan. When those present saw Zhang Lie approach, they began to cheer.

Just then, as they eagerly waited for Zhang Lie to start dancing, a dragon's roar came from the horizon.

Everyone lifted their heads. Someone pointed at the sky and shouted, "What's that?!"

A black shadow was darting down toward them.

Zhang Lie frowned. It was already nighttime, so the flyers were hardly visible to a large part of the crowd.

Just then, a red glow lit up the sky and grew larger as it approached the party. Sun Mengmeng frowned. "What's approaching?"

The red glow fell toward them like a meteor, laden with killing intent. Streaks of red filled the air and shot toward the plaza. Everyone could all sense the danger posed by this sudden attack. If the attack was to land, there would surely be casualties all around.

Almost the entire city was gathered at the plaza; it would be a devastating blow to Renhuang, one that Zhang Lie wouldn't let happen. Renhuang was something everyone present had put all their hard work into, and he wouldn't let it get destroyed so easily!

He leapt into the air and flapped the wings that sprouted from his back, blocking the red glow with his hands. The red glow was stronger than he had expected, and the momentum it carried forced Zhang Lie down. Zhang Lie gritted his teeth and flapped his wings at full force, barely slowing himself down.

"[Rune: Resonate]!" The image of a dragonturtle appeared before him as the four tablets revolved in mid-air, forcibly stopping the red glow from moving.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Zhang Lie shoved the red glow away, sending it flying into the air, where it burst apart like fireworks.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes as he scouted his surroundings, glancing at the group of fliers that had just approached.

His targets were all sura, ones that were riding on some dragons with blood-colored wings. They wore black armor that camouflaged them against the night sky.

The leader of the riders rode a dragon about three times the size of the others. He wore blood-red armor with flames emblazoned on them, and even his skin was dark red. Two horns grew out of his forehead like a crown.

Judging by his unusual appearance, Zhang Lie was certain that he was a sura king himself.

Xuechi glanced at Zhang Lie with interest. "Are you the one who killed Xueju?"

Zhang Lie frowned. The sura king's tone carried marked disdain; no matter how strong Zhang Lie was, he was still a human. Xuechi believed that he had only managed to assassinate Xueju in the middle of sex.

Zhang Lie didn't know who Xueju was, but there was only one sura who fit the bill. "You're here to take revenge for the sura king I slaughtered?"

"Indeed, I am!" The sura king's face turned dark. "Are you an idiot or a reckless fool, to be so daring as to kill a sura king and then to claim his capital as your own city? Are you prepared to die?"