

U. Warlord 451

Chapter 451: Mob Psychology

"What has Zhang Lie done? He's mobilized seven sura kingdoms against him—they're going to attack Renhuang simultaneously!"

"Serves him right! Hero, champion of mankind—ha, as if! I've disliked him for quite a while, and this will be the end of his charade!"

There were quite a number of hunters who felt that Zhang Lie was too arrogant, too prideful, and uncaring of others' concerns.

"You're laughing at humans being attacked by the sura? Are you truly from the Milky Way, or are you a spy from somewhere farther out?"

"Why can't I laugh at him? He's monopolizing his theory of limit fragments instead of bettering the whole of humanity with it!"

"Right, shouldn't that technology go to the world federation? How is it reasonable that Zhang Lie's monopolizing it for himself?"

"How can the world federation let him do that? Is it going to keep bowing down to his whims?"

"It's his own discovery, and he can do whatever he wants with it!" someone else retorted. "Of course he's able to do with it as he wills."

"Is it true that the sura are planning to attack Renhuang?"

"Of course it is! A group of sura troops passed by the city where I'm at. We caught one and learned that they were planning on destroying Renhuang whole!"

"Just what did Zhang Lie do to cause such a big hubbub?"

"What, you don't think he's done enough to merit this?"

"Right, Zhang Lie destroyed two sura kingdoms on his own! It's natural that the sura would want to take revenge on him."

"Zhang Lie's done for! How could he defend against a seven-kingdom coalition?"

"All this was brought about by his arrogance. There are quite a number of forces that could destroy these sura kingdoms if they wanted to, but why haven't they done so? It's because the sura kingdoms are like a hornet's nest. If you poke at one, you'll soon summon the others."

"Oh? Before Zhang Lie, who else was there who could destroy a sura kingdom? Give me an example, why don't you?"

"Ha, you idiot! So what if you can destroy a sura kingdom? Don't you know how many such kingdoms there are in the second realm? Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands! He might be able to deal with one sura kingdom, but how about two or three? And if he still can, four, five, six, seven? This is why no one has been able to resolve the sura threat until now. Zhang Lie's going to be a textbook example to reaffirm this point!"

The majority of the hunters thought that Zhang Lie was dead meat, but that didn't stop a small minority from supporting him at any cost.

"My father was rescued from imprisonment by Zhang Lie. As a fellow human, I want to help him out."

"The sura captured me and kept me in captivity for over a decade. I led a hellish life, and it was the hero Zhang Lie who saved me from my imprisonment. It was he who gave me the chance to sense daylight once more! I hadn't intended on returning to the second realm ever again, but I can't stand around when my savior's in danger. Who's going to join me?!"

"Are you crazy? Someone like you, who's been imprisoned for over a decade, won't even be good cannon fodder!"

"Be that as it may, I'll stake my life on this if I have to!"

"I'm another hunter who was rescued by Zhang Lie. I intend on returning to the second realm and fighting together with my savior. I might die on the battlefield, but I'll still do it— he rescued me, and this is a life debt I have to pay. No one will be able to stop me!"

Countless prisoners that Zhang Lie had rescued, regardless of nationality, planet of origin, and race, announced that they would return to the second realm to fight on their behalf.

However, others were frustrated by the magnitude of the response in favor of sending aid to Zhang Lie—like Amurong.

After destroying his second sura kingdom, Zhang Lie's popularity in the world federation soared; his name could be heard in just about every conversation. Some even said that Zhang Lie was the face of the world federation, that any who dared to go against him was daring to go against the entire world.

Even more shockingly, no one countered that sort of statement. Perhaps if Zhang Lie were to announce a bid for presidency of the world federation, these hunters would support him.

Amurong hurriedly sent word to his supporters. This time, Zhang Lie had to die—and he had to die a terrible death, not a martyr's death. Amurong would tell the world that Zhang Lie died of folly of his own making.

Another thread was posted on the hunters' forums.

"Are you all crazy? Why would you volunteer on a death trap? Do you want to die with Zhang Lie?"

"Zhang Lie saved our lives and freed us from an interminable hell. That's why I'm willing to give up my life for him."

"Think carefully. Your opponents are the sura—do you want to become prisoners again?"

The hunters were silent. To them, death wasn't something they feared—becoming the sura's prisoner again would be a fate worse than death.

"Furthermore, Zhang Lie destroyed the two sura kingdoms just to pillage and plunder them, not for the good of the world federation. You don't have an understanding of Zhang Lie's city, do you? Only

three thousand of the citizens are humans; the rest are members of alien races! It might be that Zhang Lie's already being controlled by some other race!"

"No, that's wrong! The governor has always stood by us humans, and he's never been controlled or suborned! Don't spout nonsense—these alien races were all brought to the city by force or compulsion, and they've submitted to Governor Zhang."

"Have you considered why they're willing to submit to him? Isn't it possible that Zhang Lie might be half-alien, half-human?"

Everyone was shocked by this suggestion. Most of the volunteers were humans; if Zhang Lie wasn't fully human himself, they might very well change their minds.

These naysayers thought that their baseless claims would be able to turn public sentiment against Zhang Lie, but they didn't realize how Zhang Lie's actions spoke for themselves.

"That's a baseless accusation, but even if it were true, so what? Can't a half-human stand alongside humans?"

"Don't you remember what Zhang Lie did? He defended against the sura incursion in Qi not once, but twice! In order to resolve the conflict once and for all, he counterinvaded sura territory and captured the capital of the invading kingdoms! How many humans could claim to have accomplished such a feat? And what did the humans of Qi do? They expelled him!"

"Right, no matter who or what Zhang Lie is, we'll help him defend against the sura forces!"

"We're doing this out of gratitude, and it doesn't matter whether Zhang Lie's a human or not!"

"Perhaps I might regret my decision, but I'd rather regret my decisions in a sura dungeon than die of old age in a sickbed regretting not having done anything today!"

Chapter 452: Topping Up Gene Fragments

Zhang Lie didn't know of the contentious debate surrounding the impending invasion; he was still hunting down peak-grade lifeforms with the rest of Team Zenith.

Within the cave, Sun Mengmeng glanced at the diary in her hands. "Within the cave are three peak-grade lifeforms, a frostward wolf, thundershine lion, and windwrath tiger. These three lifeforms are extremely intelligent. Not only do they not fight with each other, they even counter each other's deficiencies. Any intruder will have to deal with the three of them simultaneously, so no one has dared fight with them to date."

The cave was cold and damp, and gusts of wind blew into their faces. Thunder seemed to crackle in the distance. The cave was filled with tunnels, and it was impossible to identify in which direction to proceed.

Zhang Lie twisted his head and asked Sun Mengmeng, "Do you know the route?"

She shook her head. "It's not recorded in the diary."

"Let me see, then." Zhang Lie's eyes morphed into a dragon's pupils as he activated his peak-grade dragonsoul soulshard.

Amidst the pale blue glow that suffused his vision, Zhang Lie found three souls, as bright as a lantern in the night. One was covered in frost, another in lightning, and the other in wind. It was straightforward to determine which was which.

"Follow me." Zhang Lie took the lead.

"You know the path, Captain?" Sun Mengmeng asked.

"Roughly."

As Zhang Lie beckoned them forward, they found the number of bones littered along the path starting to increase. The souls felt closer and closer. Zhang Lie whispered, "I'll attack directly. Remain in stealth, all of you! Rock spirit, stand still by the wall and be prepared to intercept the other two peak-grade lifeforms rushing in. You'll take care of one, and the members of Team Zenith of the other."

Everyone nodded.

"You just need to hold on for a moment or two. I'm confident that I'll be able to take one down quickly." A sword materialized in Zhang Lie's hand as he flapped his wings and dashed forward. The moment he approached, the lifeforms reacted.

Zhang Lie's first target was the peak-grade thundershine lion.

It was resting in its lair. Its fur was a glossy dark purple, and two antlers grew out of its head. Lightning crackled between them.

Upon noticing Zhang Lie's arrival, the lion stood up and roared. A beam of lightning shot out of its mouth, filling the air with the tang of ozone. Zhang Lie dodged to the side. A sliver of lightning brushed against his skin, sending a prickling sensation up his body.

"[Rune: Control]!"

Zhang Lie raised both his arms into the sky, and the image of a dragon turtle appeared behind him. The two gravity-controlling tablets smashed into the ground. They began to resonate as one, emanating ripples and forming an absolute domain over all things within.

Under the influence of the warped space, the thundershine lion found itself incapable of controlling its lightning.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Zhang Lie smashed his fist down on the lion's brain, causing space to warp in its vicinity. A bright flash of genetic energy exploded on impact, causing the lion to bleed from all its orifices.

Behind them ignited another furious battle. Wind raged around them; a wolf howled as a tiger roared. Zhang Lie immediately used his trump card before the lion could retaliate.

"[Rune: Resonate]!" The image of a dragon turtle appeared before Zhang Lie as four runic tablets crashed down around the lion, forming a black formation around him.

Zhang Lie punched the lion with both his fists, sending ripples of energy crashing against its head. The defenseless lion bled, bled, and bled some more. Even before its skull cracked, its brain turned to mush. Its eyes rolled back in its head as part of its skull caved in.

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

Zhang Lie turned around immediately after vanquishing his foe. When he saw Team Zenith's performance, he was rather impressed.

The members of Team Zenith and the leader of the rock spirits working together were actually able to suppress both peak-grade lifeforms.

The peak-grade frostward wolf's fur was covered in a layer of icy armor, whereas the windwrath tiger was surrounded by a barrier of wind. Both the lifeforms were being suppressed by what seemed like an endless chain of attacks from the members of Team Zenith, a barrage so intense that they weren't able to use any of their abilities at all.

Zhang Lie was astounded by the strength that the members of Team Zenith were demonstrating.

Yang Ze made the familiar motions of [The Boundless Blade], causing sword energy to envelope him and disperse his barrier of wind.

Li Feng used [Dragon's Triumph], the greatsword in his hands emitting such blinding light that neither lifeform could open their eyes. The light morphed into a white dragon which knocked the frostward wolf aside, forcing it against a wall. Its icy armor shattered.

Fang Yi struck at the dazed wolf with his signature [Heaven's Judgment], piercing its body and causing fresh blood to leak from the wound.

The peak-grade windwrath tiger tried to rescue its companion, but Sun Xiaowu blocked its path with his body. His polearm turned a shining gold as he slashed at it with [Golden Divide].

With [Wind's Spirit] propelling himself forward, Fang Yi gripped his spear tightly to stabilize himself and broke the frostward wolf's neck with a kick.

As it witnessed its companion's death, the windwrath tiger roared in rage. A huge cyclone descended around its body. Sun Mengmeng shot a fiery arrow into the center of the cyclone, causing it to explode upon impact with the tiger's body.

"[Storm of Leaves]!" Zhou Ying rushed forward, using her shortsword to slice at the tiger's body. The tiger tried to claw at it, but Zhou Ying darted back agilely. The tiger discovered that the wound was slowly corroding its body.

Hong Xi struck with a [Fists of the Silent Sea], a direct hit on its nose, causing it to stumble backward in a daze and begin to bleed.

Sun Mengmeng fired her second arrow, which morphed into a firebird that exploded upon striking the tiger's head, quickly followed by a third, a fourth, and a fifth. The tiger's head was charred and smoking by the time it fell to the floor.

Zhang Lie clapped his hands. "Well done, well done! You've all grown to an impressive extent."

Zhang Lie's praise made the members of Team Zenith all jubilant.

Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi made to hand over the soulshards they had obtained from the kill, but Zhang Lie refused them. He sighed at their luck—he'd gone over a dozen peak-grade lifeforms without anything, but they were two for two! "This is your kill, and the soulshard belongs to you."

Chapter 453: Taking the Lead

Just as Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith were traveling all around in search of more peak gene fragments, the seven-kingdom sura coalition had set off in earnest from seven different directions toward Renhuang.

A battle between the sura and humans, never before seen in history, was about to begin. There had never been an enemy force, let alone a human force, that warranted such attention. Most shockingly, the seven kingdoms' target was a single human city.

Everyone, human and alien alike, was carefully following the upcoming assault.

"What?" The sura are mobilizing seven kingdom's forces to deal with an alien race? Who would warrant such a grand display of strength?

"Renhuang, you say? Surely they're not related to humans?"

"What? Have the humans grown so strong that the sura need to mobilize seven kingdoms to take them down?!"

The seven kingdoms' troops were slowly heading toward Renhuang. After six days of travel, Shouta found himself completely drained of any energy.

He shouted, "Elder, when are we going to arrive?"

The elder called back, "Your highness, you've asked the same question eighteen times today already!"

Shouta replied impatiently, "Well, answer me, then—when are we going to arrive?"

The elder replied, "We're about six or seven days out. If it rains, we might take twice as long to get there."

Shouta grumbled, "Can't we get the infantry to speed up?"

The elder spread his hands. "This is the fastest sustainable speed for the troops. If you want to speed up even further, we'll have to leave our supply lines behind."

Shouta folded his arms. "Why is it taking so long?!"

"Traveling with so many troops is bound to create a lot of commotion. If we move too quickly, it'll be easy to end up engaging in combat with the wild lifeforms all around. Better to avoid any needless confrontation," the elder advised.

Shouta had never fought in a war; all he had ever done was raid enemies with a small, elite team. From this perspective, it was particularly impressive that he was nevertheless renowned as a 'battlefield butcher'.

Shouta jumped up. "In that case, what if I head over to Renhuang with just a small group of elites, like I always do?"

The elder shook his head in exasperation. "Surely you must be joking, your highness! If you run over to Renhuang, what are the rest of us to do? Furthermore, it's very possible that Renhuang is backed by an opponent that even the monarch of stars has to be wary of. Please don't be rash!"

Unfortunately, Shouta refused to listen to reason. He patted the elder's shoulder and announced, "Elder, I have an important task ahead of me. I'll leave command of the army to you!"

"Your highness, please don't make a fuss!"

Shouta spread his arms. "This is what I've always done. Has there ever been a problem?"

The elder vehemently shook his head. "No, no, you can't! This isn't a battle for you alone— you're expected to be working in tandem with your six brothers! If you don't perform up to par, the monarch of stars will surely castigate you."

Shouta replied seriously, "Elder, that's where you're mistaken. It's precisely because we're a seven-kingdom coalition that I have to be the vanguard."

The elder still seemed rather wary. "Do you intend to test their strength before the frontal assault, then? That... that just might work! I can't believe you've thought of such a strategy by yourself, your highness!"

Shouta nodded sagely. "Exactly! You don't know just how perverted the other kings are," Shouta recounted with a shudder. "When they learned that the monarch of stars was about to wage war, they were so excited saliva almost dripped out of their mouths.

"Shicang cackled as he announced that he wanted to refill his necromantic army, Fenghe that he wanted to try out some of his creations in the battlefield, Moyan that he wanted to add some human eyes to his collection, Gaoyuan that he wanted to collect more races' testicles, and Suiyue that he wanted to find some older human men!"

Shouta mimicked the other kings' words and actions. "If I arrive late, there won't be any humans left for me—the six of them will take them all!"

The elder's mouth spasmed. "You're over-exaggerating." Don't you think I know you well? You just want to slaughter more humans so you can start building a tower of heads...

"Elder, I'll leave the rest here to you, then!" Shouta vanished like a wisp of smoke as the elder clutched his face. Why do I have to do everything? Why did I want to be an elder to begin with?! Perhaps I should resign...

Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith cooked the three peak-grade lifeforms in a stew and ate it all before heading to their next target, following the route they had outlined with the diary's assistance.

Zhang Lie stood back as he observed the members of Team Zenith and the leader of the rock spirits fight.

In a flash, Zhou Ying had activated three different soulshards.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Dance of the Earth Dragon]!" Two jade-green dragons darted out of her hands like two beams of light, trapping her peak-grade prey.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" An arrow shot out of the flaming bow in Sun Mengmeng's hands, transforming into a firebird as it shot toward the peak-grade lifeform, which vanished behind a curtain of flames.

Fang Yi yelled, dashing forward with his spear in hand. Hurling forward by wind and storm, the spear seemed nigh unstoppable. As it struck, [Rondo of Wind and Storm] pierced the peak-grade lifeform's head.

"[Adamantine Aegis]!" A layer of golden runes covered Sun Xiaowu's skin, augmenting his defense to such a magnitude that even the peak-grade dragon-type lifeform was unable to break through his armor.

"[Light Dragon's Remnants]!" Li Feng's hands moved so quickly they were hardly visible, sending countless dragons of light flying out toward their prey.

With their prey battered and bruised all over, Yang Ze struck the finishing blow with [The Boundless Blade].

Along the way, they had already managed to hunt down seven or eight peak-grade lifeforms, and Zhang Lie's peak gene fragments were maxed out, as were those of the members of Team Zenith and Hong Xi.

Chapter 454: Ahead of the Pack

In his office, Amurong continued to dictate all sorts of rumors that his underlings began to spread: Zhang Lie was half-alien, Zhang Lie was a member of the sura, Zhang Lie refused to hand over his research on the theory of limit fragments in order to control the entirety of the world federation...

All sorts of rumors, no matter how ridiculous or how unbelievable, were sent out.

Amurong could hardly wait for Zhang Lie to die. Only with his death would his theory of limit fragments finally land in Amurong's hands; otherwise, he would never be able to force it out of Zhang Lie.

He had even wanted to forbid anyone within the world federation from volunteering to help Renhuang for a simple reason: because no one could defend against the combined forces of seven sura kingdoms.

Rather than sacrifice a large number of seasoned hunters, why not save their strength? Renhuang only contained three thousand humans, after all, and it would hardly affect the world federation.

On the other hand, the loss of tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands or millions of hunters would be a far more significant loss. Wasn't it natural to sacrifice the few for the many?

He had almost come to blows with Martial Sage Hong Tianqi on this point during a committee meeting among the highest authorities of the world federation.

Hong Tianqi wanted to summon reinforcements from the world federation, but Amurong was wholly opposed to the idea. In the end, Hong Tianqi had no choice but to announce a summons as a private individual rather than an authority of the world federation.

When the meeting ended and Amurong's closest ally gathered at his office, they asked, "What will you do? Ignoring the other races for now, the martial sage himself will be able to draw many

reinforcements to his cause. I anticipate that the majority of Chinese hunters in the second realm will march to support Renhuang."

Amurong sipped from a cup of tea unhurriedly, causing his ally to frown. "How can you be drinking tea at such a juncture? If Zhang Lie survives, our plan will be for naught!"

Amurong replied impassively, "Ignoring whether or not the humans' aid will be sufficient to defend against the sura, it's not even certain that Zhang Lie will be able to hold out until the reinforcements arrive."

"I should hope so—I don't want to suffer another loss."

Amurong smiled primly. "Don't worry—I have a plan in mind."

"A plan?"

"I've already set up my men in positions of power in countries other than China—for instance, three hundred bureaucrats in Qi are under my sway.

With these people around, it'll be easy for me to delay the reinforcements by a day or two. By the time the human reinforcements set off, they'll be doomed."

"Is that so? What's your plan?"

"Once the humans set off, my people will announce their location to the sura and those alien races hostile to the humans. Don't you remember when Zhang Lie fought off the Qi invaders? There are quite a few races whom he's angered."

Amurong began to cackle. "Renhuang will be the grave of mankind, and Martial Sage Hong Tianqi, who gathered human hunters to a doomed cause, shall become the scourge of humanity! Not only will he lose his reputation, but also his seat in the world federation—and I shall remain in power!"

His ally advised, "You'll need a contingency plan. Be more careful—if this plan were to fail, mankind's reputation will only continue to rise, and the martial sage's words will hold more authority in the world federation."

Amurong shook his head. "They're done for. Whether or not Zhang Lie can defend Renhuang, we'll be poised to secure our power. How are your preparations going?"

The other party smiled coldly. "Rest assured. My men are stationed within the Zenith Dojo, and once something happens to Zhang Lie, I'll have them kidnap his sister."

Amurong smirked. "Very good. Considering how deadly the hunter profession is, he's surely left a will and an inheritance behind for her. It's very likely that part of that inheritance is the recipe for brewing his limit-breaking potions—or a clue to it, at the very least. As long as we can capture that girl, we'll be able to secure Zhang Lie's inheritance."

If Zhang Lie were still alive, no one would dare to touch his family after seeing the example he had made of the Musi clan. However, a dead Zhang Lie wasn't something anyone would be afraid of.

Twin cackles resounded within Amurong's office.

"So this is Renhuang? It doesn't look like anything special."

In just half a day, Shouta and his band of elite fighters had arrived in Renhuang.

They walked into the nearby forest as they scouted Renhuang's surroundings, but they had barely gone deep within when vines suddenly dropped down from the trees overhead to entangle them.

Shouta reacted quickly, waving the blade hitched around his shoulder and cutting apart the trees in a radius of five hundred meters around him.

"How curious," he murmured.

Only the stumps remained, but the wood spirits' vitality was so strong that the stumps began to regrow near-instantaneously.

Shouta frowned, then swung his blade again, destroying stump after stump.

The wood spirits hidden within these stumps were so scared that they began flying out into the air, and Shouta struck them down one after another. The blood-colored edge of his blade began to glow, as though it had come alive.

A band of hunters stood atop the city walls. Their leader was Su Hong. Upon seeing the sura king and his ilk, he shouted, "Another sura king? What are all of you doing here?"

Shouta didn't deign to respond. His executioner's blade swung down from above, and Su Hong and the others dodged instinctively. The blade left a huge crack on the city walls.

Shouta swung his blade once more as the hunters shielded their heads and ducked down.

The top of the watchtower beside them began to slide down, then crashed into the moat outside the city walls—Shouta's blade had sliced it cleanly off.

The hunters recoiled in shock. Had they been even a little slower, their heads would have been chopped off by now.

Shouta shouted, "Which of you killed my fifth and seventh brothers?"

"Who are they?"

"Ah, I forgot to mention them... They're two sura, one of which likes to have sex with human males and the other of which bathes in human blood."

Su Hong didn't know about the latter sura, but there was, to his knowledge, only one sura known for his proclivity toward human males. Every hunter from Qi knew of him.

Chapter 455: Courageous, At Least

The person who killed the sura king who liked human males, and who had tried to invade Qi—that had to be Zhang Lie! Su Hong thought for a moment before replying, "I'm not sure what you're talking about. Neither of these sura are familiar to me."

"Is that so?" Shouta didn't seem to care. "Well, forget it. I came over here to slaughter people, so if I just kill everyone in this city, I'm sure I'll get the culprit. Aren't I smart?"

Upon sensing the sura king's hostility, Su Hong shouted, "We have to fight, now! Against an enemy of this caliber, the city walls are meaningless!"

Shouta waved his sword once more, slicing off another part of the wall.

The rock giants charged forward, but they were easily beheaded with a clean sweep. Nevertheless, they continued surging onward despite the loss of their heads.

Shouta's eyes gleamed. "Very interesting—you can live on even without your heads?"

With another deft swing of his sword, he chopped off their four limbs to see if they could continue living even after that. He was about to strike again, but his next blow was interrupted with a hail of arrows. Shouta tsked as he looked up and swept away the arrows with another wave of his sword.

"As bothersome as flies." He punctuated his comment with another strike, causing Su Hong's eyes to widen as he shouted, "Dodge! Everyone, stay down!"

Shouta sent strike after strike flying toward the city walls and the soldiers above. The crag eagles tried to swoop down on the sura forces, but Shouta easily took them down. The difference in their strength was massive, and their attacks were simply useless against him.

Su Hong knew that they had no chance of delaying the sura incursion.

Just then, a tree so tall it almost seemed to be reaching the clouds unrooted itself from the ground and began walking over to Shouta.

Shouta glanced at it curiously. "How interesting. I'm glad I beat everyone else here."

The tree's massive branches tried to swing toward Shouta, but he cut them off the trunk without even glancing at them. Nevertheless, the branches began growing back rapidly.

"Interesting, very interesting!" With a smirk, Shouta continued slicing off the branches even more rapidly. Two slices stripped the tree of its branches, three scored a deep cut in its bark, and the fourth left a huge opening in the trunk.

Just as the fifth strike was about to land, Su Hong shrieked, "Hold it!"

The gigantic tree was the ancestral abode of the wood spirits. Cutting it apart would present a huge blow to their kind.

Shouta ignored him. His sword flashed downward, but before it could complete the arc of its trajectory, a black shadow flashed by. Shouta kicked him aside without even turning around, causing him to fly away like a cannonball. He rolled on the ground a few times before coming to a halt, and only then did Su Hong see that he was the Yeluo chieftain.

With the two clan leaders of the alien races defeated, it seemed as though Renhuang wouldn't last until Zhang Lie's return.

Even so, Su Hong had to try his best to delay things further.

He shouted loudly, "Didn't you want to find the killer behind those two sura?"

Shouta frowned. "Do you know who the killer is?"

"It's me!"

Shouta struck with his blade so quickly that Su Hong couldn't react. By the time he came to his senses, he had toppled over. His head glanced at his two feet, which had been neatly lopped off his body. "Don't treat me like a fool. Someone like you could hardly have killed two sura kings."

Su Hong roared, "Nonsense! I was the one who killed the sura king Xueju, who hung him on the city walls and let anyone humiliate him!"

Shouta crushed Su Hong's chest with a foot. "You might not be the sura kings' killer, but you do seem to know something. Who's manipulating all this from behind the scenes?"

Su Hong shouted again, "I've told you, it's me! Kill me if you must, but the others in Renhuang are innocent!"

Shouta shook his head. "You don't seem to understand what I came here to do. You should realize that I've never let anyone go in the past—I'm an equal-opportunity sculptor. Be you adult or child, elderly or matronly, I'll chop off your head and build a tower out of it. Don't you think me fair?"

Su Hong cried out again, "If you're willing to let the people in the city go, I'll tell you everything!"

"No. But if you tell me everything, I can consider sparing your life."

"You have to let Renhuang go!"

"I came precisely for the slaughter. No matter what you do, Renhuang will perish—and, I think, so will you. You've exhausted my patience." Shouta's executioner's blade swung down toward Su Hong.

Lit by the blood-red glow, Su Hong's eyes were filled with despair and misery.

In the end, he was unable to delay the sura invasion. By the time Zhang Lie returned, he would find that Renhuang, which he'd poured months of effort into, had been destroyed by a sura king.

Just then, however, a flaming arrow shot toward Shouta. Frowning, he cut it apart.

"We fight for our own opportunities." A shadow had appeared before Su Hong out of nowhere. He clenched his shaking fists tightly, and the entire world seemed to shake.

Shouta had no time to launch another blow; he had no choice but to defend. The fist landed on his blade and pushed it back, sending the blade smashing against his face. Such was the strength of the blow that Shouta began to bleed from all his orifices, and he was knocked flying.

Upon seeing his savior, Su Hong's eyes turned red. "Governor, you're finally back! I'm sorry I've disappointed you!"

"No, you've done very well. You can rest easily now—I'll make the sura pay for having harmed you. Sun Mengmeng, help Su Hong out. I'm going to take down these foolish invaders!"

"Interesting, very interesting! Are you the culprit then? You must be the one who killed my fifth and seventh brothers."

"Indeed—and soon I'll be your killer too!"

Shouta rubbed his blade and laughed. "Ha, just you alone? I'm my godfather's strongest son! None of the others are a match for me, and I've killed countless humans like you in the past. You won't be a threat at all."

Zhang Lie surveyed the mess that Shouta had made of his city and chuckled coldly. "I'll commend you for your courage, at least. Don't think I'll show you any mercy."

Chapter 456: The Invincible Governor

"Oh?" Shouta eyed his opponent scornfully. "I'll make you wish you were never born."

Renhuang was the result of everyone's hard work. Even when they raided Xuechi, few of the forces from Renhuang had been injured, and none were killed. This fellow had, however, caused the first casualties to the city.

Zhang Lie taunted, "You really have an elevated opinion of your abilities, don't you?"

He clenched his fists tightly. Now that he had capped his peak gene fragments, he was curious about the extent of his strength, and this opponent seemed like he could put up something of a fight.

"Let's see, shall we?" Shouta slashed down toward him, the edge of his blade gleaming with a blood-red glow.

Zhang Lie dodged to the side, ripples emanating from his fists and smashing apart the sword energy from Shouta's strike. As though he were taking a leisurely stroll, Zhang Lie made to move toward Shouta.

Shouta's face turned serious; he found that he had underestimated Zhang Lie. His blade moved so quickly that few would see it and even fewer would be able to react, but the moment he struck, Zhang Lie leapt up into the air. He easily dodged Shouta's blow with another flap of his wings, then darted toward him once more.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" A punch, filled with boundless energy, so strong it seemed to warp space all around it, broke all the bones in Shouta's chest. He was only able to remain standing thanks to his frightening constitution.

With a murderous roar, he swung his blade in a flurry, but Zhang Lie again dodged each strike with ease. With another punch, he struck Shouta in the face, causing it to cave in.

"Looks like you're nothing impressive without your blade."

Shouta clenched his face in pain, his eyes revealing shock and disbelief. How could a human become so strong? He was just a human, but Shouta found himself unable to counter him at all—and Shouta was the best of the monarch of stars' nine godchildren!

Shouta was finally certain that the man in front of him was the killer of his fifth and seventh brothers, but the price of learning the truth might well be his life.

"Die!" Regardless, despite knowing that he was no match for Zhang Lie, Shouta gritted his teeth, picked up his sword again, and rushed over.

Unfortunately for him, Zhang Lie was far too overwhelming.

He dodged Shouta's blade easily. Strong though it might be, it was nothing more than a weapon.

Shouta seemed like a little child who was unable to use his blade to its full potential. He had overwhelmed his past foes with dominating physical strength, so when faced with an opponent that was even stronger, his lack of finesse became a debilitating weakness. He either targeted the neck or the head, never any other part of the body, and it was trivial to see through his attack.

The reason Su Hong and the others had fared so poorly against him was because of fear—the defenders had been so overwhelmed that they hadn't taken the time to study their opponent closely.

Given their lacking physical strength, they also wouldn't have had the ability to respond and counterattack even if they understood Shouta's style of attack.

Against Zhang Lie, however, Shouta was little more than a mobile punching bag.

Shouta had realized this point too. Rather than attack Zhang Lie, his blade was directed at the members of Team Zenith, who stood behind Zhang Lie; perhaps he sought to take advantage of any weakness that Zhang Lie would show when trying to rescue his comrades, but upon seeing the reactions of the members of Team Zenith, he felt as though he had to re-evaluate his understanding of all of mankind.

[Mirrored Refraction]!

[Daybreak]!

[Floating Clouds]!

[Blinding Flash]!

[Willow's Caress]!

[Tempest Dance]!

[The Elusive Moon]!

Each member of Team Zenith used a footwork technique to adroitly evade Shouta's attack.

Shouta was clearly taken aback. Zhang Lie might be strong, but why were all his teammates so strong too? When had the humans become so strong that they could easily evade his attacks?

He was a sura king, the first son of the monarch of stars! How could he be incapable of dealing with any of the humans here?!

In truth, he wasn't to blame. The members of Team Zenith were all incredibly strong hunters; after all, they had each finished capping their peak gene fragments. Most importantly, the hunters had all consumed Potion #3, and their strength was far beyond that of an ordinary human hunter. At this moment, they each had strength comparable to that of a sura king, or even beyond that of a sura king.

"In the end, you only have a few tricks up your sleeve." Zhang Lie looked at Shouta and shook his head in disappointment. He had thought the sura king would be a worthy foe, but he was nothing more than a fool!

He hadn't even used a tenth of his full strength to take down Shouta.

With a wave of his hand, he sent Shouta flying out, skidding for over a hundred meters over the ground before he came to a stop.

It wasn't that he was weak; on the other hand, Shouta was one of the strongest sura kings. However, Zhang Lie was so strong that he was on a different level entirely, and his victory shouldn't have been a surprise.

Seeing that Zhang Lie had taken revenge for him, Su Hong whooped in excitement. "Kill him, Governor, kill him!"

Having watched the entire display, the other hunters and Yeluo fighters glanced at Zhang Lie with admiration in their eyes. "Victory to our governor! Renhuang will never fall!"

"Victory to our governor! Renhuang will never fall!"

"Victory to our governor! Renhuang will never fall!"

Shouta's face burned red with pain and shame. Perhaps intentionally or otherwise, Zhang Lie's blows had all been directed at his face. He could have killed him with one blow, but none of his blows had been lethal. Suddenly, he thought back to what Zhang Lie had said.

"I'll make you regret being born..."

Shouta's eyes filled with fear as a talisman materialized in his palm. "Elites, kill everything in sight!"

Shouta crushed the talisman, and a group of sura appeared before him. The chains fell off their bodies as their dazed expressions turned crazed. They screamed like beasts and pounced on any lifeform around them that they could see.

Shouta began to laugh as he stood up. "Say goodbye to your Renhuang. These are my elite troops, and they'll never stop until all their energy has been depleted! They'll kill every hunter in sight, so you only have two options: either let me leave, or wait until they destroy all that you love and value."

Shouta wasn't a fool; knowing that he was no match for Zhang Lie, he didn't intend to fight to the death.

"I'll choose neither option!"

Zhang Lie grabbed Shouta by the neck and shouted, "Let's have a look at how your elite troops are faring, shall we?"

"[Avatar of the Fae: Earthbound Prison]!"

Zhou Ying stomped on the ground, her feet seemingly becoming rooted. The patch of ground beneath and all around her began to glow green, and hundreds of jade-green roots flew into the air, rushing forward into the distance.

They each wrapped around one of Shouta's so-called elites, trapping their movement.

Shouta laughed coldly. "It's useless."

His elites were strong; despite the roots being resilient, they were slowly freeing themselves.

"Allow me to assist you, Zhou Ying!" The shaman of the wood spirits flew gracefully toward her as their bodies melded together...

Chapter 457: Nothing to Fear

The next moment, Zhou Ying's body flared with green light, ensconcing her fae avatar and resonating with the energy and life force of the shaman of the wood spirits.

"I won't let you destroy our Renhuang!"

In the center of an outburst of green light, Zhou Ying's hair rapidly grew so long it reached her leg, fluttering in an invisible wind. Countless jade-green leaves wrapped around her, and the vitality radiating from her was visible to the naked eye. She seemed to have become one with the land. She looked like a goddess of nature, descending from the heavens.

Upon seeing her transformation, the wood spirits all subconsciously knelt down.

Waves of purifying energy radiated from her, and the wounded hunters found, to their shock, their injuries healing on their own. Su Hong's feet, which had been lopped off his body, were reattached whole without any external effort.

The trees whose trunks had been chopped off were quickly growing back, and the wound dealt to the ancestral abode of the wood spirits was quickly recovering.

Under ordinary circumstances, the critical wound would have taken a century or so to heal on its own; even with the wood spirits' assistance, it would have taken three decades. After Zhou Ying and the shaman of the wood spirits merged, however, their ancestral abode was recovering so quickly the new growth was visible to the naked eye.

Even Zhang Lie himself was surprised.

Although he had suspected that the wood spirits would be able to magnify Zhou Ying's abilities and had informed her of his suspicions, he had hardly expected her to have advanced so far.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Earthbound Prison]!" Thousands of jade-green wood dragons rose out of the earth with a humongous quake, covering the sky with naught but their bodies and devouring Shouta's elites whole with their gaping maws.

The sound of breaking wood emanated from their bodies, but Shouta's elites weren't able to make their way out.

As time passed, those sounds gradually grew fainter and fainter. Finally, out of the body of each dragon who had swallowed up one of the elite suras grew a wooden face, precisely that of the sura they had swallowed.

Shouta trembled in fear upon seeing what had happened. It was as though a sword seemed to have been shoved down his throat. He gritted out, "How could this be? My forces won't give up until they've sated their bloodlust!"

Zhang Lie activated his dragonsoul soulshard and peered at the wood dragons carefully. "It looks as though your forces have been petrified at the genetic level."

In other words, their bodies had slowly turned to wood. It was fortunate that their souls were already incomplete as a side effect of whatever process Shouta had used to make them into his elites; otherwise, they might have lived out the rest of their lives in endless darkness and fear.

Suddenly, Zhou Ying stumbled and collapsed, and the shaman of the wood spirits slowly floated out of her body. The transformation had taken a toll on both their mental reserves, and Sun Mengmeng hurriedly stepped forward to support her.

Even after the shaman of the wood spirits extracted herself from Zhou Ying's body, however, the wood dragons didn't vanish. Branches began growing out of their bodies, which immediately sprouted.

Thousands of trees that took on the shape of dragons had appeared almost out of nowhere, and they formed the basis of a majestic and almost overwhelming forest. If not for the fact that half the trees had a sura face ingrained in their bark, it would have become a haven of natural beauty.

Those wounded hunters who had received a pulse of life-giving genetic energy from Zhou Ying's transformation slowly began to stir and recover, but the dead remained dead.

The wood spirits all gathered around their shaman and Zhou Ying, their eyes filled with respect as they looked toward her, as though she had suddenly become a holy maiden of their clan.

The Yeluo chieftain rushed over, pushing aside the crowd. His eyes sparkled. Sun Mengmeng frowned as she stood protectively in front of Zhou Ying. "What do you want?"

The Yeluo chieftain hesitated. "I want—"

Zhou Ying looked at him guardedly. "Chieftain, not only is there a significant difference in our age, we're even members of different races. I don't think—"

The Yeluo chieftain cut her off. "No, no, not that! I'd like a sample of blood from you and the shaman of the wood spirits."

The shaman shook her head. "My body is half-spiritual, and I can't afford to give up any of the little blood I possess, unfortunately."

Zhou Ying asked, "What do you want my blood for, Chieftain?"

"For experimentation, if possible."

Zhou Ying smiled. "If that's it, give the shaman and I some time to recover. Unfortunately, it's not possible for us to bleed in that state, but I'd be happy to hand you a strand of hair or even a bit of our flesh."

The moment she merged with the shaman of the wood spirits, any injuries she had sustained would heal immediately, no matter how serious.

Still with Shouta's neck gripped in his hand, Zhang Lie murmured, "It looks like your elite forces have all been taken down. What will you do now?"

Shouta cried out, "Hold it! I'm telling you, my father is the monarch of stars—"

Zhang Lie slapped him without holding back. "I've heard the same thing twice already, and I don't want to hear it again."

This was the first time Shouta had ever lost in a fight, and he didn't know how to beg for mercy.

"I told you I'd make you regret being born, didn't I? I keep my promises. Do you know how Xueju died?"

"You killed him?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "No. I hung him up on the city walls and had people do whatever they wanted to him. It took him a few weeks to die, I hear."

Shouta's eyes widened.

Zhang Lie called out, "Su Hong, come over here!"

Su Hong, who had recovered fully, rushed over. "What's the matter, Governor?"

"Remember what we did to Xueju? Do the same to him."

Over the next few days, Shouta would regret his actions direly—he would regret his rashness, the fact that he was born a sura, and finally, the fact that he was born at all.

Su Hong turned to Zhang Lie. "Governor, this is one of the seven sura kings that are striking at Renhuang."

"The seven sura kings? What do you mean?"

"Please, come with me. There are a few people I think you should meet."

Su Hong brought Zhang Lie toward a group of hunters whom Zhang Lie vaguely recalled had participated in the battle against Shouta.

He frowned. "You're not from Renhuang, are you? At the very least, I don't remember your faces among the three thousand hunters who came to Renhuang with me."

Although Zhang Lie's memory wasn't so good that he had perfect recall of the three thousand hunters, he was certain that none of these hunters were among them.

Suddenly, the hunters in front of him knelt on the ground.

"Thank you, our savior!"

Zhang Lie frowned as he turned to Su Hong. "Just what's going on?"

Su Hong replied, "They were all rescued from imprisonment within the two sura capitals we seized. They came over to Renhuang in order to help us defend against the allied sura forces from the seven kingdoms!"

To Zhang Lie, however, any number of sura could be easily dealt with, as long as they weren't led by an asura. With the Yeluo around to concoct their sura-specific poison, he had nothing to fear!

Chapter 458: A Failed Test

"You saved our lives, champion of mankind! Now that Renhuang's facing a trial, we'd like to do what we can to help.

"Martial Sage Hong Tianqi is trying to rally a group of hunters to come to your aid, but because of the time difference between the second realm and the real world, along with the active obstruction of the presiding member of the highest authorities of the world federation, he's been having a hard time.

"Each human city has begun amassing a group of forces to support you—champion of mankind, you won't be facing the sura alone. All of China, all of mankind, stands behind you!"

After Zhang Lie met with those who had once been prisoners in the sura capital, he headed out to see the citizens of Renhuang cleaning up the rubble that had resulted from the fight.

With the rock spirits around, it was easy enough to patch up the walls of the city, but patching up the walls of their heart would be a different matter instead.

Every race in the city had suffered significant losses. Although they had won in the end, no one seemed particularly happy about it.

Zhang Lie suddenly said, "I don't much like defensive battles. Whether or not we win or lose, there's too much we have to patch up afterwards."

"What do you plan on doing, then, Governor?"

"I'll speak with the sura king Shouta."

At the present moment, Shouta had been tied up firmly, and the citizens of Renhuang given free rein. Not only had he destroyed the city walls, he had even killed quite a few citizens within, rousing the ire of many of Renhuang's citizens.

His body was mutilated beyond compare, scarred and defaced, and there was nothing he could do but grit his teeth and bear it all.

A funnel was pierced through a gag in Shouta's mouth so as to facilitate administering healing potions to him—they couldn't have him dying so easily, after all.

Upon seeing Zhang Lie approach, Shouta began to writhe and squirm, making noises with his gag as though he had something to say.

Su Hong ungagged him and Shouta shouted, "My brothers are going to descend on this city at any moment now, and the combined forces of the seven kingdoms will crush your city and slaughter everyone within! If you want to save them, kneel down on the ground and beg me. I can still help you save them—"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Gag him again. He's too noisy."

Su Hong did so. "How do you intend on carrying out the interrogation, Governor?"

Zhang Lie pressed a hand against Shouta's head, and his moonlight wyrm swam into Shouta's mental space.

The process was over in a matter of moments. After recalling the wyrm, Zhang Lie rubbed his head, whereas Shouta's eyes went slack.

"He's strong, so he should be able to survive this ordeal. Give him a chance to recover—don't keep torturing him right now. You wouldn't want to kill him too quickly, after all."

Those who had their souls consumed by the moonlight wyrm wouldn't die instantly; they would live on as shells of their former self. Zhang Lie suspected that, given time, Shouta's mind would recover.

Zhang Lie strode off the city walls and told Su Hong, "Call Yu Huantian over."

By the time Yu Huantian appeared, Zhang Lie had sketched out a map, which he passed to him. He instructed, "Bring some of your kin to scout these seven directions. Prioritize safety at all costs; report back the moment you see something."

Yu Huantian asked, "Is this related to the sura assault?"

"Yes. Be careful!" Zhang Lie turned to Su Hong again. "Have the members of Team Zenith and the three clan leaders to the palace. I have instructions for them all."

"Yessir!"

The Shouta kingdom's elder was currently wondering where Shouta was.

It had been quite some time after he had left, and he had sent no word back. Given his skills, he should have been able to deal with Renhuang in no time at all—could he be building one of his sculptures instead?

Given his personality, the elder really could imagine him doing so. And by the time the other six sura kings made their way inside and saw his tower of heads that pierced the clouds, he'd ask them proudly, "What do you think of my creation?"

The more the elder thought about it, the more he shuddered at what the other kings' reactions would be. No, he'd better resign! Given how arrogant Shouta was, his other brothers might well band together against him, and he might be caught in the aftermath, too.

Just as the elder was contemplating leaving the army and delegating all his responsibilities to a subordinate, a scout suddenly rushed toward his quarters.

"Elder, his highness Shicang has arrived!"

The elder noticed that the sura scout seemed rather unmotivated, but that hardly mattered to him. He was planning on resigning, after all. He didn't want to deal with being an elder of this sura kingdom any longer!

"Please send his highness Shicang into the tent."

When Shicang made his way over, the elder greeted him politely. "How may I help you, your highness?"

Shicang's words and demeanor were cold. "There are some things I want to do."

"His highness Shouta has advanced ahead of our main forces, and he's likely within Renhuang by now. Once the forces gather, your highness will be able to talk to him then."

"The butcher's dead."

"What?!"

"Shouta is dead."

The elder frowned. "Your highness, pardon my temerity, but how can you be so confident in this extraordinary claim?"

"I left part of my presence on Shouta a few days ago when we were all gathered in the empire of stars. If his soul is dramatically weakened or entirely dissipated, I'll be able to sense it—and I did so

a few moments ago. Even if the butcher isn't dead, he's just a few steps from death. If I'm not mistaken, he made his way to Renhuang with just his elites, and now he's been caught in a trap!

The elder hurriedly stood up. "In that case, we have to inform the other five kings immediately and rescue his highness at any cost!"

"Have you considered why our opponent didn't kill the butcher?"

The elder stilled. "Do you mean to say that this might be a trap?"

"It's very possible."

"Your highness Shicang, since you've made your way here, you must surely have a plan?"

"Indeed. The successive deaths of three of my brothers demonstrates that our foe possesses considerable strength, and I'd like to get your assistance."

"Anything we can do for the sura, for his highness!"

"Oh, this is something all of you can do. It's very simple, you see."

"What is it?" the elder wondered. Something everyone was able to do, which would assist in rescuing Shouta?

"Die!" Shicang snapped his fingers.

The guards standing behind the elder suddenly grabbed his shoulders and pierced his body with their weapons, causing the elder to clutch his chest in pain as he forced them aside. "When did you defect to Shicang?!"

Shicang shook his head. "They didn't defect. They're simply dead."

Only then did the elder notice that the faces of his guards were completely lifeless; their eyes were as vacant as those of a corpse—no, they were the eyes of a corpse.

"The deaths of my first, fifth, and seventh brothers makes it clear that this battle won't be as easy as we thought. The backer behind this city of Renhuang must have some considerable amount of strength. I've been looking for an opportunity to improve my strength and amass more strength. Thankfully, the butcher is an idiot. As I predicted, he left his army behind in order to test the strength of Renhuang—and his strength was found wanting."

Chapter 459: The Nine Children of the Monarch of Stars

Shicang continued explaining himself. "The butcher's sudden death sent alarm bells ringing in my head—I needed to do something to strengthen myself, and absorbing his troops into mine isn't a bad idea."

The elder clutched his wound as he shouted, "Help! Help!"

Shicang smiled. "There's no need to try to call for help. Listen closely—none of them have the freedom to help you."

To the elder's shock and dismay, a huge commotion could be heard outside his tent as the sura troops fought against one another.

Shicang continued, "While you were worrying about what had happened to your king, I killed and resurrected most of your troops as corpses."

The elder shouted, "Don't you think the monarch of stars will be informed of this?!"

Shicang shrugged. "I'll simply blame it on the mastermind behind Renhuang. After you all become my forces, who would know the truth?"

"Damn it!" The elder tried to run off, but he found that his arms and legs were immobile. As though he had become a puppet, they had lost all sensation.

Shicang's smile reached his eyes. "Do you know why I chose not to make a move on you immediately? Why I continued talking to you about my plans?"

The elder's eyes widened. He was about to say something when he found that his lips refused to open.

"You should have noticed it earlier, really—why did it take you so long to notice the clashes from outside the tent when they were so loud? It's because I've been controlling your sense of hearing for quite some time now. You simply haven't noticed because of your anger. You want to know when I made my move, don't you?"

The elder did, but he couldn't even nod in response.

Shicang continued, "The moment I stepped into this tent, I used my own special techniques to corrupt your soul. Your attention was focused entirely on me, so you didn't realize."

The elder wondered why a sura king would have to expend so much effort to deal with a lowly elder like him.

Shicang replied calmly, "I'm a cautious sura, and I prize certainty over all else."

The elder would have raised his eyebrows if he could. How did Shicang know what he was thinking without his having spoken?

"It's because your soul's under my control, so I can hear your mental thoughts as well. By the way, if you had tried to resist my influence, you could have escaped my control—but you were so curious about my answer that you've missed your opportunity. Well, this is it for you."

The elder's will slowly dissipated. In his last moments, there was only one thought left in his mind: Why didn't I quit sooner?!

A huge black bird hung in the sky above Shicang's tent as it surveyed everything going on down below. Only when the fighting had settled did it fly off once more.

Zhang Lie claimed Shouta's blade from his body. It didn't have a special name, but it did have a unique history and ability. It was a blade once used by the monarch of stars himself, which had later been presented as a gift to his first godson.

The blade was able to store the souls of the enemies it had killed and transmute those souls into enhanced power. The blood-red glow that the blade had given off when it cut a chunk off the city walls was a manifestation of this power.

There was, however, one downside to the blade—any who wielded it would become corrupted by the blade and turn into a crazed fool whose only purpose in life was to slaughter. The wielder's

intelligence would also decrease dramatically; the blade's corruption was much like a drug addiction.

Zhang Lie could hardly use a blade like this himself. He summoned Whitey, which curled around the blade and sucked up the spiritual matter that had been stored within.

The monarch of stars, and particularly Shouta, had done impressive work storing spiritual matter in the blade, and all that spiritual matter was now going to Whitey.

Whitey fattened up by a noticeable degree. All the souls he had sucked up in a battlefield or another had made him now over eight meters long, and he wrapped indolently around Zhang Lie's body.

Just then, the members of Team Zenith and the three clan leaders headed in.

"Governor, did you summon us all so urgently because of the sura forces?"

"That's right."

The people in the room didn't seem particularly surprised. After raiding a sura kingdom, it was only normal that the sura would retaliate.

"Seven kingdoms are coming at once."

The members of Team Zenith reacted with dismay. One sura kingdom was easy enough to deal with, and even two wouldn't be a big problem. Three would be a struggle, but one they could overcome, but four, five, six, seven?

"What's going on?"

"The first sura kingdom we destroyed, Xuechi, and the second kingdom, Xueju, where we're currently located, belong to an empire, the empire of stars. The monarch of that empire was extremely enraged to hear that Xuechi and Xueju had been destroyed, and he's dispatching forces from his seven subordinate kingdoms to destroy Renhuang.

The Yeluo chieftain asked, "Governor, what's your plan?"

Sun Mengmeng replied seriously, "Captain, no matter what you decide, we'll follow your orders!"

Zhang Lie smiled as he saw everyone's resolute expressions.

"A defensive battle isn't in our favor, and Renhuang can't hold out against the bombardment of seven sets of sura troops. Even if we were to eke out a victory, Renhuang would be destroyed.

This means that we have to strike preemptively before they can do so."

Strike preemptively?! Everyone was taken aback by Zhang Lie's bold declaration, but despite their misgivings, they believed wholeheartedly in Zhang Lie.

"We'll always listen to you, Captain!" Sun Mengmeng promised.

Zhang Lie nodded. "We don't have to rush things for the moment. Let Yu Huantian and his crag eagles scout the vicinity first—once we have the necessary information, we can decide on our battle strategy."

Sun Mengmeng raised her hand. "I have information about eight sura kings. Could it be useful?"

Li Feng glanced at her in surprise. Eight sura kings? How?"

"It was recorded in Xuechi's diary."

"Hold on—wasn't that supposed to be a diary for lifeforms to be hunted down?"

Fang Yi suggested, "Perhaps in Xuechi's eyes, his brothers were no different from genetic lifeforms themselves..."

Everyone turned silent.

After a pregnant pause, Sun Mengmeng began anew. "The sura king had nine godsons, the first of whom was Shouta. He likes constructing towers made of the heads of his decapitated enemies, and his weapon is the blade once used by the monarch of stars himself.

"The second son is Shicang, of unknown heritage and background. He wears a black robe at all times, and no one has seen his true appearance. It's not even certain that he's a sura himself. According to Xuechi, this son received the monarch of stars' knowledge about the soul. His main power is necromancy; he's transformed his kingdom into a necropolis."

Everyone sucked in a deep breath.

"The third son is Fenghe, who received the monarch of stars' inheritance about biological research on genetic lifeforms. He enjoys splicing creatures together into monsters, and his main fighting force consists of those monsters."

Chapter 460: The Battle Draws Near

"Xuechi calls Fenghe a mad scientist, but Fenghe proclaims himself to be an artist and biologist."

Zhang Lie listened quietly to Sun Mengmeng's recounting of the nine sons as he committed their racial characteristics to memory.

"The sura king's fourth son is Moyan, apparently an oculoophile. He calls himself blind, but he has the special ability to make whatever he sees vanish from sight. The price to pay for that was the destruction of both his eyes. The reason he collects whatever eyes he can find is to use this special ability of his."

Li Feng muttered, "The ability to make anything he sees vanish? How are we supposed to fight him?"

Zhang Lie commented, "This should be some dark-attuned technique or another."

That was the basis behind his [Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade], after all.

"The fifth son is Xueju, and we're all familiar with him by now. He obtained a special technique from the monarch of stars which lets him collect souls."

Zhang Lie added, "It's a very special technique—he kills people while they're at the peak of some emotion or another. That outpouring of emotion transforms their spiritual matter, and he collects those mutated souls and stores them as a battery or backup reserve of power."

Harvesting souls when they were experiencing intense emotion had the greatest efficiency; otherwise, only a small amount of spiritual power could be extracted under ordinary circumstances.

These were words that the monarch of stars had imparted to Shouta. When Zhang Lie fought against Xueju, the red spider lilies that had dotted the battlefield had been manifestations of those souls.

Sun Mengmeng continued, "The sixth son is Niutou, a mixed-blood cross between a sura and a minotaur. He calls himself a farmer; the monarch of stars gave him nothing extraordinary, only a title, land, and the strength to keep his position. According to Xuechi's notes, he grows stronger as he becomes more and more excited. The seventh son is Xuechi, but nothing is written about him."

Zhang Lie suddenly said, "Xuechi's known as the bloodsucker, and he refers to himself as a noble. He can ignite his blood to grant himself additional strength."

No one was surprised to hear that Zhang Lie had this information; he had always been rather mysterious, and he had fought with Xuechi himself, after all.

"The eighth son is Suiyue, a gerontophile. From the monarch of stars, he obtained a special technique—[Passing of Time]. Apparently, quite a few sura had tried to cultivate the technique, but the only successful example was Suiyue.

"Those who successfully cultivated the technique had it manifest in a different form each time. Suiyue's manifestation allows him to reverse time—if he's badly wounded, he can use this technique to return to a time during which he wasn't injured."

"Doesn't that make him invincible?"

Zhang Lie frowned. "It's true that time-manipulation techniques are exceedingly rare, but they always have a steep cost. I'm sure there's some drawback that prevents him from activating it quickly in succession.

"Ever since Suiyue mastered [Passing of Time], the rate at which time affects his body has been lowered. Others might grow a year older with a year's passing, but he would only grow a year older after a decade.

Only by being in close proximity to ancient artifacts or ancient lifeforms will Suiyue's passing of time return to normal."

Hong Xi asked, "Isn't it a good thing for time to pass more slowly?"

"Not in conjunction with the side effects of him reversing time. Every time he uses that technique, his body might go back one to three years into the past—and he'd lose all his cultivation during those years!"

Hong Xi's eyes widened. "He's sacrificing his cultivation to restore his body!"

Zhang Lie continued, "It's more an artifact of him not mastering the technique completely. The monarch of stars has stated that, once he fully controls the technique, he'll be able to keep his mind intact during such a reversal, allowing him to retain his experience from years in the future instead."

He had gleaned this information from Shouta's mind—if Suiyue were to continue progressing as is, he would be able to become a true regressor, one who would grow more and more potent with time.

Sun Mengmeng concluded, "The monarch of stars' ninth and final godson is Gaoyuan."

Everyone frowned upon hearing this name. [1]

"He proclaims himself to be a gourmet. From the monarch of stars, he learned a technique that even the monarch of stars had yet to perfect, and he even improved upon it. It stores vitality and energy between his legs, and he can transform that energy into lifeforce during a battle to recuperate quickly."

By this time, the members of Team Zenith and the three clan leaders had obtained a far better understanding of the nine godsons of the monarch of stars than before.

Suddenly, Yu Huantian rushed into the meeting room. "Governor, something's very wrong! My clan and I went scouting in the directions you indicated, and there are six sura troops heading our way."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Six, not seven?"

"There were originally seven, but two of the troops merged together. Some of my scouts were in the air at the time, and we saw some sort of internal dispute that led one troop to take over the other."

"An internal dispute?"

Zhang Lie frowned. He didn't know whether to be worried or relieved—this was beyond his predictions, and any uncertainty was worrisome.

"My scouts were afraid of detection and weren't able to understand the situation more fully."

"Tell me everything you know, quickly!"

Yu Huantian reported, "From the west, fifty thousand troops moving at a sedate pace, pillaging and raping everything along the way. They've killed all the females and imprisoned the males."

Sun Xiaowu murmured, "Doesn't that sound like something Xueju would do?"

"But he's dead." Fang Yi shook his head.

Zhang Lie asked, "Which king do you suspect this is, then?"

Sun Xiaowu shrugged. "Who can say? The nine sura kings all seem particularly perverted, and I could see any of them doing something like this."

Zhang Lie asked, "Were there any special insignias that their troops displayed? An emblem of sorts?"

"Two testicles."

"In that case, it could very well be Gaoyuan," Zhang Lie concluded. "Keep going!"

"From the northwest, a hundred thousand troops, at least half of which are old sura, so old they can hardly walk. They're moving more slowly than a turtle."

"In that case, that must be Suiyue!" Zhang Lie replied confidently.

According to Shouta, Suiyue had once proclaimed that sura were like wine: the longer they lived, the more they matured, and the more intoxicating they became. The sura fighters in his kingdom were given the option to retire when they reached old age, but many chose to stay on as a result of his words.

This also meant that Suiyue's forces were the weakest among all nine sura kingdoms.

"From the north, eighty thousand forces including both sura and minotaurs."

"Niutou, of course!" Everyone guessed the origin of these forces immediately.

"From the northeast, an ordinary group of a hundred and twenty thousand sura, whose insignia is a black eye."

"Perhaps Moyan."

Yu Huantian's eyes then showed rare revulsion and fear. "From the east, a group of patchwork monsters, who hail from no alien race we know. They were particularly frightening and strong—my clan was almost discovered without even getting close."

"Fenghe's army!"

Yu Huantian continued, "From the southeast, forces so numerous we couldn't count them—over a million at the very least."

Everyone sucked in a breath.

Yu Huantian asked worriedly, "Can Renhuang really defend against sura forces numbering a million strong?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I don't intend on defending against them. We'll attack head-on."

Yu Huantian gaped. "But they have a million sura!"

"It might be a million now, but if we let them gather, there'll be two million sura at our city walls. We're still a small city, and we can't defend against such numerous foes. Our only choice is to strike fast and bring the fight to them, rather than to let them come to us," Zhang Lie declared.

Upon sensing Zhang Lie's confidence, Yu Huantian calmed down, and the others were willing to believe that Zhang Lie knew what was best. If Zhang Lie wasn't panicking, then they didn't have to worry either.

"Keep reporting everything you observed—there might be a crucial detail in there that we can make use of."

Yu Huantian nodded. "The million-sura force was very strange—the troops moved like zombies, and they looked very disorganized. They attacked any lifeform they encountered, and the dead lifeforms would end up joining their ranks."

This had to be Shicang's army of the dead!

Yu Huantian continued, "From the south was originally a group of fifty thousand sura, but something suddenly happened to this group that caused them to merge with the southeastern forces. By the time they did so, those forces behaved much like zombies as well."

Zhang Lie pondered Yu Huantian's intel carefully. He didn't understand what Shicang was thinking, nor why he had absorbed his brother's forces into his own, but they didn't have much time left.

The sura forces were quickly approaching, and Renhuang would have to respond...