

U. Warlord 491

Chapter 491: Resurgence of Danger

"When there aren't any live mutated-grade lifeforms available on the market, hunters can choose to post requests in the guild hall in hopes that someone will pick it up.

"When the Yeluo need specialized herbs and plants, they can also do the same. In addition, there are always quests for capturing or killing superior-grade lifeforms, possibly with mercenary assistance.

"After all, in the second realm, superior-grade lifeforms are large enough that they can provide superior gene fragments for ten to twenty hunters. If they pool their resources and post such a quest, they can make the reward large enough to attract the attention of the stronger members of the alien races.

"In other words, they'll form ten- to twenty-member parties, then add in another ten to twenty Yeluo or rock spirits to form a thirty-member strong raiding team.

"There are quite a few hunters and members of the alien race that now have the strength to take on a superior-grade lifeform, especially after our war against Xuechi. In fact, most of the rock spirits are comparable in strength to a superior-grade lifeform."

Zhou Liao's eyes widened. "Impressive, impressive indeed. Despite the fact that it's only been a few months since its founding, there are so many things in Renhuang that are simply beyond all my expectations. I suspect that half these human reinforcements aren't going to want to go back to Qi!"

Zhang Lie replied, "While there are more humans coming into the city, I'm hoping to establish diplomatic relationships with other human cities. After all, the herbs and plants that the wood spirits are cultivating and the Yeluo potions are something that no other city possesses."

For the moment, Renhuang would need all that the wood spirits and Yeluo could supply, but as time passed and the alien races' production chain became more and more mature, Renhuang would have rare and precious goods that could be exported.

"You're going to take over the other human cities too? You—" Zhou Liao thought he understood Zhang Lie's ambitions in the second realm.

Zhang Lie pointed at the next building ahead. "The next building is an auction hall. All sorts of strange and unusual trinkets go up for auction there, along with the rare few superior-grade lifeforms that the Yeluo or rock spirits have captured alive."

Further ahead, beyond the auction hall, Zhou Liao noticed another building about the same size as the guild. "What's that?"

"We're planning on selling live genetic lifeforms officially now that there are so many more hunters in Renhuang. We'll need to make sure that there's enough supply to meet demand, and we'd like more oversight regarding transactions involving live lifeforms as well."

Zhou Liao gaped. He felt that, if Renhuang were to keep developing at this pace, the rate of growth of hunters in Renhuang would far outstrip those in other cities.

Renhuang's hunters would be known for their strength, which Zhou Liao expected to be on par with that of a sura king, whereas those hunters from other human cities would remain as weak as they currently were.

Zhou Liao's envy soared. If not for the fact that he was the troop leader of the special forces of Qi, he would long since have settled down in Renhuang. There were simply too many benefits to being a hunter here!

"Where do you intend on acquiring these lifeforms that you'll be selling?"

Zhang Lie replied, "We'll set up our own hunting parties. Once the war against the sura kings is over, Renhuang's combat forces will be given the choice of being city guards or hunters. Of course, if they don't want to fight any longer, we won't force them to do so."

Ever since the crag eagles had devoured the golden rocs' flesh, they too had advanced uniformly to the level of superior-grade lifeforms, and Zhang Lie intended to take full advantage of them. After all, they had impressive scouting and hunting abilities in their own right.

Zhou Liao glanced at him speechlessly. "You've even planned out the lives of your veteran soldiers?"

"I have a team of excellent subordinates to do all the detailed planning for me, after all." Zhang Lie pointed at yet another building in the distance. "That's part of another goal we're working towards—a science academy."

"A science academy?!"

Although there were private laboratories in each human city, none had ever tried to construct an academy of sciences.

There were only a rare few scientists who were able to advance to the second realm, and it was prohibitively difficult to reconstruct scientific equipment. As a result, there were scant few experiments that could be conducted, and even fewer results published.

"Indeed, I intend on constructing a science academy right here in Renhuang. The first rector of the academy will be the Yeluo chieftain himself!"

Zhou Liao seemed even more shocked than before. "Do you have enough talent and scientific equipment?"

"There's nothing to worry about in terms of talent. The Yeluo are particularly gifted at chemistry and medicine, and we've already thought up a solution to the equipment."

After speaking with Zhang Lie, Zhou Liao really was tempted to contact Xiao Zhengyang to quit his job and move to Renhuang instead.

The hunters' forums continued buzzing with activity as word of Zhang Lie's victory over the seven sura kings continued to spread.

"What's going on in the second realm? It feels like there are more and more shocking stories with every passing day!"

"Well, Zhang Lie's been making waves ever since he entered the second realm, after all."

"What's going on with Zhang Lie and Renhuang now?"

"The empire of stars just declared war on Renhuang, and they're advancing toward Renhuang now. Apparently, the monarch of stars' forces includes three million sura—and those are just the elites!"

The gathering of the sura forces had caused such a commotion that it couldn't be hidden; everyone around the empire of stars learned of what was happening immediately.

"I told you, the sura aren't just going to give up so easily. After Zhang Lie killed two sura kings, seven more popped out; now that Renhuang has gotten rid of the seven sura kings and their forces, the empire of stars is finally mobilizing!"

Someone else countered, "Well, if the seven sura kings combined aren't able to deal with Zhang Lie, would a sura empire really do so much better?"

"The empire of stars is led by the monarch of stars, and the monarchs are on a different level entirely than the sura kings. The empire of stars is the strongest of the sura empires, and it's a whole different level of strength entirely. A sura monarch has strength comparable to that of a hundred sura kings!"

"What? That's ridiculous!"

Chapter 492: The Annals of History

"No, it isn't ridiculous at all! The difference between a regular sura kingdom and a sura empire is like comparing a firefly's light to that of a moon. Any general in the employ of the empire of stars is at least as strong as a sura king."

"Isn't that similar to Renhuang, then?"

After all, as everyone now knew, every member of Team Zenith was able to take down a sura king on their own.

"No, it's not the same. No one in Renhuang is as strong as a sura monarch."

"Another crisis for Renhuang, then?"

"But what about Zhang Lie?"

"No matter how strong Zhang Lie is, he surely can't compare to the monarch of stars. What's more, not only is there the monarch he has to contend with, there are three million sura that he has to defeat, along with the generals leading them. How can Renhuang stand a chance?"

"The empire of stars could destroy all of us humans if it really wanted to—no other force in history has ever defeated or held back a sura empire's assault!"

Within his office, Amurong was so excited that he yelled out, "This time, Zhang Lie's sure to perish!"

The seven-kingdom coalition might not have been able to crush Renhuang and deal with Zhang Lie. With Renhuang and Zhang Lie's reputation soaring, Amurong had no recourse for dealing with him—but now, the monarch of stars was going to do it in his place instead!

Anyone who knew anything about the second realm understood what a sura empire represented. It was an undefeatable existence, one incomparable to a small city like Renhuang. Destroying all of humanity's enclaves would be as simple as snapping his fingers for the monarch of stars.

The monarch of stars himself was an unusual existence, and the empire he governed was the largest and most prosperous of all the sura empires. Three had cooperated to try to take down the empire of stars, but the monarch of stars had destroyed them all instead.

It was inconceivable that Renhuang could be its equal.

Even if Zhang Lie and his team could counter an ordinary sura empire, the empire of stars boasted the strength of at least three. The moment the monarch of stars mobilized his troops, Renhuang's fate had been decided.

Amurong poured himself a glass of red wine and downed it in a single gulp. His face flushed with excitement and alcohol, Amurong contacted his allies among the world federation.

"Make a move the moment the empire of stars and Renhuang initiate the clash."

"Don't you want to wait until Renhuang becomes a pile of ruins first?"

Amurong seemed to shrug. "It's only a matter of time at this point. With Renhuang in such peril, Zhang Lie won't have any attention to spare to the Zenith Dojo."

"Just like last time?"

Amurong's voice was lined with certainty. "Don't joke around with me! Renhuang's enemy is the empire of stars, the largest and strongest of the sura empires. There's no way Zhang Lie can make it out alive!"

He could barely wait to behold Zhang Lie's recipe for concocting his limit-breaking potions.

What Amurong didn't realize was that the four major races of the Milky Way were pooling their forces and making their way toward Renhuang. Thus far, they had already gathered over a million troops combined.

Lianna said firmly, "Zhang Lie won't be such an easy opponent for the sura. After all, his Team Zenith managed to take down the seven sura kings' forces by themselves."

Xing Bai nodded. "That's as we expected. Zhang Lie's team is filled with excellent hunters—after all, we experienced their strength for ourselves. How could they be so weak as to be unable to defeat a sura king?"

Despite their words, the shock and amazement on their faces hadn't fully disappeared. Even if the members of Team Zenith were able to take down the sura kings, they certainly hadn't expected it to happen so quickly.

After all, the four races had all begun mobilizing their forces the moment they learned about the impending attack, but they were still on their way by the time the battle was reported to be over.

"Zhang Lie's the champion of the Void Cup, and he was the first to break the four prime races' monopoly on it. The humans have never had access to the Void Throne. Someone who was able to chart a new course in history like that—well, even if the whole world were to view him as a fool, I'd follow in his footsteps. We know just how strong he is."

Lianna added, "I hear another piece of bad news—the monarch of stars is preparing to attack Renhuang."

Xing Hui asked, "The monarch of the strongest sura empire?"

Lianna nodded.

Xing Bai roared in laughter. "No, that's not bad news at all—it's excellent news! Our forces will finally be able to help Zhang Lie out. He might have been able to deal with the seven kingdoms' forces himself, but the forces from the empire of stars will be larger and stronger. Even with Zhang Lie's strength, he'll probably have a hard time, and our aid will be timely."

The four prime races were heading straight for Renhuang.

Lianna turned back. "I'm just not sure if Zhang Lie will like the present we've prepared for him."

Within their party was a large cage covered by a gigantic piece of cloth. It was impossible to see what lay within. The creature within battered the cage as it shrieked, its voice sounding simultaneously like a wolf's howl and a dragon's call.

When Zhang Lie learned of the monarch of stars' impending assault on Renhuang, his face turned dark. "Zhou Liao, it doesn't look like I'll have any time to have a drink with you. Renhuang's in danger once again, and I have to be prepared."

"What's going on?"

"The empire of stars is going to attack us."

Zhou Liao blinked. "More sura kings?"

"No, not just sura kings—the monarch of stars himself! It would take a hundred sura kings to stand up to the monarch of stars, and they might not even win," Zhang Lie explained concisely. He turned to head back to the palace. "Have the human reinforcements depart. Renhuang's going to face another calamity."

Zhou Liao clenched his fists. "What are you talking about? We came all the way here to help Renhuang in its time of need—but by the time we arrived, it was already time for the celebratory banquet! Now that there's yet another threat coming to Renhuang, let us fight. We don't care if the enemy's a sura monarch or sura king—we can take them on!"

A sura kingdom was already a huge problem for a regular human city, and most hunters had hardly heard of a sura empire. Even among the world federation at large, only a select few knew the specifics of the sura hierarchy and structure.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "You won't be able to handle it. The empire of stars' forces will at least be ten times stronger than what we've faced to date!"

Zhou Liao's eyes bulged. Ten times stronger than a seven-kingdom coalition? How could that be? That a seven-kingdom coalition had attacked a human city was a history-defining affair, but now a sura empire itself was attacking Renhuang?

No other force had ever provoked such a response from a sura empire.

Chapter 493: I Don't Want to Leave

Regardless, this wasn't a decision Zhou Liao felt qualified to make on his own.

"Let me ask some of the other leaders what they think about this information. However, I'm telling you this now—regardless of what they choose to do, I'm not going to leave! If I desert you just because of an impending disaster, I would be far too ashamed to ever show my face in front of you again."

Zhang Lie nodded, smiling in gratitude. He then sought out Yu Huantian, who lived in a tall watchtower overlooking all of Renhuang. By the western quarter of Renhuang, the humans and rock spirits had pooled together their resources to destroy the buildings that had once been there and replace them with tower after tall tower in order to give the crag eagles a place to live.

The rock spires that the rock spirits had created were a decent temporary measure, but the crag eagles ultimately found them somewhat uncomfortable. They preferred to roost in tall towers like the watchtowers that the rock spirits had subsequently built, instead. Yu Huantian had personally gone to Chu Feng to speak to him about this.

According to Chu Feng, each watchtower could house seven or eight crag eagles, and these towers were very space-efficient.

During the seven-kingdom coalition, the crag eagles had played an important role in scouting, and Yu Huantian had managed to claim full rights over a patch of land as the eagles' share.

Zhang Lie was impressed by their choice. Either by acumen or sheer luck, they had chosen an investment that would keep appreciating over time. Based on Renhuang's current rate of growth, it was likely that land prices would continue to rise and rise.

Now that they had their own territory, it remained for them to get their own towers. The crag eagles had been making use of their ability to control avian lifeforms of lesser strength to capture regular- and mutated-grade lifeforms alive as a guild worker.

Every crag eagle was saving up to purchase their own high-rises.

Chu Feng smiled deviously as he approached them. "You can always pay in installments, you know."

The crag eagles cocked their heads. "What do you mean, installments?"

"To put it simply, we'll construct your towers for you immediately. You'll pay the cost back to the city over a certain period of time, and you'll be charged interest on the balance. Once you pay it all off, you'll own whatever you bought."

Yu Huantian asked, "Won't our towers belong to us before we finish repaying the loan?"

"You'll be allowed to live in it and to sell it, but it won't, strictly speaking, belong to you before you finish paying off the loan. If you don't pay off enough interest for five continuous months, Renhuang will confiscate your house."

Seeing how flummoxed the crag eagles seemed to be, Chu Feng continued explaining, "To put it simply, you can sell the house or continue living in it, but you can't destroy or otherwise damage it. In addition, you'll have to keep paying off your interest on a monthly basis until the entire balance is accounted for."

Yu Huantian was naturally wary of this offer, but Chu Feng, who was well-versed in negotiation and bartering, was easily able to convince the naive eagles.

Chu Feng leaned into Yu Huantian's ear and whispered, "If you're willing to make your purchase now, I'll talk to the governor and see if we can get you a 20% discount. As a fighter who participated in the defense of Renhuang, you can get an additional 10% discount, for a 30% discount in all! On the other hand, I won't be able to offer you any discount of the sort if you want to save up until you can afford it in one fell swoop."

Yu Huantian was sorely tempted.

Chu Feng continued, "The earlier you have these houses built, the earlier you can start staying in them! Given how much money all of you are making, you'll surely have enough to afford building a few watchtowers. You aren't comfortable living on the rock spires, are you?"

If they had been content with their living conditions, they wouldn't have wanted to build these watchtowers.

"Wouldn't it be much more convenient and comfortable to have these watchtowers immediately?"

The other crag eagles, fully convinced by Chu Feng's words, all demanded to buy a place in their respective watchtowers in installments.

The rock spirits were able to effect the construction of the watchtowers in almost no time at all. For their labor, the rock spirits were paid in rare minerals, ores, and gems sourced from Xuechi, which were of such high quality that the rock spirits were all very pleased with their compensation.

Ever since then, the crag eagles of Renhuang had been saddled with debt from their mortgages.

When Zhang Lie found out about the news, he was dumbfounded. No matter what, however, the crag eagles were a clan that Zhang Lie had brought back with him, and he didn't intend to extort them with Chu Feng's housing plans.

Indeed, after learning more about the situation, he believed that it was in both parties' best interests.

The crag eagles were very popular within Renhuang because they were particularly efficient scouts that could provide both mobility and aerial support.

Although they were saddled with debts that shouldn't have existed in the second realm, the crag eagles' living conditions had improved dramatically. With their talent of being able to control avian lifeforms of lesser strength, their debt wasn't particularly crippling, and they would easily be able to repay it within three years.

"I need your help to scout the area," Zhang Lie told Yu Huantian.

Yu Huantian's strength and position among his clan had allowed him to claim the top floor of one of the watchtowers, and he was among the most relaxed members of the clan. He asked curiously, "Are there more sura on the way?"

"Yes, I've just received news. Please have a look."

"I'll be back soon!" Yu Huantian spread his wings and flew out of the watchtower.

After Zhang Lie and Zhou Liao split up, Zhou Liao gathered the human forces for an important announcement. In a strident voice, he yelled out, "I have urgent news for everyone!"

"Are we preparing to leave?" One of the hunters stepped forward. "I don't intend on leaving. After discussing the issue with a few of my friends, we've decided to stay in Renhuang. Being able to employ the services of these alien races with just a few soulshards has been a godsend, and there are countless herbs, plants, and potions not available elsewhere. We'll surely be able to develop much more quickly here."

A large fraction of the hunters concurred; overall, over 80% of the hunters had chosen to remain in Renhuang. Only those hunters who had witnessed Renhuang for themselves realized just how amazing of a city it was.

The remaining 20% either had important responsibilities in their home city or friends and family in their home city that they couldn't leave behind.

For instance, quite a few people were intending to become traveling merchants that transported goods back and forth between Renhuang and their original cities.

"I've pooled resources with some of my friends, and we're intending to issue a quest in the guild hall to secure some mercenaries to hunt down superior-grade lifeforms. I can't believe how convenient it is to acquire gene fragments in Renhuang—information about genetic lifeforms is publicly available, and you can easily purchase it with just a small amount of coin! You can even learn about the habits and territory of these lifeforms, and if you have access to unrecorded information, that can be exchanged for money too."

Sun Mengmeng had recorded all the information from Xuechi's journal, save that involving peak-grade lifeforms, into the guild database. Those who wanted to learn about the restricted peak-grade information would have to amass enough guild reputation by accepting and completing quests, issuing quests, or selling information.

"You're only realizing that now? I made a lot of money by selling information about the lifeforms that I know of around my home city!"

"Really?!"

Quite a few hunters' eyes lit up as they rushed off into the distance, eager to sell their information before any other hunter around them could do so.

Chapter 494: The Monarch of Stars Approaches

Zhou Liao called out, "Hold on, all of you! Let me finish my announcement first!"

The hunters ignored him. How could they wait? If they were too slow to sell the information to the guild, someone else would get there before them!

Zhou Liao shouted at their backs, "Renhuang's going to be destroyed! What're you going to do with that money?"

The startled hunters turned back. "What did you say? Even the seven-kingdom coalition was unable to take down Renhuang. Isn't it the safest place in the entirety of the second realm?"

This was part of the reason the hunters who had arrived in Renhuang as reinforcements didn't want to leave—their home cities might be destroyed by just a single sura king or a targeted invasion by another alien race, but Renhuang was different.

In Renhuang, the members of Team Zenith could each take down a sura king by themselves, and a sura or alien invasion was all but out of the question.

"What exactly would destroy Renhuang?"

"There's a sura empire on its way," Zhou Liao replied seriously.

"What's a sura empire?" The majority of hunters present at the scene hadn't heard of the term.

"I think I've heard of them before... they're supposedly sura kingdoms that are much larger and stronger than usual. Apparently, there are multiple sura on the level of sura kings in each sura empire?"

"What? Isn't that ridiculous?"

Zhou Liao explained what Zhang Lie had told him. "A sura empire's roughly about a hundred times as strong as a sura kingdom—that is, we'll see an invasion force roughly the equal of ten times what Zhang Lie and Renhuang managed to hold back."

Zhou Liao's comparison shook the hunters to their core.

"The governor of Renhuang himself, Zhang Lie, has suggested that you flee." Zhou Liao glanced at them critically. "I want your opinion: will you stay and fight, or will you flee? I won't stop any of you from returning, but I'll say one thing—I'm staying."

"As if we'd be afraid!"

"We're genetic hunters, and we came to Renhuang to fight!"

"Isn't that wonderful timing? We were invited to the banquet despite not participating in the defense of Renhuang at all. Now's the time for us to shine!"

Considering that these reinforcements had been willing to head toward Renhuang in the face of critical danger, it was only natural that none of them chose to leave now.

Zhou Liao's face remained as serious as ever. "You can certainly all stay, but I want to make sure you're aware of the facts. Compared to the seven sura kingdoms, the empire of stars will be a much more difficult foe to face, with greater strength and larger numbers. Only one in ten of you might survive."

"Troop Leader Zhou, we came here to fight, not to be tourists! We were already prepared to give up our lives in hopes of guarding the creation of a new future. Despite only having been in Renhuang for a few days, I daresay everyone here thinks that it's a worthy cause to fight for!"

"The members of Team Zenith were able to defeat the seven sura kings alone. It's certainly not impossible that, with our help, they might be able to take down a sura empire's forces."

"How can we grow as hunters if we constantly flee from danger?"

Zhou Liao surveyed the gathered hunters with growing appreciation. Indeed, this was what humans should be like! He nodded firmly. "I'm proud of all of you here, of all you human hunters!"

"We'll protect Renhuang to our deaths!"

"My soulshards are still in the guild—I need to acquire some superior-grade lifeforms!"

"Right, I have a date with a wood spirit!"

Over the course of just a few days, they had become invested in the city's fate.

If Renhuang were to fall, the currency that they had accumulated with their soulshards would become useless. The hunters clearly weren't willing to see this happen; Renhuang would be a shortcut to power in the long run, and they had to survive this ordeal!

Zhou Liao added, "I'll inform Zhang Lie that everyone's planning to stay. You're all dismissed. Prepare for a difficult battle to come."

The hunters rushed off in the blink of an eye to sell what they knew to the guild.

Zhang Lie summoned the members of Team Zenith and the leaders of each of the alien races to the palace.

"Another foe is approaching us," Zhang Lie declared.

Sun Mengmeng seemed rather surprised. "What kind?"

It was very rare for her to see such a serious expression on Zhang Lie's face. He clearly felt that their next foe would be a dangerous threat, far more so than the seven sura kings ever were.

"The monarch of stars and his forces are approaching us."

Sun Mengmeng couldn't help but ask, "The monarch of stars? Does he lead a sura kingdom?"

Considering Zhang Lie's lack of regard for the seven sura kings' invasion, a single sura kingdom shouldn't have been enough to provoke such a serious response.

"No—a sura empire."

The shaman of the wood spirits and the leader of the rock spirits each sucked in a breath, and the Yeluo chieftain appeared so frightened his face turned blue.

Sensing the shock in the three clan leaders' faces, the members of Team Zenith were certain that this so-called sura empire wouldn't be an easy target.

Zhang Lie explained just what a sura empire represented to the members of Team Zenith. After he told them the entire story, the members of Team Zenith all turned serious.

"About ten times stronger than the seven-kingdom coalition we faced..."

Since they heard the news directly from Zhang Lie, no one doubted the veracity of the information at all.

The leader of the rock spirits sighed. "It's been a very long time since I've heard of a sura empire attacking those from other races."

The leader of the rock spirits explained that his seniors had told him never to provoke a sura empire. Back then, the sura weren't yet hegemony of the second realm, and their territory had been much smaller than it was now. Even so, they boasted such strength that the domineering rock giants had been unwilling to provoke them.

Sun Mengmeng asked, "If they're so strong, why don't we know of them? Don't they attack other races?"

The leader of the rock spirits retorted, "Would you humans wage war against ants?"

Sun Mengmeng: ...

The rock spirit sighed. "I can't believe that we'll have to face the monarch of stars himself, and immediately after defeating the seven sura kings, too! Renhuang truly is suffering from calamity after calamity."

The Yeluo chieftain asked, "Governor, we'll obey your every command. What do you propose we do?"

Zhang Lie thought for a moment. "Let's wait for Yu Huantian to return with news before deciding on our next steps."

He consoled the members of Team Zenith as he looked at their serious, glum faces. "There's no need to worry to such an extent. Even against a sura empire, Renhuang won't fall so easily. Don't forget that we have the Yeluo potions, which will be an invaluable asset in such large-scale battles."

While Zhang Lie was consoling the crowd, Yu Huantian returned.

His face was slightly green, his voice slightly panicked, as he reported, "Governor, as you suspected, there's a large force making its way toward Renhuang from the north. Their pennant is a compass surrounded by countless stars, with a bloodied beast at its center. If I'm not mistaken, it's indeed a force led by the monarch of stars."

"How many sura are approaching?"

Yu Huantian's voice turned firm. "Three million sura."

This was within his expectations; Zhang Lie didn't panic. After all, panicking wouldn't serve any purpose now. He had no intention of backing down against anyone but an asura himself.

Chapter 495: Aid from the Milky Way

That said, even if Zhang Lie weren't afraid of the monarch of stars, it was prudent to develop battle strategies to minimize as much injury and death as he could. Although he was still the core of Renhuang, Renhuang didn't belong to just him.

"There may be a terrible battle lying ahead of us. Unlike before, the main fighting force won't be the human hunters, but rather the crag eagles led by Yu Huantian..."

As Zhang Lie began explaining their strategy, a voice called out from the outside, "What are all of you discussing? Count me in!"

Everyone looked outside to see Zhou Liao smiling as he made his way toward them.

Zhou Liao clenched his fists tightly. "Every member of the human reinforcements has chosen to stay to defend against the monarch of stars' invasion and protect Renhuang!"

"Are you all certain?" Zhang Lie frowned. "Our opponent is the strongest sura empire."

"If we weren't certain, I wouldn't be here now," Zhou Liao replied naturally.

A black figure darted across the top of the palace, his voice reaching the gathered people before his appearance.

"Governor, there's something wrong!" The crag eagle folded his wings as he landed hurriedly and shouted, "Governor, a huge group of forces is heading toward Renhuang!"

A huge group of forces? Who could that be? Zhang Lie glanced curiously at Yu Huantian.

Yu Huantian rolled his eyes at him. "What're you looking at me for? I didn't summon them over. I scouted in the direction you pointed me at, nowhere else!"

Zhang Lie asked, "Are they sura?"

"No, they aren't sura. I've never met their like before—there are a few beasts as large as mountains, some creatures that look like the wood spirits but aren't half-ethereal, and others who have fish-like tails and are surrounded by a mist of water! I also saw some winged creatures with feathers of all types of colors, dark humanoids, and a whole procession of other groups following behind them. As far as I can tell, it's a multiracial coalition."

"I suppose we'll simply have to see who they are for ourselves, won't we?" Hearing the crag eagle's recounting of what he had seen, Zhang Lie had a guess for who this other party might consist of: reinforcements from the four prime races. Leaping off from the ground, he flung himself toward the city walls like a loosed arrow. The members of Team Zenith and the alien leaders raced after him.

Without startling anyone, Zhang Lie landed deftly atop a watchtower, from which he could see the procession of forces heading toward Renhuang.

"As expected..." Although he had guessed the identity of these forces, Zhang Lie was still quite surprised upon seeing them anew.

The members of Team Zenith caught up to him and glanced at the reinforcements in surprise.

"What are they doing here? The four prime races? They're known throughout the Milky Way!"

Leading the reinforcements were Xing Bai and Lianna, representatives of the starbeasts and the aquatic. Behind them were their subordinates and subsidiary races, numbering over a hundred thousand in all.

Zhang Lie stepped forward to welcome them, taking big strides in the air as though he were walking along the ground.

"May I ask what the starbeasts and aquatic are doing here?"

Xing Bai glanced up to see Zhang Lie walking across the skies, shocked at his technique. Zhang Lie emanated no trace of genetic energy; this wasn't something Xing Bai could replicate.

"Zhang Lie, my brother, it's so good to see you again!" The panda-like Xing Bai leapt up as he spread his arms wide, thinking of hugging him tightly, but Zhang Lie dodged aside gracefully.

Xing Bai frowned when he saw Zhang Lie's antics. "Aren't you at least going to let me hug you? We've been rushing for days on end to get here on time!"

"That's right," Lianna added. "We heard that Renhuang was in danger, so we immediately gathered our forces and brought them over."

Xing Bai cut to the chase. "Renhuang's being attacked by a sura empire, isn't it? I heard that millions of sura fighters are on their way over. Everyone in the second realm has heard the news!"

Lianna praised, "You truly are a special individual to be able to draw the attention of a sura empire. The entire world's focused on Renhuang. As your friends, how could we not help you in your time of need?"

"We've even brought you an excellent gift, one you're sure to enjoy," Xing Bai added. He motioned to those who were carrying the cage and shouted, "Remove the cloth!"

The guards standing by the cage removed it to reveal a ferocious wolf-type lifeform, one that simultaneously possessed draconic characteristics. Fierce and domineering, it seemed to represent a perfect union of a dragon and a wolf.

"This is...a peak-grade dragonwolf?!"

Even Zhang Lie seemed surprised. Upon hearing his words, the beast suddenly bashed its body against its cage.

Despite having been trapped for countless days, its temper was as explosive as ever. Its movement had been so sudden that it almost managed to knock the cage sideways, and everyone seemed surprised by its sudden aura.

Xing Bai nodded happily. "You're exactly right! And as you can see, it's still very energetic despite having been caged up for so long."

The four prime races had locked it in a sturdy cage and weakened it with a specialized potion, but despite its dosed and caged state, its ferocity was unparalleled.

Lianna smiled. "Do you like this gift?"

Zhang Lie nodded firmly. "It must have taken significant effort to catch one of these live."

Killing a peak-grade lifeform was difficult enough, let alone capturing it whole. It was easy for Zhang Lie to kill peak-grade lifeforms, but even he would have been hard-pressed to try to keep one alive.

Xing Bai shrugged. "We were lucky enough to find one on the verge of death. Even so, it cost us quite a few fighters to take it down."

Lianna added, "If you obtain a soulshard from it, make sure to tell us about its effects!"

Zhang Lie nodded firmly. "I accept your gift with gratitude."

He turned and shouted, "Open the city gates! Friends of Renhuang have arrived!"

The reinforcements from the four prime races all walked into Renhuang together. Glancing around, Xing Bai murmured, "Oh, this isn't bad! It's comparable to the starbeasts' cities in the second realm."

Lianna crossed her arms. "It's more than just 'isn't bad'! Could you imagine humans having such a city? The ones I've been to look like pigsties!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "Well, it's not just our efforts. We built this atop a sura capital."

The other human cities certainly weren't so bad, either; Lianna had been exaggerating in a poor attempt to heap more praise on Zhang Lie.

"At any rate, it certainly is the case that this is the most magnificent of the human cities I've had the pleasure to visit."

The four prime races were very interested in the humans and alien races that had made Renhuang their home, and the citizens of Renhuang were likewise curious about the four prime races' arrival.

Chapter 496: The Pitiful Dragonwolf

"Is that a genetic lifeform, do you think?"

"I should hope not. Look! Don't those aliens have the tail of a fish?"

The alien races of Renhuang began pointing at the starbeasts and the aquatic, only to be held back by the humans. "Be more respectful of them—they're some of the strongest races in the Milky Way, as well as the governor's good friends!"

"How strong are they compared to the governor?"

"They're weaker, of course—who isn't?"

As Zhang Lie guided Xing Bai and Lianna forward, he told them, "I'll have a reception prepared for you, but please give me some time to arrange the logistics."

The monarch of stars had convened a meeting of the elders in his palace. He roared, "Are all the preparations complete?"

The elder nodded. "Following your command, your majesty, we've called for all the cities in the empire to send their garrisons to the capital in order to prevent an attack from the other sura empires. Fortunately, thanks to your majesty's victory against the three sura empires recently, the citizens' morale is high, and all the cities have agreed to this demand. In addition, the last group of captives from other sura empires will arrive at the capital shortly."

"Once the captives arise, we'll have everything we need to proceed." The monarch of stars leaned back on his throne. "Although all nine of my godsons have given up their lives for this, I have to admit that Renhuang has given me an even better reason to advance my plans."

Many believed that the reason three sura empires had attacked the empire of stars was because they were threatened by the empire of stars' growth, but only a scant few people realized that this was all part of the monarch of stars' great plan.

"I'd intended on getting more materials from Renhuang, but all seven of my remaining godsons died instead... I suppose it's not too much of a drawback, considering I now have a stronger claim for advancement."

The monarch of stars' tone was calm and placid, as though the rage he had demonstrated that day in his palace was all just an act.

One of the elders raised his head and asked, "Your majesty, are we truly carrying out this plan?"

"Do you think there's an issue with it?" the monarch of stars asked. He frowned; he thought his plan was flawless.

"Your majesty, I'm sure you've planned for all contingencies, but according to your plan, you'll have to sacrifice a million square kilometers of land belonging to two of the sura empires you conquered, as well as half the population of the empire of stars. Are you certain this price is worth it?"

The monarch of stars' eyes' bulged. "You want me to give up on a plan I've spent years working toward at the eleventh hour?!" A blood-red beam emanated from his eyes and pierced the elder who quailed as he knelt trembling on the floor.

"N-No, your majesty!"

The red glow in the monarch of stars' eyes dissipated. "If not for the fact that you've been loyal to me for so long, I'd have decapitated anyone else who said that to me on the spot. I won't hear the like again, do you understand?"

The elder's forehead beaded with cold sweat. He felt as though he had almost looked death in the eyes.

The monarch of stars rapped on his armrest. "Sacrifices have to be made for such a large venture, and the ends justify the means. It's too late for your doubts."

"Yes, your majesty!" The elder wiped the sweat off his forehead. His heart thumped in his chest.

The monarch of stars slowly closed his eyes. "Do you know what the grandest treasure, what the basest pillar of our empire is?"

"Please tell us, your majesty!" The elders stirred, unwilling to hazard a guess that might prove incorrect—and deadly.

"Me!"

The elders:...

"The ruler!" the monarch of stars cried out. "As long as I remain alive, the empire of stars will not crumble!"

This was a rather arrogant claim, but the monarch of stars' words were reflected in the sura's beliefs. Absolute strength trumped over everything else; no one would dare provoke the monarch of stars while he remained alive and well.

"And do you know what the second-most important treasure of the sura realm is?"

The elders shook their heads once again. "Please tell us, your majesty!"

"The army!" The monarch of stars continued, "The army can help expand the empire's territory, so I'm going to assign 80% of our forces to head toward Renhuang."

"From everyone else's perspective, it will surely seem like I've lost my mind—that I'm intending to defeat Renhuang at any cost without any care for the safety and security of the empire of stars. In truth, however, I simply want to protect the integrity of the army. I shall have to thank Renhuang for destroying the seven sura kings' forces; otherwise, I would hardly have such a good reason to act.

"Now, do you know what the third-most important treasure of the sura realm is?"

"The... people?" an elder guessed.

"Wrong!" the monarch of stars boomed. "It's all of you."

"All of us?"

"The third-most important treasure is the empire's elders and officials. Only with all of you around can the empire function properly, so I'll preserve all your lives."

"Thank you, your majesty!"

The monarch of stars continued, "And the fourth-most?"

"The citizens, surely?" another elder guessed.

"Incorrect once more! It's the empire's treasury. The citizens are only the eighth-most important thing in the empire, following our natural resources, technique repository, and weapons! Why should I give up my plan for the eighth-most important thing in the empire?"

"We understand our mistake," the elders replied somberly.

"There are countless sura all over the sura realm, as many as there are ants. If we want more citizens, we simply have to conquer a few more sura empires—and that's an easy feat as long as I become an asura! After that, the entire world shall be our oyster!"

The monarch of stars' eyes gleamed with cold red light.

The four prime races' gift, a peak-grade lifeform, was very generous as things went.

After a short deliberation, it was decided that Zhang Lie would weaken the peak-grade dragonwolf before allowing the strongest hunters to attack it a few times. Doing so would let them obtain some peak gene fragments before the dangerous battle.

Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith themselves didn't need more peak gene fragments, but the other hunters of Renhuang would certainly appreciate it.

Despite its chains and the drugs that it had consumed, the peak-grade dragonwolf was still a fierce creature to behold. Against Zhang Lie, however, it was all meaningless.

"[Rune: Resonate]!" Zhang Lie easily sealed the wolf's actions and thoughts, then beat it senseless.

Subsequently, a group of Renhuang hunters lined up. Each gave the wolf one blow with their weapon before moving on. Multiple times, a healing tincture had to be poured on the wolf's wounds to prevent it from dying outright.

As he watched the proceedings, Zhang Lie couldn't help but feel sorry for the wolf, who had to suffer this indignity at the hands of the humans.

After everyone had attacked it, Zhang Lie dealt the finishing blow. The peak-grade dragonwolf made a relieved expression at the last, tears brimming from its eyes as it finally found solace in death.

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

Zhang Lie smiled. Noticing his smile, Lianna couldn't help but ask, "Did a soulshard condense?!"

Chapter 497: Legends of the Sura

Zhang Lie nodded as he smiled.

"In that case, what are you waiting for? Test it out, please!" the young leaders of the nightdemons, Pu Kui, and of the winged, Hong Yu, requested simultaneously.

Zhang Lie acceded to their wishes...

Just as Zhang Lie was testing out the functionality of his new soulshard, the monarch of stars was concluding the final preparations for his plan. He had managed to capture quite a few prisoners from the other three sura empires that had attacked, and he had been saving them up for this precise moment.

Cage after cage was transported deep within the palace, in which many a sura was enclosed. None of the prisoners knew exactly what awaited them.

The monarch of stars was paying particularly careful attention to his plan, and he refused to permit even a single mistake. Now that his plan was nearing conclusion, he was personally overseeing the transportation of the prisoners into the palace.

He knew very well that not all his officials would be in support of his plan, but there were only five who knew it in its entirety. As long as he kept a careful eye on these five, nothing would go wrong.

And once the plan came to its natural conclusion, he would be a single step away from becoming an asura. That was the reason he had devoted so much effort into studying souls.

The monarch of stars noted that a few cages contained humans rather than sura, but he didn't care. Regardless, none of the prisoners would live.

The monarch of stars instructed, "Remember to prepare a few corpses as well."

The elder by his side replied, "Don't worry, your majesty, the preparations are complete."

Back in Renhuang, the dragonwolf's carcass was being stewed into a thick, rich broth, which was distributed to all the hunters that had participated in striking the dragonwolf. It wasn't very much—each hunter might get one or two peak gene fragments at most—but even that was precious indeed, and worth the equivalent of ten superior gene fragments.

Many of the hunters present wouldn't have been able to acquire peak gene fragments by themselves, after all.

Through this opportunity, the citizens of Renhuang were able to acquaint themselves with the starbeasts, aquatic, nightdemons, and winged.

Zhang Lie was once again pushed to the forefront to give a speech in front of a campfire that had been hastily built. Cheers rang out from the crowd as he cleared his throat before they quickly quieted down.

Zhang Lie began, "First, thank you for the support and reinforcements—both from my human colleagues, as well as from the four prime races. Despite knowing the strength of the opponent we face, none of you have chosen to leave, and the four prime races have traversed half the world to get here on time. Once again, you all have my utmost gratitude."

The humans and representatives of the four prime races began to smile.

"I once informed the hunters of Renhuang of a piece of good news—the seven-kingdom coalition was on their way here." He stuck out two fingers. "Now, the second piece of good news: a sura empire is coming over."

The reinforcements were quite shocked by Zhang Lie's words. How could the arrival of a sura empire be considered good news?

"This is your chance to leave your name in history—to witness history before your eyes! Never has a sura empire ever targeted an external force, but now, the empire of stars faces Renhuang. When we destroy their three million sura fighters, we'll rewrite history with our very hands. We'll become the legends who first went up against the sura—and succeeded. And when we do so, we'll elevate the status of mankind in the second realm, and your names shall forevermore be remembered in history!"

A huge round of applause came from the gathered reinforcements, and Xing Bai and Lianna seemed astounded by his charisma and the force of his personality.

This man—he could create history no matter where he went, because he was a legend in his own right. Hunters weren't afraid of death; they were afraid that their deaths would be meaningless, that no one would record their deeds and triumphs.

Sun Mengmeng gazed at Zhang Lie, her eyes filled with passion. He truly was a natural hero, a natural leader!

"Will this battle be a difficult one? Assuredly, it will—it'll be the greatest challenge all of us will face. But with all our reinforcements—the humans, the four prime races—I promise you, defeating the empire of stars isn't an impossibility. With our hands, we'll wrest victory from the sura!"

"We'll defeat the sura! Long live Renhuang!"

"Long live Renhuang! The monarch of stars will fall!" Cheerful shouts could be heard all over Renhuang, wiping away the terror and fear that threatened to consume the hunters.

Zhang Lie raised his bowl of peak-grade dragonwolf soup as he shouted, "Our legend's just getting started! Ten thousand years from today, everyone will still remember our names!"

He downed his bowl of soup in one big gulp and smashed his bowl against the ground.

"Ten thousand years from today, everyone will still remember our names!"

Everyone in Renhuang, human and alien alike, emulated his actions, downing their soup in one gulp and smashing their bowls against the ground.

Lianna gazed at Zhang Lie's back with wide eyes. "This man will surely be at the apex—not just of the second realm, not just of the Milky Way, but rather of the entire universe..."

She found that her own understanding of Zhang Lie had been in error. She had thought him a hunter with great potential, who was worth investing in because of his development of limit fragments.

Now, however, Lianna understood Zhang Lie's most fearsome quality—his charisma and leadership ability, the former of which would spur his own growth, and the latter of which would spur everyone else's.

She had to associate herself with someone like Zhang Lie at any cost.

The banquet lasted all the way into the night, until the humans and aliens had all drunk their fill.

As Xing Bai upended a vat of wine into his mouth, he asked Zhang Lie, "The monarch of stars is exceptional even among sura monarchs. How do you plan on dealing with him?"

Zhang Lie, seated at Xing Bai's back, took a gulp of wine himself. "I know of him. He's the strongest among the sura monarchs, isn't he?"

Xing Bai warned him, "Don't underestimate the monarch of stars. Not only is he the strongest of the sura monarchs, his name is known widely across the entirety of the second realm. None of the other monarchs are comparable to him; he's known as the top contender to ascend to an asura."

Li Feng leaned against Xing Bai's stomach as he drank. "What's an asura?"

Beside him, Fang Yi asked, "Is an asura the god of the sura?"

Li Feng continued to drink. "Who knows if the asura really do exist? Perhaps they're just like the gods of our mythology."

Xing Bai replied firmly, "The asura truly do exist. According to the annals of the starbeasts, early in the inception of the sura realm, the sura's rise and dominion could be attributed to a genius who ultimately rose through the ranks and became an asura in his own right. In other words, it was because of his presence alone that the sura managed to take over so much of the second realm!"

The leader of the rock spirits added, upon hearing the thread of the conversation, "There are countless tales of the asura circulating in our clan as well. Allegedly, the moment an asura is birthed in the second realm, a calamity will befall all other beings within. His breaths can ignite the land, a wave of his arm can split the sea in half, a sharp gaze can cause the stars to fall—his existence is a calamity for the sura realm!"

Chapter 498: Sacrifices of Blood and Fire

Li Feng asked, "In that case, why haven't we heard of the asura before in the second realm?"

Fang Yi spoke up again. "In that case, could it be that their abilities are far more exaggerated in these tales than in practice?"

The leader of the rock spirits shrugged. "I heard that they went to the third realm."

Li Feng spread his arms. "If the asura have all ascended to the third realm, then surely there's nothing to worry about?"

Xing Bai shook his head. "No, they haven't ascended. In our annals, it's been recorded that their very presence will damage the sura realm, so they choose to hibernate deep within sura territory, only to be summoned in times of great crises."

Li Feng asked, "If their continued presence hurts the realm, why doesn't the realm remove the asura?"

Xing Bai smiled tiredly at him. "The answer is very simple: even the will of the world can't do anything against an asura."

Zhang Lie frowned. Given what Xing Bai had said, the presence of the asura in the second realm was very similar to what had occurred when he chose to remain in the first realm despite having absorbed disaster gene fragments.

The second realm was even able to harbor disaster-grade creatures, so if the asura were so strong that even the second realm opposed them... were they beyond disaster-grade?!

Xing Bai turned back to Zhang Lie. "How do you intend on dealing with the monarch of stars, Zhang Lie?"

Li Feng folded his arms. "There's no way our captain would lose!"

Zhang Lie swallowed another cup of wine, his face seemingly unperturbed. "The monarch of stars might be strong, but we aren't weak."

Within the palace of the monarch of stars, a blood-red beam of light shot into the air. A number of officials knelt on the floor as they observed the beam of light, as though waiting for something.

The origin of the beam was deep within the palace, in a secluded location only the monarch of stars was qualified to go. The spiritual matter in the air was so thick that it almost seemed to condense. It was difficult to imagine how many lifeforms had to be slaughtered to produce spiritual matter of such density.

Corpse upon corpse was heaped on the floor, those of humans, genetic lifeforms, and sura alike. So many corpses lay on the floor that it felt as though there formed an ocean.

Above the ocean of corpses lay countless cages. The sura and humans trapped within begged and pleaded for their lives, but no one was there to hear them cry.

At the very heart of the ocean of corpses was the monarch of stars, who held a compass in his hand.

The compass was unique and intricate in its design. Spiritual matter condensed and whirled around the exposed face of the compass, forming a whirlpool which gleamed with red light. This was the origin of the beam of light that the sura officials had observed from the outer reaches of the palace.

The monarch of stars murmured what seemed to be an incantation in an ancient tongue, and golden glyphs native to the sura surrounded him. A blood-red galaxy seemed to materialize around him as the monarch of stars' eyes opened wide. As the galaxy spun faster and faster, the blood of all the dead corpses snaked out of their bodies and gathered atop the compass.

The whirlpool on the compass began to rotate, keeping time with the galaxy that had materialized around the monarch of stars. That blood morphed into a blood-red dragon that devoured all the

corpses whole before uncoiling and heading straight for the sky. The dragon was visible throughout the entire territory of the empire of stars.

The caged sura and humans screamed and yelled, making such a huge ruckus that they were audible even to the sura officials at the outskirts of the palace.

Countless black hands suddenly emerged from within each cage, capturing and swallowing the humans and the sura within. Their blood and spiritual essence was forcibly extracted from their bodies and sucked into the draconic twister.

As a bloody haze descended on the realm, the sura and humans were sucked dry. Within each cage were emaciated and shrunken corpses. The blood-colored twister turned black, as black as the abyss, as black as outer space, darker than even darkness itself.

The cries of babies seemed to be audible from a distance. Pairs of eyes appeared from within the twister, as though they were mocking the world.

If Zhang Lie were present, he would immediately notice that this... creature... was very much like the peak-grade dragonsoul that he had killed in the valley described in Xuechi's diary.

The difference was that the monarch of stars' creation seemed to bear ill will toward the entire world—oceans of blood and spiritual matter, tainted by death and desperation, malice, anger, rage, and hatred, had condensed into a pitch-black, tainted creature.

Countless feelers emerged from the twister, stretching in every direction.

The sura of the empire of stars tried to run, but it was already too late. One after another, the citizens were grabbed by these feelers and dragged into the darkness that was darker than dark. Their resistance was futile.

Spiritual essence and blood was forcibly stripped from their bodies and used to enlarge the draconic twister's form. The empire of stars, peaceful and placid just moments ago, had transformed into a living hell.

The sura officials trembled as they knelt, barriers of light drawn around them. The draconic feelers naturally avoided those barriers of light, as though all this had been planned in advance by the monarch of stars.

They turned to face the empire at large, only to see sura after sura being sucked dry of their essence—among them their friends and family.

The entirety of the capital was a furnace; the living sura were medicine; their blood and spiritual matter was the fire that fueled the transformation.

The entire capital was coated by a blood-red light, and the sura within were forcibly sucked dry. The haze of light expanded past the capital toward the east and west, splintering the land as it proceeded.

The light split the empire of stars in two as it headed toward the neighboring sura empires that the monarch of stars had only recently conquered, and two bloody pillars of light simultaneously lit up the land of both empires.

As they did so, a mysterious formation of light appeared in the skies above them, moving and transforming in patterns completely reversed from that on the monarch of stars' compass.

As the light shone above the two conquered empires, the sura within began to scream and writhe. Blood and spirit wisped out of their mouths and skin, dyeing the skies red.

This was what the monarch of stars had spent years planning for.

The extracted blood and spiritual matter gushed toward the capital of the empire of stars like a flood, allowing the draconic twister to grow larger and larger, devouring everything in its surroundings. The desiccated corpses in the capital of the empire of stars disintegrated in the wind, leaving nothing behind...

Chapter 499: A Successful Ritual

In the center of the blood-colored twister rose a beam of light that pierced the skies. All the spiritual matter and blood amassed over the top of the capital of the empire of stars, shining so brightly that it could be seen from half the sura realm.

The monarchs of the other sura empires looked at the unusual phenomenon in the skies with ugly expressions on their faces; it was evident that disaster would soon strike.

The blood-colored beam contracted as the energy contained within it began to condense. An object appeared out of nowhere over the compass.

The monarch of stars smiled with malice. Suddenly, the will of the world appeared—it had sensed the evil ritual that would sacrifice the lives of millions and threaten the entire realm. It attempted to break the monarch of stars' ritual.

The monarch of stars raised his head and stared up at the sky. "Haha, will of the world, I've been waiting for you!"

Hidden beneath the runic inscriptions of the capital of the empire of stars was another layer of light.

Countless corpses were buried under the capital, all of whom were warriors who had died in battle. The monarch of stars had commanded that a large pit be dug for all these corpses, along with the corpses of his failed experiments. The pit was filled with a special form of earth that would preserve the spiritual essence of the dead.

The frighteningly dense spiritual essence turned into a many-headed, many-eyed monstrosity, one that the monarch of stars sealed underground and chained up for this very moment.

As the array of light filtered underground, the monstrosity suddenly burst free from its chains. Brilliant white light shone above the capital of the empire of stars, stacking with the bloody light. The two sources of light manifested in the form of two ethereal hands, which caught the will of the world as it descended on the empire of stars.

Noticing something amiss, the will of the world immediately tried to leave, but it was a little too late. The probing hands tore a piece off its immaterial body and consumed it whole. The will of the world shuddered as it escaped from the scene, not daring to reveal itself or to disrupt the monarch of stars' plans any further.

It didn't have the strength to do so, after all.

A core appeared above the compass held by the monarch of stars. Red light quickly wrapped around it, layer after layer. Pinpricks of light began to glimmer over the compass, as though a miniature galaxy was trapped within.

All that energy on the compass contracted to a point, which subsequently exploded. Blood-red light shot out from the compass in all directions, swallowing up the empire of stars and even the nearby empires.

The light didn't appear to cause any harm; indeed, it dissipated after the initial flash. Over the compass, however, a blood-red sun had appeared. It burned with such flame, with such energy, that it seemed as though an entire galaxy was contained within.

"Haha, I've succeeded, I've really succeeded!"

The monarch of stars inclined his head as he laughed into the air. The sura officials all bowed their heads as they continued to kneel. "Congratulations, your majesty!"

The monarch of stars had made a tremendous sacrifice for the object in his hands.

The once-populous capital was naught but a desert; no living creature remained within. The citizens of the capital, sacrifices whose blood and spirit had been stripped from them, disintegrated into dust.

In order to increase the likelihood of success, the monarch of stars had even brought the citizens of a few nearby cities into the capital for a supposed festival. All in all, over tens of millions of sura had died.

All across the empire of stars, sura had disappeared without a trace, leaving behind nothing but a pile of sand which scattered with the wind. The cities belonging to the empires he had conquered were entirely devoid of people.

All this had been caused by none other than the monarch of stars.

Worst were the empires who had been conquered by the monarch of stars; according to the laws of war agreed to by all the sura empires, ordinary citizens shouldn't have been dragged into the conflict.

The monarch of stars had obeyed this law initially, and the citizens of the conquered empires found that they were treated no differently than before. The sura within began to feel goodwill toward the monarch of stars, but none of them expected that they would be sacrificed in such a cruel fashion.

The conquered empires had turned into a barren wasteland, destroyed by the monarch of stars' ambition. Tens of millions, hundreds of millions of sura had died, let alone the plants and genetic lifeforms around. To the monarch of stars, all this was worth it; he could always conquer more empires and add more sura to his empire, after all.

As long as he succeeded in refining the object in his hands, he would be just one step away from becoming an asura, from becoming the god of the sura! He would have boundless strength, and the entirety of the sura realm would belong to him. And now—he had succeeded in his objective!

The monarch of stars laughed in triumph as he gazed at the ruins of his empire.

His perversion outshone his nine godsons' combined. He had walked a forbidden path to its conclusion, something even his godsons hadn't managed.

The skies remained tinted with blood, vibrant and red like a wound inflicted on the very realm itself. Indeed, what the monarch of stars had done had hurt the sura realm to its core.

The blue skies and shining sun were forevermore occluded from the empire of stars and the conquered empires nearby. What replaced them were a bloody sky and a scarlet sun.

By the time the monarch of stars' plans were over, half the population of the empire of stars had vanished, and much of the land was no longer suitable for habitation. The entirety of the land was a furnace; the sura were medicine; their blood and spiritual matter was the fire that fueled the transformation.

The monarch of stars had given up his empire for strength, for power approaching that of an asura—but the more strength he obtained, the weaker he felt.

Many claimed that the monarch of stars was the existence closest to that of an asura, but it was exactly because he was considered the closest that he realized just how large a chasm lay between him and a true asura.

If the asura were a mountain, he was an ant—they were so different as to be incomparable. The monarch of stars knew that, even if he worked and toiled his entire life, he would never approach such vaunted heights.

Others thought it the highest of compliments to call him the one who most closely approached the realm of an asura, but to him, that was the harshest of satire. How could an ant hope to move a mountain?

Chapter 500: Arrival of the Monarch of Stars

The monarch of stars had given it all, had become crazed from his efforts, had raged at the world—but everything he did seemed to magnify the difference between the ant that he was and the mountain he couldn't become.

And thus, the monarch of stars took a step along a forbidden path.

The monarch of stars gazed at the scarlet sun in the air and found it rapturing to behold.

If he couldn't become a mountain by himself, then he would become a force that could destroy that mountain.

Humans couldn't grow as large as mountains, of course, but they could destroy those mountains with dynamite. He found it ironic that he had gotten this inspiration from a lifeform he had considered beneath him—he had learned from a human that humans were able to create dynamite, interstellar spaceships, bombs with the ability to destroy heaven and earth. Even if they were hardly as strong as he was, they had the ability to destroy something even stronger.

The monarch of stars turned to research. After countless years, he slowly began to understand the soul, the spiritual matter that made up all lifeforms. His status as a sura king prolonged his life, and he spent those countless years studying, learning, and experimenting.

And once he understood the power of the soul, he came up with a new idea: to extract the soul and blood from the sura and to create a weapon with it. To accomplish that objective would require

immense quantities of blood and spiritual matter, but that didn't dissuade the monarch of stars. The sura realm was full of life, after all.

Thus began his monstrous plan: to sacrifice all the sura living in three sura empires to create a weapon never before seen in the second realm.

With that weapon, he would be able to conquer the entirety of the sura—no, the entirety of the world!

He had heard from a human that there were realms beyond the sura realm. Once the sura realm was entirely his, once he had sacrificed everything within for the pursuit of his own power, he would advance into that realm and claim it as his own.

Wasn't he truly a genius? He might not be able to become a mountain, but he could claim the land as his own and destroy that mountain.

The monarch of stars walked out of the palace and welcomed the crimson sky. His gaze landed on the statue of the asura carved within the capital. He murmured, "Have I approached your stature?"

"We greet his majesty!" the kneeling officials cried out.

The monarch of stars nodded.

One elder cautiously raised his head. "Your majesty, the outcome—"

The monarch of stars revealed the compass in his hand, on which a scarlet sun shone. It burned with such flame, with such energy, that it seemed as though an entire galaxy was contained within.

The sura officials hailed their monarch. "His majesty is undefeatable! His majesty shall rule earth and sky!"

The monarch of stars stored the compass securely as he turned to face his officials. "I heard that there was a city that dared to provoke the empire of stars, that killed my nine sons."

"It's the human city of Renhuang, your majesty," one elder replied.

The monarch of stars nodded. "Good. Shall we test out this weapon on that city, then?"

The elder's eyes widened. "Your majesty, surely this isn't—"

As the monarch of stars whirled toward the elder with a glare, the elder immediately stopped short.

The monarch of stars began to smile. "I hope this so-called Renhuang isn't too weak, or this won't be interesting at all."

By that time, Renhuang had finished preparing for battle.

The Yeluo clan had produced as much poison as they could for the upcoming battle, and much of the clan had been working tirelessly for days on end. The hundreds of chests in front of them were the results of their labor.

Neither the Yeluo nor the wood spirits would participate in the battle, considering that their specialty was in production and manufacturing. Instead, they would have to continuously supply the fighters with shipments of potions and poison throughout the battle.

It had been some time since the empire of stars launched an invasion force against Renhuang, so Renhuang was surely mobilizing by now.

"In that case, I'll forestall them halfway and kill Renhuang's forces there."

Renhuang's troops would be an excellent testing ground for his new weapon. The monarch of stars grinned. "If they could kill my nine godsons, they clearly have some strength of their own."

As weak as his nine godsons might be, they had received his personal tutelage and skills. Although they would be no match for other sura monarchs, they were far stronger than ordinary sura kings.

When the monarch of stars destroyed Renhuang's forces in one fell swoop, the sura would tremble upon hearing his name, and everyone else would kneel.

Back on Earth, a group of people were slowly making their way toward the entrance to the Zenith Dojo. They were dressed in black and wore masks to conceal their identity.

"You're certain that Zhang Lie's sister is within the dojo?"

"Yes, I've confirmed it multiple times!"

"Let's wait until we receive news from the second realm. Once Zhang Lie's forces begin the fight, we'll act."

As Renhuang's forces marched toward the empire of stars, Zhang Lie suddenly felt a particularly dangerous aura around him. He raised an arm and motioned for the forces to halt.

Beside him, Sun Mengmeng asked, "What's going on, Captain?"

Zhang Lie stared up at the sky without speaking, perceiving a figure in the distance.

Suddenly, everything around them began to quake as a bloody beam of light descended on Renhuang's forces.

Zhang Lie flicked his wrist, ripples of energy spreading up his arm and condensing on his fist. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!"

His technique clashed against the bloody light, causing a huge explosion in mid-air above Renhuang's forces.

"An enemy assault!" the hunters cried out, getting into defensive positions immediately.

"Hmm. You're the only interesting human among these forces."

The figure who had appeared out of thin air kept his gaze on Zhang Lie, who shot into the air and stared levelly back at him.

The middle-aged sura before him was wreathed in bloody light, casting his face in a malevolent tint. He had the aura and arrogance of the strong. The horns on his forehead marked him as a sura.

"If I'm not mistaken, you must be the monarch of stars," Zhang Lie surmised

The sura sighed and shook his head. "And you must be Renhuang's Zhang Lie. To be frank, I'm a little disappointed. I expected that the man who killed nine of my godsons would be more interesting, but are you really this weak?"

Zhang Lie laughed mockingly. "Ha! You baldy might not be all that strong, but you certainly have a big mouth."

"What?!" The monarch of stars brooked no disrespect, and he had never, in his entire life, been called a baldy. "You dare, human trash? Face your death!"

"All forces, retreat a hundred kilometers!" Zhang Lie's command rang out amidst a huge explosion of genetic energy.

"Yes, Captain!" Sun Mengmeng complied immediately, waving an arm as she guided the troops' evacuation. Their target wasn't the monarch of stars, and they would hardly be able to contribute in such a high-level fight. It would be pointless for them to remain...