

## U. Warlord 641

Chapter 641: The State of Affairs

"Strong? How strong?"

"The Zijing clan is the strongest among our four clans. They'll surely be able to get a considerable amount of resources by helping a prince ascend to the throne, but the Zijing are rich and strong enough that it can't be worth the effort in general. They surely have an ulterior motive for doing so."

"What motive?"

"I don't know."

"Are there humans in this world?"

Heijie Niu shrugged. "The humans are active in worlds that are seven or eight wormholes away. Lord of Renhuang, just how did you make it over here, anyway?"

"Seven or eight...?" Zhang Lie's face turned cold. That damned will of the world—it had to have done this on purpose!

Almost all hunters who ascended were sent directly to their respective race's settlements. Even if there were some error, they would at most be sent outside those settlements, or to nearby worlds.

That Zhang Lie had been ten worlds away from the nearest human city clearly wasn't an error, but a deliberate choice on the will of the world's part.

Zhang Lie had suspected that these wills of the world were impartial moderators of their respective realms, but it looked as though they could certainly favor or disfavor certain individuals. In that case, he wouldn't go easy on them when he took revenge, but that revenge would be a long way away in the making.

Zhang Lie's expression didn't change despite his thoughts. He coldly tossed Heijie Niu the vial of potion in his hands.

Heijie Niu swallowed it in one gulp. His wounds began to close, staunching the flow of blood. As the wounded portions of his body slowly began to regrow, he asked, "Lord of Renhuang, how did you end up traveling with the ninth prince?"

Although Wang Jian was the only person that had appeared in front of Zhang Lie and the ninth prince, there were still men from the various princes surrounding them, observing the ninth prince's new backer.

Zhang Lie smiled. "He's my disciple. Don't try to lay your hands on him, or I'll smash your head to pulp."

Heijie Niu ducked down. "To be honest, of the nine princes, the least likely to ascend to the throne is the ninth prince. Anyone else might win the succession, but not him."

"Why?"

"For one, the ninth prince was born too late. The other princes have all been amassing their forces for decades, the crown prince foremost among them. He's been a prince for sixty years by now, and

he's built up an impressive network. His mother's the empress, and he's just half a step from the throne."

"In that case, this crown prince is particularly strong?"

"Of course! Otherwise, the other princes wouldn't be cooperating against him. If you're interested in this world, Lord of Renhuang, why don't you come join our clan and support the seventh prince? He's got quite a stable base of power himself. With the Heijie clan and the lord of Renhuang himself, he'd surely become the new king of the realm."

"I've already accepted a deposit from the ninth prince, and I certainly won't renege on my word."

Heijie Niu pursed his lips. "A poor bastard like him? What could he give you—the seventh prince will pay double that price!"

Zhang Lie snorted. "The seventh prince wouldn't be able to pay that price—not even the king of the realm would."

To be honest, if someone were to offer him two pieces of the map, Zhang Lie might have given in. These map fragments were particularly valuable, and he was lucky just to find two so recently. It was very unlikely that a second piece would be present in this world.

Zhang Lie asked curiously, "Why did so many princes decide to target the ninth prince together?"

He should have been the least threatening of all the princes, after all.

"The prince himself is useless, but his death would be a useful weapon."

"Oh?"

Heijie Niu narrowed his eyes. "It doesn't matter who strikes first—what's important is who his killer seems to be."

Zhang Lie contemplated this revelation. "You mean that, if this Wang Jian had failed to kill the ninth prince, you would kill the ninth prince yourself and lay the blame on the Wang clan?"

Heijie Niu shook his head. "No. We'd try to lay the blame at the first prince's feet."

"Oh?"

"Upon doing so, the first prince himself will be obligated to investigate the truth behind the ninth prince's death. Doing so, he'll surely uncover that the Wang clan's Wang Jian was the killer, and he would gain the impression that the Wang clan was trying to lay the blame on him."

Zhang Lie finished, "Regardless of the truth, it's sufficient for the first prince to find a scapegoat. He'll surely clamp down hard on the third prince. At that point, you'll give the third prince a push from the back to remove him from the competition."

Politics was indeed a devious field... "The princes certainly care very much for each other," Zhang Lie commented acidly.

Heijie Niu shrugged. "It's a competition for the throne, after all."

No one had expected the ninth prince to find a savior like Zhang Lie, who was able to repel all the assassins that had come his way.

"However, I can't be certain whether or not you've lied to me."

Heijie Niu replied seriously, "I can swear to the heavens that nothing I've told you has been a lie."

"Very well. Let me ascertain the truth for myself." Zhang Lie's eyes glimmered with rainbow light. Heijie Niu was caught in his gaze immediately.

"Did you lie to me during my interrogation?"

Heijie Niu shook his head. "No, but I left out a few details."

"Ha! What details?"

"The forces under our control, the princes' personality, the status of each prince's forces, the status of the king of the realm."

Zhang Lie thought back for a moment. Indeed, Heijie Niu had spoken a lot, but none of that information was particularly useful. Just as Zhang Lie was about to ask for the information that Heijie Niu had chosen to hide, some clatter came from behind him.

Without even turning his head, Zhang Lie smiled. "Come out—don't hide back there!"

The ninth prince walked out of the shadows. Zhang Lie wasn't surprised, because he had detected the ninth prince's presence some time ago.

"Did you hear it all?"

"Yes, I did."

The ninth prince was rather touched. He knew that the deposit that Zhang Lie had spoken of was just a scrap of tattered parchment, one that was important to him largely because his mother had bequeathed it to him on her deathbed.

The only thing special about that parchment was that even his father was unable to determine its provenance. It could neither be burned by fire or sliced apart by a sword—but that was it. Nevertheless, this seemingly useless fragment was, to Zhang Lie, something the seventh prince—or even the king of the realm!—was unable to procure.

Compared to him, he knew how much more competitive his seventh brother was. He had more strength and support, but Zhang Lie had nevertheless chosen to side with the ninth prince.

The ninth prince couldn't help but be touched. No one had ever been so kind to him save his mother and his mother alone. Most people approached him with a secret agenda in mind.

Most importantly, his brothers betrayed him and used him as a scapegoat at every junction.

Just like Heijie Niu had mentioned, he was like an orphan compared to the other princes. To add insult to injury, the reason he had been assassinated wasn't due to his status as a prince, but rather because his death could be used as a weapon to hurt his brothers.

And even so, despite all that, Zhang Lie had chosen to stick with the ninth prince.

Chapter 642: The Nine Princes

Zhang Lie beckoned the ninth prince over. "Sit down. We'll hear this information together."

Heijie Niu began, "The king of the realm's health is declining day by day. I believe he'll be dead within two or three years."

Zhang Lie stilled. "Two or three years? Is the king of the realm's health that poor?"

"After all, he's lived for thousands of years. Even though he's supported by the will of the world, his body's still going to decay away sooner or later."

"Tell me more about the battle for succession."

"There are three separate factions: one for the crown prince, and two for the other princes."

Heijie Niu picked a branch off the ground and drew two large circles in the dirt, one which he labeled the crown prince and the other which he labeled the other princes.

"Of the two factions formed by the other princes, one is indigenous and the other is supported by aliens from the Milky Way."

Heijie Niu divided the circle representing the other princes in two. The indigenous support came from the Wang, Feng, and Qian clans; the alien support from the Hei, Jin, Yin, and Zi clans.

"The two factions are nominally enemies, but there are a few temporary alliances in place. The Zijing clan and Qian clan are in cahoots, as are the Jindao and Feng clans. The Yinlian and Wang clan are working together, while we, the Heijie, are working with the crown prince."

Heijie Niu then drew ovals connecting the various informal alliances.

Zhang Lie glanced at the drawing on the ground. He couldn't help sighing, "Things really are quite complicated in the capital, aren't they?"

Heijie Niu shrugged. "This is how court intrigue tends to go."

Zhang Lie lifted his head and turned to the ninth prince. "Did you know about this beforehand?"

The ninth prince shook his head.

Heijie Niu sighed. "The ninth prince has no backer and no strength. He's not considered a part of the battle for succession at all, and he's been kept in the dark. Of course, with your presence, lord of Renhuang, the ninth prince is now considered a dark horse."

"And what about the other princes?"

"The crown prince was tutored by the king of the realm himself, and he's beyond a peak-grade level. The second prince, supported by the Jindao, has strength just slightly inferior to the crown prince himself. He's ambitious and charismatic, and I'm sure he's up to something."

Zhang Lie continued, "What about the princes supported by the indigenous clans?"

"The third, fourth, and fifth princes, supported and fostered by the three major clans of the capital, are intelligent and resourceful in their own right, but too young to pose a threat to the first two princes in general."

"And the others?"

"The sixth and seventh princes are rather inferior, especially in comparison to the first five. They were born to houses that had recently ascended to the nobility, and their background didn't prepare them well for succession."

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes. "In that case, why is your clan in support of the seventh prince?"

"Heh! It's precisely because the seventh prince is inadequate that he's easy to control."

"Hmm..."

"The eighth prince is a piece of trash, and the ninth prince doesn't have any backers to speak of. He was such an inferior option that we didn't look closely at them."

Zhang Lie frowned. "And the Zijing clan is willing to sponsor a piece of trash?"

"As I've said, there has to be something wrong with the Zijing clan."

Heijie Niu's comments about the Zijing clan were the same within hypnosis as before. It looked as though there really were something suspicious about the Zijing clan that he would have to investigate.

Zhang Lie nodded. "Return to your clan and tell them that I, Zhang Lie, am interested in working with the Heijie."

Heijie Niu's eyes widened. "Lord of Renhuang, you're willing to help the seventh prince?"

The ninth prince shook.

Zhang Lie chuckled coldly. "Given what I've learned, if I really wanted to help one of the princes ascend to the throne, do you think I would choose the seventh prince?"

"In that case, what do you want, Lord of Renhuang?"

"There's no need for you to worry about that. Tell the Heijie of my intentions."

"I understand, Lord."

Heijie Niu knew that Zhang Lie's help would be of tremendous utility to the clan. If the seventh prince had the chance to become the king of the realm, Zhang Lie might help them out in return for some benefits; on the other hand, if the seventh prince were to threaten the ninth, Zhang Lie might kill the seventh prince and all his supporters.

Zhang Lie had the strength to meddle in this game of kings. Whereas the weak had to be chosen, the strong had the right and might to choose.

Zhang Lie turned around. "Let's go."

The ninth prince hesitated. "As for him..."

Zhang Lie waved a hand. "If he dies to a genetic lifeform, it'll be his own bad luck."

As they headed off, Zhang Lie noticed that the ninth prince seemed to want to say something, but was visibly holding back. He turned around impatiently. "What's the matter? Spit it out!"

"Master, the man called you... lord of Renhuang?"

"Yes, yes, I built a kingdom or two and ruled over a huge tract of land. It's nothing too impressive."

The ninth prince's mouth spasmed. "In that case, Master, are you planning to head back to that kingdom?"

"No," Zhang Lie replied curtly. "I've already left, and I can't return, not that I have any intention to."

"Why not? Wasn't it a kingdom you built with sweat and tears?"

With sweat and tears? It really hadn't been anything too strenuous—constructing his farm had been rather a slog, but the rewards were well worth it. "Once you climb to the peak and witness your surroundings, you'll understand how I feel and why I've made the choices I've made."

The ninth prince lowered his head. "Yes, Master."

To be able to construct a kingdom was something countless men spent their entire lives working fruitlessly towards, but Zhang Lie had written it off as though it were a meaningless accomplishment.

He simply couldn't understand how Zhang Lie could give that kingdom up so easily, but he wouldn't press the matter further.

The ninth prince's behavior was very satisfactory to Zhang Lie; he was truly assimilating to his identity now.

Beforehand, the ninth prince had been formal and courteous, but only because he had a request to make of Zhang Lie. Now, he was truly treating Zhang Lie like his master and senior.

Perhaps it was because he had learned that Zhang Lie himself was once a king, or because he had learned from Zhang Lie's conversation with Heijie Niu that Zhang Lie had no intention to betray him for another prince.

Zhang Lie continued calmly, "Before you ascend to the peak of that mountain, you won't understand my feelings. To me, a mountain is just a mountain. After climbing one mountain, you set your sights on another. Our lives are filled with mountain after mountain, and there's no need to be too fixated on any one of them. Of course, these are just my thoughts. You can agree or disagree with them at your leisure."

The ninth prince nodded.

Zhang Lie jumped up on White, while the ninth prince got on Whiter.

The ninth prince continued hesitantly, "Master, there's still something that bothers me. Why choose me, and not any of my other siblings?"

Zhang Lie had rejected the seventh prince's offer immediately, but was the scrap of tattered parchment the ninth prince had given him really worth that much?

The ninth prince thought that someone like Zhang Lie could easily have discarded him for another prince, vastly increasing his own chances at acquiring the primordial starflower. So why had he chosen the ninth prince, the prince least likely to take the throne? Zhang Lie had the qualification to work with any of the princes, after all...

Chapter 644: The Ninth Prince Goes to Court

Zhang Lie looked Heijie Niu up and down. "Oh, very good. You seem to have recovered in no time at all."

Heijie Niu flushed. "Lord of Renhuang, your potion was miraculous!"

He crept closer to Zhang Lie and whispered, "Lord, if you don't mind, I've told my clan that I was wounded after exchanging a few blows with you, not your cat..."

Whiter let out a hoarse roar before nudging Heijie Niu's body, shocking him so much that he leapt back.

Zhang Lie nodded wearily. "I see..."

The Heijie representatives walked up and proffered their buglike appendages to him. "Lord of Renhuang, it really is you! We were shocked to learn that you had made your way into this world as well. We understand your thoughts, and we're delighted to be working together with you."

Zhang Lie grasped their cool appendages and shook them firmly. As he looked them in the eye, his mistmeld clam soulshard activated.

Zhang Lie gave each of the Heijie a subconscious command: not to betray him.

The Heijie invited him into the capital, warning him as they stepped within, "Lord of Renhuang, there are no humans here. It may be better for you to put on a disguise to save yourself some trouble."

Zhang Lie nodded.

This was the capital of an alien world, and they could very well be in hostile territory. Without any idea of how the ninth prince's enemies might come at them, it was only prudent to take countermeasures. Zhang Lie feared no attack, but the ninth prince might be adversely affected by things he could shrug off.

As he patted his cheeks, his face slowly began to morph into that of another person entirely.

The ninth prince was shocked by the transformation, but this was simply one of the abilities that Zhang Lie had gained access to ever since becoming a disaster-grade lifeform. He was able to control every muscle and bone in his body at will.

Because the ninth prince's status in the palace wasn't particularly high, he was unable to bring Zhang Lie with him. Before he entered the palace, he requested the blade that Wang Jian had left behind. His eyes shone with determination, as though he were about to do something momentous.

Despite the fact that the ninth prince had said nothing about the assassination attempt throughout the journey to the capital, he had certainly been threatened and angered by the ordeal.

He had been stopped at the gates to the capital, his man had been seized right before his eyes—did the world think that he didn't exist?!

Zhang Lie estimated that the ninth prince was about to make so large a fuss that others were forced to pay attention to him.

Worried about his safety, Zhang Lie had the ninth prince bring Red Comet with him, who would guard him from harm. Even if Red Comet couldn't fend off his assailants, it was fast enough to run away with the ninth prince and return to Zhang Lie's side.

As a beast, Red Comet was surprisingly easy for the ninth prince to walk around with. After all, a number of the princes had their own pets, but the ninth prince's fourth-level beast was clearly a cut above the rest.

The Heijie invited Zhang Lie to meet with the seventh prince, but Zhang Lie rejected the invitation outright. He would have an audience with the seventh prince when it came time, but given that he had just arrived at the capital, Zhang Lie didn't want to make too big a fuss. His current identity was the master of the ninth prince, and it would seem rather strange for him to visit the seventh prince on his first day in the capital.

In truth, Zhang Lie didn't mind the rumors; he simply didn't want to meet the prince. Was he so free an individual that he would agree to such meetings on the seventh prince's whims?

Heijie Niu commented, "The ninth prince is finally safe now that he's within the capital. No prince would be so foolish as to make a move within. If a prince were to do so, the other princes would immediately react."

That the capital was neutral territory was an implicit agreement between the princes. If any of them were to break that agreement, the capital would immediately descend into chaos.

Outside the capital, of course, it was another matter entirely.

Heijie Niu continued, "The Heijie clan have a manor in the capital. Lord, if you need a place to stay..."

"I'm not interested." Zhang Lie did not want to live with these bug-like aliens.

Suddenly, however, he thought of something. He was running out of money. He turned to Heijie Niu. "How were the effects of the healing potion?"

Heijie Niu's eyes brightened. "It was the best potion I've ever consumed!"

"Do you want to buy some for the future?"

"You're interested in selling your stock?"

Zhang Lie nodded.

Heijie Niu bought twenty vials at an extremely high price, using the currency native to this world.

With that money, Zhang Lie found a comfortable inn in which to reside. The inn was clean and spacious, though he had to pay extra for hot water.

Furthermore, White and Whiter couldn't be brought inside the inn and had to remain out in the stables. As Zhang Lie was finishing up a nice, long bath, however, he found a panicked stablehand waiting for him.

White and Whiter's presence in the stables were causing all the horses and animals present to panic. Their legs were shaking, their bodies trembling.

As a result, Zhang Lie had no choice but to pay for a neighboring room in which White and Whiter could be temporarily installed.

The next day, the ninth prince got up bright and early, dressed himself, and attended that morning's court.

Not every prince had the right to participate in court, especially not a powerless prince like him. However, the reason he had left his palace was to survey a particular territory on the king's orders, and he had received special dispensation to report to court. His intention was to display Wang Jian's sword and describe what had happened to him, laying the blame at the other princes' feet and reminding them of his continued existence.

The ninth prince marched into court. The crown, second, and third princes were all present. Only they had a standing invitation to morning court; they were the three princes most favored by the king.

This was why the other princes had tried to trap the third prince and tarnish his reputation—so they could replace him.

The crown prince asked, "Ninth brother, are you hale? I received news that your guards perished on your way back to the capital."

The crown prince was over a hundred years of age, but he still seemed as strong as a hunter in his prime. He had been in the army and had even suppressed a rebellion. Killing intent radiated from his body, which was lithe and muscular. Two long scars marred his face.

The ninth prince bowed. "Thank you for your concern, eldest brother. Unfortunately, I encountered a pack of third-level beasts, though I managed to escape unscathed."

The second prince remarked, "A pack of third-level beasts! You must have suffered greatly, ninth brother."

The second prince's stature was far less intimidating than the crown prince's. Just like the crown prince, he was over a hundred. He looked like a scholar, demure and staid—but the ninth prince knew precisely what kind of cunning man lay behind that cultivated exterior. He was barely weaker than the crown prince himself.

"By a chance encounter, I met a man who saved my life, second brother."

The third prince's eyes flashed upon hearing this recounting. "Oh? What man is this? I must meet him myself to thank him for saving my ninth brother!"

Chapter 643: Entering the Capital

Zhang Lie glanced at the ninth prince, still deep in thought. He asked, "What do you think of the crown prince?"

The ninth prince hesitated. He didn't understand why Zhang Lie was suddenly asking about the crown prince; did he intend on working with the crown prince?

Knowing that the ninth prince had gotten the wrong impression, Zhang Lie clarified, "I mean, what do you think of the crown prince's life?"

"Born to nobility, the crown prince is the eldest and most established among us. Father values his work, and he's aided by the most senior and superior officials. His life's about as perfect as it can get," the ninth prince explained.

Zhang Lie smiled. Hidden behind the ninth prince's words was a sense of jealousy.

"From my perspective, his life is pitiful."

The ninth prince's eyes widened. "What's there to pity? He won the genetic lottery from birth, and he's head and shoulders above us other princes. He's supported by most of the senior officials as well—Master, what am I missing? You were a king yourself, weren't you? Your opinion seems much like those of the commoners, the ones who claim that the life of royalty is bad because they weren't born into it!"

The ninth prince was born to royalty, but his life was almost like that of a commoner. The ideal life of royalty was something he could witness daily through his eldest brother, and it was something he had yearned for and coveted since he was little more than a child.

To the ninth prince, the crown prince's life was absolutely perfect.

Zhang Lie laughed. "It is a pleasant life, isn't it? The crown prince, favored of the king, aided by the best officials—but it's precisely this sort of life, this easy, obvious, natural life without any trials or tribulations whatsoever, that makes it dull, boring, and meaningless."

To be born to wealth, with parents that doted on you, intelligent and advantaged from a young age—well, that was the secret to an easy life. But wasn't it a rather pitiful one, too?

Zhang Lie explained, "Games are meant to be played on harder difficulties—only then do people gain enjoyment for their success. What fun is an easy game?"

The ninth prince processed Zhang Lie's words, then shook his head. "Perhaps only someone like you would be able to say that, Master."

Zhang Lie was very happy that he had encountered the ninth prince first.

Supporting the first prince was undoubtedly the simplest and most boring strategy, the second and third princes slightly less so, the fourth through eighth princes much more difficult, and the ninth prince hellish.

Not only did the ninth prince start out with no resources, manpower, or strength, he was even being chased after by the other princes. Who knew what would happen once he returned to the capital?

That said, this was the environment in which Zhang Lie could make the most of his strengths.

The ninth prince smiled. "If what lies ahead of me is a road to hell, Master, would you be willing to lead me through it?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him. "I wouldn't bring you to hell—I'd take you to the peak of the tallest mountains, to show you sights you've never seen before."

After this incident, the ninth prince and Zhang Lie's relationship had deepened considerably. The ninth prince had more faith and trust in Zhang Lie than before. Of course, it wasn't to the extent

when they could confide in each other, but at least the ninth prince wouldn't doubt Zhang Lie any longer.

The two of them quickly arrived at the capital, which Zhang Lie noted to be far less impressive than that of Limit.

The kingdom of Limit was a multiracial one, with all sorts of clashing architectural styles and ideals. Meanwhile, the capital that stood before them seemed much more staid. It looked grand and imposing from the outside, but there was nothing particularly special about it—just its size.

As the two of them strode toward the gates leading within, they were halted by the city guards. The ninth prince took out his token of identification. "I'm the ninth prince, and I seek entry to the capital."

The guards replied, "Owing to the number of people trying to pass themselves off as the princes, I have to report this matter immediately."

A group of guards suddenly enclosed them. The guard captain held out a bounty with Zhang Lie's figure depicted on it. "Identify yourself!"

The ninth prince asked, "Just what's going on?"

The guard captain replied coolly, "Your highness, please allow me to carry out my duties. The person beside you is a criminal, one who has committed a whole slew of crimes. He's destroyed quite a few cities in the past."

The ninth prince snorted. "This man is my guest and my aide. You claim that he's committed a series of crimes—do you mean to assert that I'm his accomplice?!"

The ninth prince's tone and stance caused the guard captain to take a step back subconsciously, but he quickly came to his senses. With some embarrassment that he had lost out in a confrontation against the useless ninth prince, he stepped forward again. "Your highness, I have orders I must follow."

Zhang Lie had never committed any of these listed crimes, and it was evident that he was being targeted by the other princes in an attempt to target him and remove him from the ninth prince's presence.

Would these other princes strike them within the capital? Zhang Lie wasn't sure, but he certainly would take precautions against such an outcome. He didn't want to be detained; he could easily break free, but it would be a hassle.

His eyes gleamed. He was just about to use his disaster-grade mistmeld clam soulshard to resolve the problem when a shout came from afar.

"Hold it, hold it!"

When the guard captain saw Heijie Niu walking toward him with a few others from his clan, the guard captain frowned. "You're... the guests being hosted by the seventh prince?"

Heijie Niu smiled. "Captain, this man is a guest of the seventh prince. Please, allow him to depart."

The guard captain's brows furrowed. "That—well, I'm simply not sure what to do. My superiors insisted that I arrest this man."

Heijie Niu's smile grew firmer. "I'm afraid I can't allow that, Captain. The seventh prince himself requested his presence. If you refuse to let him go, you may have to bear the brunt of his anger..."

The guard captain hesitated. He didn't want to offend his superiors, but he certainly didn't want to offend the seventh prince.

It was obvious from this interaction what sort of position the ninth prince had. The guard captain was arresting the ninth prince's companion to his face, but he was willing to defer to the seventh prince just because one of his men had made his way over.

Heijie Niu slid a bag of coins into the guard captain's hands. "Let's make this interaction a pleasant one, Captain."

The captain smiled as he hefted the bag, then waved an arm. "There's no criminal here—we made an error in judgment. Retreat!"

The guards dispersed and Heijie Niu turned toward Zhang Lie with a smile. "Lord of Renhuang, these are fellow members of my clan. They've agreed to your offer of cooperation."

The Heijie clan had clearly anticipated this problem, so they had rushed over in order to help Zhang Lie resolve it. That was more than sufficient courtesy to start off their collaboration. After all, the indigenous clans might not be aware of what sort of existence Zhang Lie was, but the races of the Milky Way certainly knew all about him.

As for Zhang Lie, he could have resolved this spot of trouble himself, but he would remember what the Heijie had done...

#### Chapter 645: In Court

The third prince's aura was as sharp as a sword. He gave off a domineering aura of sharpness, of blades at every corner. Even his eyes seemed to carry a fraction of that ideal.

The ninth prince knew that the Wang clan was the third prince's sponsor, and the clan had taught the third prince a specialized sword technique that only the core disciples of the clan had access to.

This sword technique, the 'path of kings', had dominance baked into its very name, and only the royal members of the Wang clan were permitted to study it.

Nevertheless, despite satisfying these harsh conditions, the third prince was still overshadowed by the crown and second princes, though he was certainly stronger than the average hunter.

The Wang clan head had once mentioned that the power of the technique would only grow with the third prince's position; if the third prince were able to take the throne, his mastery of his technique, as well as its strength, would instantly soar to unparalleled heights.

At that point, the third prince's strength would eclipse the crown prince's, and it would even approach that of the king of the realm himself. If he were allowed to continue cultivating that technique while serving as king, his strength would only increase by leaps and bounds.

"You'll certainly have a chance to meet my savior, third brother," the ninth prince replied.

Based on how cordial the conversation seemed to be, a stranger might suspect that the four princes had a good relationship with each other.

"His Majesty has arrived!"

An old man walked stiffly into court from the front, supported by attendants on either side of him. His robe was lined and embroidered with silver, with a draconic lifeform that didn't look quite like a dragon stitched where his chest was. He held his head erect, supporting a heavy crown. Despite the obvious signs of his age, his aura of authority blanketed them all.

The ninth prince found that his father seemed to have grown far older in his absence. His hair had turned snowy-white, his eyes were drooping, and his skin seemed to be hanging in folds. He looked as though he might tip over and collapse at any moment.

"We greet the emperor!" the princes chorused, bowing down.

"We greet the emperor!" The officials followed suit, after the princes.

"Rise!" With a whispered word from the realm of the king, the court convened. "State your affairs."

The officials each began to report on the various issues they were having from all over the land, as well as the steps they had taken to resolve those issues.

Whenever there was a question, the king of the realm would solicit the crown prince's advice.

Once the crown prince had spoken up, the second prince would immediately present his own opinion, often much at odds with the crown prince's, and the third prince would follow suit.

The three opposing factions tended to argue for hours and hours on end, with the king of the realm breaking any stalemates.

A simple question could mire the court for an entire hour, even two. The ninth prince shook his head, thinking about how inefficient the court had become.

An urgent disaster that had been reported required immediate attention, but it frequently took an hour of bickering before the three princes were all satisfied.

But even then, the princes didn't settle on a course of action. Over the course of the argument, more questions, problems, and conundrums would undoubtedly emerge, spawning even more arguments in the process.

The ninth prince didn't participate in the heated battle of words.

Perhaps many years ago, this court had responded promptly and efficiently to the many affairs brought up by the court officials, but as the king of the realm grew older and older, the court began to stagnate. All its actions were slow and unwieldy, as though it had likewise grown old with the king.

The king of the realm, in his old age, had largely lost control of his ability to manage the realm, but he didn't want to abdicate the throne immediately. As a result, he gave the three princes a permanent invitation to court under the pretext of learning from his judgment, but fundamentally for the sake of preserving the delicate equilibrium where the three opposing factions met.

Many years ago, the king of the realm might have been a wise ruler, but in his old age, he was using what he had learned over his long tenure to maintain his rule at the cost of his realm.

Everyone knew that fact, but no one dared to say it out loud—whoever exposed this scheme would surely be sentenced to death.

It took an interminable amount of time before the arguments finally quieted down.

Everyone was hungry and lacked the motivation to argue further; a recess was called so that everyone could go home and have a meal before returning to court for a second round of quarrels.

Before everyone was dismissed, the king of the realm turned to the ninth prince. "What are your feelings on the development of the south?"

The ninth prince strode forward, bowed, and reported, "The south is growing and expanding according to plan. Even in the poorest regions, all the citizens have adequate food and lodgings—all thanks to your wise governance."

The king of the realm nodded. "I heard you encountered some troubles along the way. Were your guards all slaughtered?"

The ninth prince's tone slowly turned weighty and despondent. "I encountered a group of assassins while returning home, your majesty, and... I almost failed to return."

The second prince frowned. "Ninth brother, didn't you say that you encountered a group of third-level beasts?"

"They were spurred by the assassins, yes."

The king of the realm's voice grew in his anger. "Who dares assassinate a prince of the realm?! Jing Heng, step out!"

The crown prince strode forward. "I'm here, your majesty."

"Were you aware of the assassination attempt on your brother?"

"I've just learned of it, your majesty."

"Take care of your brothers. I'll leave the investigation of this affair to you—find the assassin within seven weeks."

The ninth prince frowned. The fact that the king of the realm hadn't pressed him for details and was handing the whole affair to the crown prince meant that he wasn't invested in this case.

This wasn't an outcome the ninth prince desired.

"Your majesty, the assassins have all been killed."

"Indeed? By whom?"

"By a man I've since taken as my master, your majesty."

The third prince snorted. "A ridiculous claim. What could a country bumpkin teach a prince?"

The ninth prince ignored the third prince's words. Before the third prince could change the topic of conversation, the ninth prince continued, "This sword was under the possession of the assassins."

The ninth prince retrieved Wang Jian's sword from within his robes.

Even before the sword was unsheathed, everyone present could sense the thick layer of killing intent emanating from it, so strong that the closest officials were turning pale.

The crown prince's brows furrowed. "Such dense killing intent could only have been produced by the blades of the Wang clan."

The third prince snorted. "Nonsense! Who can confirm the provenance of this sword?"

Despite his words, the moment the sword was revealed, his forehead had begun beading with sweat.

The crown prince turned to the king. "Your majesty, to identify whether this sword indeed belongs to the Wang clan, I motion to summon the Wang clan head."

The king of the realm nodded and commanded, "Summon the Wang clan head!"

The Wang clan head quickly made his way over to the court, where he confirmed the blade's origins. "This is indeed a Wang blade, though I'm confused as to how it ended up in the ninth prince's hands."

The ninth prince's eyes narrowed. "Because the assassin is from the Wang clan!"

The Wang clan head replied, "You mean to claim that the assassin was the bladewielder of the Wangs, Wang Jian?"

"Who else?"

The ninth prince sensed that something was wrong; the Wang clan head was far too leisurely about this accusation.

The Wang clan head shook his head and replied sorrowfully, "You must be mistaken, ninth prince. Wang Jian perished in his sleep a few days ago."

#### Chapter 646: A Courtly Fiasco

"What?!" The entire court was in an uproar.

The king of the realm asked, "What happened? How did he suddenly die? Why was there no news about this from the Wang clan?"

Right after the ninth prince claimed that the Wang clan's Wang Jian was the assassin, the Wang clan head announced that Wang Jian had died at home. Did he think everyone present was an idiot?

The Wang clan head sighed and clutched Wang Jian's blade tightly in his hands. Gritting his teeth, he called out, "Wang Jian was poisoned to death! I'm enraged and heartbroken at the death of my nephew—they'll fear the retribution of the Wang clan!"

The third prince sighed. "What a pity! I could hardly have expected the Wang bladewielder would die so suddenly..."

The ninth prince snorted. "This is farcical. With Wang Jian's strength, how could he have died in the Wang manor? Why was there no news of his death beforehand? Do you dare present the corpse to court so that his identity can be determined?"

The third prince retorted coldly, "Ninth brother, you're asking for far too much. Do you intend to dishonor Wang Jian so flagrantly as to reveal his corpse to one and all?"

The Wang clan head added, "To preserve the Wang clan's name, we've chosen not to publicize the death of our bladeswielder. Even among the clan, very few know of Wang Jian's death. It would be an embarrassment for the world at large to know that we couldn't even protect our own bladeswielder."

Suddenly, as though he had just realized something, the third prince called out, "Ah, I understand now! No wonder the ninth prince's unknown master could have defeated the renowned bladeswielder of the Wang clan—he had to have been a fake!"

The crown prince chuckled coldly. "I'm just wary that the person who died in the Wang manor wasn't Wang Jian, but rather an innocent."

The head of the Wang clan lifted his head up high. "What are you implying, crown prince? Don't you think the Wang clan can recognize its own?"

The crown prince strode forward. "Indeed, only the Wang clan knows whether this is truth or deception."

"Crown prince, you make it sound as though the Wang clan's trying to hoodwink his majesty with a fake corpse! We know nothing of the ninth prince's attempted assassination. Even if the killer were Wang Jian, he surely did so of his own accord. The Wang clan cannot be held responsible."

The crown prince sighed. "What a pity for Wang Jian! All his life, he killed and bled for the Wang clan—but in death, the Wang clan is severing all their connections with him. A pitiful dog, surely?"

The Wang clan head gritted his teeth, but he didn't dare contradict the crown prince.

However, the third prince did. "Eldest brother, whatever could you mean? We still can't be confident that the mastermind behind the ninth prince's assassination attempt was Wang Jian. Do you have evidence to back up your claims?"

The crown prince bowed toward the king of the realm. "Your majesty, I will surely do my best to investigate the assassination attempt directed at my ninth brother. To do anything else would be to invite ruin and disrepute to the court. If the mastermind strikes again, their next target might not be the ninth prince—perhaps they might strike at me, or even at you, your majesty!"

The second prince folded his arms. "Eldest brother, do you mean to suggest that there are people plotting a coup?"

The third prince turned to the king and bowed as well. "Your majesty, I agree that there is a pressing need to resolve this matter to its fullest extent and to cleanse the Wang clan's tarnished name. I am likewise willing to devote my attention to this case."

The crown prince hurriedly added, "Your majesty, I assure you that I won't let the mastermind behind this deed go unpunished."

The king of the realm nodded. "I'm very pleased by both princes' willingness to help out their brother. I leave the investigation in your hands."

"Yes, your majesty," the crown and third princes said simultaneously. They glanced at each other, and a spark seemed to ignite in the air between them.

The Wang clan head's neck was already beading with sweat. He requested, "Your majesty, may I bring this sword back to my clan? This is the Wang clan's sword, after all, and it had once been Wang Jian's possession. I think his parents would be very happy to see it returned to their son."

The king of the realm replied indolently, "Since it belongs to the Wang clan, the Wang clan may certainly reclaim it."

The Wang clan head nodded repeatedly. "Thank you, your majesty, for your benevolence."

Before he could finish, however, the king of the realm's half-closed eyes suddenly shot open. He stared coldly at the Wang clan head, and the temperature of the air in the court suddenly seemed to fall.

"You may bring the blade back this once, but if it ever appears in front of me again—then it shall become imperial property."

Upon sensing the king of the realm's jaw-dropping authority and strength, the Wang clan head's legs turned to jelly. He knelt down on the ground, his head pressed against the floor. "Yes, your majesty!"

The king of the realm continued, "The court's hunt begins in two days. Princes, prepare to participate. Ninth prince, I believe you're old enough to participate in this year's hunt as well."

The ninth prince excitedly bowed. "Yes, your majesty!"

The implication was that the king of the realm had deemed him of age.

The king continued, "Have this master of yours accompany you at that time. I'll see if he's qualified to be the master of a prince."

"Yes, your majesty."

"Very well. Court dismissed. How old I'm getting—even half a day's worth of court is starting to be too much for me to handle."

The officials of the court and gathered princes all bowed as they watched the king of the realm depart.

As the ninth prince strode out of court, the third prince commented acidly from behind, "That country bumpkin you call your teacher has no place being the master of a prince, not even of an inadequate one like you. If you don't want an accident to happen during the hunt, you'd best avoid bringing him with you."

The ninth prince looked back at the third prince. "Thank you for your advice, third brother, but I have my own plans. I hope you'll be more careful in the future."

The third prince's eyes went round. "What do you mean?!"

The crown prince laughed as he too stepped out of court, his hands behind his back. "Do you intend to keep bullying our ninth brother, third brother? Aren't you afraid the court officials will laugh at you?"

Upon seeing the crown prince walking over, the third prince snorted again and stalked off into the distance.

The crown prince patted the ninth prince warmly on the shoulder. "I didn't expect you would be so daring on your rare occasions at court. Excellent performance, ninth brother. I remember my first appearance at court—I was ten or so, and I was so scared I could barely speak."

The ninth prince laughed. "You must be joking, eldest brother. Your performance at court is still an example for us all. My tutors have often impressed upon me the skill and deftness with which you handled your initial appearance."

The crown prince waved a hand. "Ha! It was nothing worth speaking of. Ninth brother, I hadn't expected you would be so pleasant to speak to. We should converse more often."

The ninth prince smiled dryly.

"Tell me more about what happened. I want to learn more about your account of events so that I can help find the culprit."

The ninth prince recounted what had happened that fateful day.

To be frank, the crown prince knew who the assassin was—it was evident the moment the ninth prince revealed the assassin's weapon to the court. He simply didn't know if he had enough evidence to indict the third prince.

What he was about to face was a heated battle—whether the crown prince would be able to conjure up evidence more quickly than the third prince could get rid of it.

When the ninth prince returned to his chambers in the palace, he let out a long sigh. He tossed his clothes to the ground as he slumped.

"Why are you so upset?"

The ninth prince jumped up in shock. He should have been the only one in his chambers; even if any of the palace maids were to come by, they would only do a cursory sweep of the room before leaving.

Because of how low his status within the palace was, the palace maids even frequently forgot about his existence.

Who was this mysterious person in his chambers—could it be another assassin?!

Chapter 647: Repercussions of the Assassination

The ninth prince didn't panic; panic wouldn't help save him. Only a fool would dare to assassinate a prince within the palace, so whoever this stranger was, he might only be here to give the ninth prince a warning, or perhaps to kidnap him, but regardless, the ninth prince didn't think he would be in life-threatening danger.

As long as he were alive, he had a chance to break free.

When the ninth prince turned around to see the man behind him, however, he instantly relaxed. "Master!"

Zhang Lie calmly sipped his tea.

As though he had just thought of something, the ninth prince suddenly cried out, "Why are you here, Master?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him. "What, am I not welcome?"

The ninth prince shook his head. "Of course you are, but this is the palace!"

"So what? It's not a problem for me to enter the palace at will. The only place that poses even a little challenge to me here is your father's chambers—the rest of it might as well be my backyard. I even toured the palace before stopping here."

The ninth prince praised, "As expected, Master! Where else did you go?"

The moment he saw Zhang Lie, his face suddenly brightened and his eyes lit up. He rushed to sit by the table, looking more like a little rascal than a dignified prince.

"I had a look at your father's concubines, and, well, he has rather... interesting... interests."

The ninth prince smiled awkwardly; he didn't know how to continue this thread of conversation, or even if he should.

"Then, I went to your third prince's quarters and added a bit of pepper and the like to his underwear. While I was there, I heard about something interesting."

"What?"

Zhang Lie stretched out two fingers. "I learned two things on my tour. First, that your father's doing much better than he appears. At the very least, he's not at the point where he'll die within the next two or three years. I was almost discovered while skulking around."

The king of the realm wasn't stronger than Zhang Lie, but the fact that he was supported by the will of the world meant that Zhang Lie had to deceive that higher-order entity if he wanted to travel the palace freely.

If not for the king of the realm's old age preventing him from accessing all that authority, his aura would be able to encompass the entire palace. That would have allowed him to detect even a foreign mosquito's presence.

In fact, he would even have been able to expand his aura to the capital at large.

Zhang Lie stretched out another finger. "Second, the third prince isn't the one who wants to kill you."

That revelation shocked the ninth prince more than his father's feigned ill health.

Zhang Lie recalled what he had seen: the third prince, his face sullen, was returning to his quarters. The Wang clan head followed quickly behind him. The third prince beckoned him to a meeting room. "Wang clan head, are you dissatisfied with me?"

The Wang clan head bowed. "Of course not, third prince."

The third prince grabbed the Wang clan head by the collar. "In that case, do you hope for my death?!"

The Wang clan head glanced at the third prince calmly. "Why do you say so, third prince?"

The third prince countered, "Why did you send the Wang bladewielder to kill the ninth prince, that useless piece of trash?"

The Wang clan head replied smoothly, "As I explained in court, Wang Jian wasn't the one who tried to assassinate the ninth prince."

"Let's hope so, then." The third prince let go of the Wang clan head and returned to his seat. "You should know that the Wang clan isn't the only important clan in the capital; I think the Feng and Qian clans would be happy to work with me as well. After all, putting all your eggs in one basket isn't necessarily a good idea."

This was little more than an idle threat, however. The third prince could indeed work with the Feng and Qian clans, but it wasn't an opportune time to break off ties with the Wang clan. A partnership required mutual trust, and the third prince knew the Wang clan the best of the three major clans.

The third prince asked, "What do you think?"

"What do you mean, third prince?"

The third prince was so angered that he almost jumped out of his seat again. "Don't try to fool me—how do you intend to clean up after your mess?"

The Wang clan head smiled again. "Third prince, what mess is there to clean up? I haven't done anything."

"I know what you've done—as does my father, the ninth prince, the crown prince, and the entire court. The reason my father didn't punish the Wang clan right then and there is because the Wang clan's blades are still useful to him.

"It's only for that reason that my eldest brother wasn't able to do anything to you on the spot, but given his personality, he won't give up on this opportunity to weaken your standing in court. I'll be caught in the aftermath, too. You know how important Father's will is. If the crown prince comes up with enough evidence, you and I will both suffer."

The Wang clan head changed the topic. "Third prince, I think the most important thing we should focus on is the upcoming hunt, not anything else. Even if the crown prince were to make trouble for us, it would be after the hunt. By that time, don't you think we would have the opportunity to come up with evidence of our own?"

The third prince nodded. "You've thought about this, then?"

The Wang clan head smiled. "The king has made his stance clear. Regardless of how much evidence the crown prince comes up with, as long as we deny the charges, who can stand against us?"

"Be that as it may, things are coming to a head. I feel as if something's about to happen—no, that it's in the process of happening."

The Wang clan head bowed. "You're overthinking things, third prince."

"Why did you suddenly strike at the ninth prince?"

"I think he's a bit dangerous."

"Hoh? How can a piece of trash without any backing be dangerous?" The third prince simply had no idea how the Wang clan head viewed him as a threat.

"Isn't it dangerous enough that he was willing to oppose us so publicly during his first appearance at court?" The Wang clan head's eyes sharpened, as though they were blades that had been unsheathed.

"I keep thinking that this ninth prince will become a thorn in our sides in the future. Even now, he's in the middle of forging an alliance with the crown prince. Nipping this problem in the bud is the best way to proceed."

The third prince rejected the Wang clan head's idea immediately. "We'll have to pay too high a cost to do so. I disagree."

"If there's nothing else, may I depart, third prince?"

The third prince narrowed his eyes. "I hope you recognize just whom you're working with. Go—prepare for the next hunt. This year, I have to beat the crown prince."

"Yes, third prince!" The Wang clan head walked out of the third prince's quarters and was just about to leave the palace when he saw a man standing before him.

The man's hair was slathered with oil. He was rotund and porcine, and he seemed as round as a meatball. The fat on his face narrowed his eyes into slits. The Wang clan head immediately recognized this man as the fifth prince. His behavior, however, wasn't princely at all. He looked far more like a merchant instead.

"Ah, clan head Wang! I've finally found you." The fifth prince waved at the Wang clan head from afar.

The Wang clan head bowed toward the prince, then marched quickly away as though he hadn't seen a thing.

Many people knew that the Wangs and Fengs didn't like the Qian clan, and that intrinsic dislike extended to the fifth prince whom the Qian clan supported. Even before the battle for succession, the Wangs and Fengs were united in their distaste of merchant clans like the Qians.

The fifth prince called out, "Ah, clan head Wang, wait up! Don't ignore me!"

The Wang clan head continued on his way without turning back. "Fifth prince, please, be mindful of your actions. Who can say whether or not we're being watched here in the palace?"

The fifth prince plastered a smile on his face. "What could you mean, clan head Wang? Surely no one will report on idle gossip."

"Our alliance isn't public knowledge. Be more prudent!"

The fifth prince smiled again. His narrow, slit-like eyes glinted coldly. "Don't worry. I've bribed the nearby palace maids and guards. No one will overhear our conversation."

The Wang clan head shook his head again. "Better to be careful."

"I'm simply too anxious to speak to you. You did very well, clan head Wang—except for the fact that the ninth prince didn't perish. You didn't let him go intentionally, did you? Or does he really have someone in his employ strong enough to take down the Wang bladewielder?"

The Wang clan head sighed. "I was very shocked to hear the news. My plans all went haywire—I was planning to lay the blame on the third prince, and now..."

The fifth prince replied, "Well, we'll try again. The hunt will be an excellent opportunity."

"Indeed—I don't intend to spare the man who killed the Wang bladesword, either."

The Wang clan head narrowed his eyes as sword energy flared up around him. Someone who ruined his plans so completely had to suffer for what they had done.

If this plan had been a success, the fifth prince would have been able to take out the third—but the assassination attempt had failed thanks to the appearance of the ninth prince's mysterious master.

Thankfully, the third prince still needed the Wang clan's aid. If the third prince had pushed aside the Wang clan in a fit of rage, the Wang clan could have suffered terribly for this mistake. Only with the third prince dead would the Wang clan be safe from retribution.

However, this incident had forced the Wang clan and the fifth prince's hand. Regardless of the success of the assassination attempt, the Wang clan and the fifth prince were tied together.

If the Wang clan were to break the alliance off, the fifth prince could bring up the Wang clan's attempted assassination; similarly, if the fifth prince were to do so, the Wang clan could do the same.

The fifth prince continued, "I've been trying out the famous sword cultivation techniques of the Wang clan, but they don't seem to be anything impressive."

The Wang clan head smiled. "You've chosen the path of wealth. It's easy to accumulate wealth, but converting that into power is a slow process. Rather than quality, it cares more about quantity—simply surround your sword with whatever treasures you're willing to spare."

The more the fifth prince sacrificed to the sword, the stronger he would become.

The Wang clan head continued earnestly, "As long as you're wealthy, you can accumulate a whole sea of sword energy and defeat your opponents by exhausting their reserves!"

#### Chapter 648: A Complicated Affair

The fifth prince laughed gaily. "Haha, very well! What I have the most of in this world is money. Very well—I'll acquire my strength by accumulating as much treasure as I can!"

The Wang clan head continued, "Fifth prince, if there's nothing else, I'll be leaving now. If I spend too long talking with you, I might rouse the other princes' suspicions."

The fifth prince bowed toward him. "Farewell, clan head Wang."

The Wang clan head bowed and turned to leave. After strolling well away from the fifth prince, he turned to the sky. "Third prince, I understand very well not to put all my eggs in one basket."

Zhang Lie recounted the entire sordid tale to the ninth prince, who began to laugh in earnest.

"Amazing, amazing! I bet the fifth prince and the Wang clan head didn't expect to be overheard at all."

"What's your perspective on the matter?"

The ninth prince poured himself a cup of tea. "I wouldn't have believed it if not for what you'd witnessed—the fifth prince and the Wang clan conspiring against the third, and I, the unwilling sacrifice. The Wang clan is bold indeed to try to claim two princes with its nefarious plots!"

"They don't seem to care about any retaliation from your part at all."

The ninth prince chuckled bitterly. "You wound me, Master."

But it was the truth, after all. Compared to the Wang clan, the ninth prince had almost no authority at all.

Zhang Lie sighed. "I hadn't expected the Wang clan to betray the third prince. Indeed, Heijie Niu's information was incomplete."

The ninth prince thought for a moment. "I don't understand why the Wang clan head would want to break off that alliance."

The Wang clan head's sister is the mother of the third prince, so the Wang clan head is the third prince's uncle. They're bound by blood—there's no reason for the Wang clan head to defect unless something has gone seriously wrong. What could that reason be?"

The third prince's status and authority was growing by the day, and the fifth prince paled in comparison. The third prince wasn't the most impressive among the princes, but he was at least ahead of the fifth through eighth princes.

Why would the Wang clan give up such a promising candidate?

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "Related by blood? All you princes are related by blood, too—and that hasn't stopped any of you from trying to kill the others."

The ninth prince nodded, sighing. "Indeed so, Master."

His mood was rapidly sinking; indeed, it was too naive for him to be thinking that blood relations meant much amidst the royalty.

"To understand the relationship between the third prince and the Wang clan head, we can proceed in two directions," Zhang Lie advised.

"Which two directions?"

Zhang Lie stuck up a finger. "For one, we can ask those around him."

"Who?"

"The crown prince!"

"The crown prince?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "He's responsible for the investigation into your assassination attempt, so in some sense you have a partnership with him. I think he would be happy to answer your questions on this front."

"And the second direction of approach, Master?"

"You."

"Me?"

Zhang Lie folded his arms. "Don't you think it strange?"

"Do you mean to suggest that I might have an important clue in my hands, Master?"

"Indeed!"

Zhang Lie replied. "Why would the fifth prince want to kill you, the ninth prince? It would take considerable effort to do so considering your status, and it would cause significant trouble that could well be traced back to him. So why? Why would the fifth prince want to kill you? Could you be able to threaten him somehow?"

The ninth prince replied, "Doesn't he just want to make use of me to tether himself firmly to the Wang clan and to remove the third prince from the equation?"

Both of them could point to the other and implicate them in the assassination of the ninth prince, which would prevent either of them from betraying each other.

The ninth prince continued his cool analysis. "The Wang clan head and the fifth prince are devious and malicious, and they naturally know how to control each other."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "You're still too naive. They don't want to tether themselves to each other—they want to tether the other person to themselves and simultaneously have the ability to walk away freely without the other party's knowledge."

The ninth prince frowned. "You mean that both the Wang clan head and the fifth prince think that they can get away with my assassination scot-free?"

"It's certainly possible. Who knows? The fifth prince, working with the Qian clan, might be able to take down the Wang clan and the third prince—or the Wang clan may be trying to take down the fifth prince instead."

"No one can say for certain, and you're playing against people who are far more experienced in this game of courtly intrigue than you are."

The ninth prince nodded.

Zhang Lie scrutinized the ninth prince carefully. "If they wanted to tether each other to themselves, it would be better to focus on a smaller incident ather than the assassination of the prince.

From my perspective, the fact that they're willing to take that risk means that you know something crucial to their claims to the throne."

Zhang Lie's words left the ninth prince deep in thought. Did he really know something like that?

Zhang Lie continued firmly, "You surely know something that would deal the fifth prince and the Wang clan a severe blow."

The ninth prince continued thinking. What might that be? What did he know?

"Think carefully. Even the smallest of details might unravel the bigger picture—is there anything exceptional that you might have done?"

The ninth prince frowned. "But I haven't interacted with the Wang clan and the fifth prince at all recently..."

Given his position in the palace, none of his brothers were willing to talk to him, nor were any of the major clans of the capital willing to sponsor him."

Zhang Lie continued, "Not at all? Even an off-hand remark might make all the difference."

The ninth prince slowly shook his head. There was simply nothing he could think of, no secret that had been revealed to him, no errant conversation.

Zhang Lie let out a long sigh. It looked as though they wouldn't be able to make any progress on this front, then...

Chapter 649: Analyzing the Pieces

Zhang Lie continued questioning the ninth prince. "Why did you seem so upset on your way back here? Isn't it a good thing that you're establishing a relationship with the crown prince?"

"Master, you know what happened in court?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "I was right in the palace—what do you think?"

In his mind, the ninth prince praised his master for being so skilled at stealth that he could eavesdrop on the court's affairs without being caught.

He took a deep breath and replied, "I wanted to take down the Wang clan or to damage my third brother's standing somehow, but in the end, I was unable to accomplish anything. I saw Wang Jian try to kill me with my own eyes, and I even possessed the murder weapon—but even with all that evidence, the Wang clan slipped away scot-free. Doesn't that make me rather useless, Master?"

The ninth prince's intention was to remind the entire capital that he, the ninth prince, existed. He wanted all those who thought him useless or irrelevant to fix their eyes upon him, to see what he could accomplish.

Even the guard captain of the capital had ignored his presence and tried to detain his master in front of him; this was a memory the ninth prince could never forget.

And yet, despite all the evidence he possessed, he had managed to achieve nothing. He was still that useless prince of the past.

"Hahaha!" Zhang Lie suddenly began to laugh, so much that he was almost curling up into a ball.

The ninth prince frowned. His face turned dark. "Master, I know I'm useless, but there's surely no need to make fun of me so."

Zhang Lie continued laughing. "Do you know why I'm laughing at you?"

"At my uselessness?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "At your naivete."

The ninth prince was rather confused, so Zhang Lie elaborated, "How long has the third prince been in power? And how about the Wang clan? Do you think that one blade alone would be enough to topple these major powers of the capital?"

The third prince had been in power for five or six decades, whereas the Wang clan had been established centuries ago in this world.

"You, a child in your first decade—do you really think you can upend those powers whenever you want?"

That blade might mean a lot to you, but it's nothing more than a toothpick to these major powers. Even the crown prince might not be able to suppress the Wang clan without sufficient preparation in his own right."

The ninth prince lowered his head. "As expected, I'm useless."

"Your uselessness is as much an advantage as it is a disadvantage."

The ninth prince raised his head sharply. "How can that be? How can my ineptitude—"

"It's precisely because you're useless that the others will underestimate you, to give you opportunities where none might have existed before. How did you manage to end up with the Wang bladewielder's blade, for example?"

"Because you were strong, Master!"

"That's part of it, sure, but the more important reason is that the Wang clan underestimated you. They believed that the Wang bladewielder would certainly be enough to get rid of you, but you managed to subvert those expectations."

The ninth prince nodded hesitantly.

"From this perspective, then, do you really think you're still the useless ninth prince of before?"

The ninth prince, deep in thought, sat in silent contemplation. Zhang Lie didn't disturb him; he quietly had a cup of tea. By the time he finished, the ninth prince's eyes were aglow once more. "I might still be my useless self, but I have you, Master!"

"You do have me," Zhang Lie affirmed.

"My presence elevates you from an individual to a force to be reckoned with, one with an unknown level of strength, whom the other princes all know very little about. But there's something else, too."

The ninth prince tilted his head. "What?"

"You're not useless—the assassin's blade was crucial, critical evidence. The king of the realm simply wanted to leave the Wang clan alive for now."

The ninth prince sighed. "I should have taken that into account. In hindsight, it does make sense what my father would have done."

"It's precisely for this reason that even the crown prince might not have been able to take down the third prince and the Wang clan, but the crown prince would have been able to leverage that blade far more effectively than you."

The ninth prince stared thoughtfully at his tea. "I understand, Master. You think I should have handed this blade to the first prince."

"Very good."

The ninth prince smiled weakly. "If only I had thought about that point before the court session today."

"Actually, the best outcome would have been to hand the sword to the third prince, not the crown prince."

The ninth prince frowned as he tried to unravel Zhang Lie's thoughts. "In hindsight, yes. However, at the time, neither of us knew that the mastermind was actually the fifth prince."

If he had handed the sword to the third prince, the third prince would have understood that the Wang clan was betraying him. That would have frayed the trust between the Wang clan and the third prince, and the ninth prince would receive the third prince's gratitude.

"It seems as though you have much to learn," Zhang Lie surmised.

"I understand, Master!"

"That said, your choice wasn't particularly bad, either. Your most important task now is to establish a relationship with the crown prince. The other princes are all attacking the crown prince. He doesn't need an ally; he needs a spy. You're the prince who can best play that role, because the other princes are all on poor terms with him. He can't refuse your help—he needs you too."

"In that case, Master, what do you intend to do during the upcoming hunt?"

"Tell me more about the hunt—I don't know anything of it."

The ninth prince blinked in surprise. "Here I thought you knew everything!"

"There's much that I'm unaware of regarding your customs and culture."

The ninth prince began his explanation.

Every year, the king of the realm and his favored princes would participate in a hunt. Those who obtained the highest-quality prey would obtain an impressive assortment of rewards, and it would be an excellent opportunity for the princes to display their strengths in front of the king.

The prey of these hunts were superior-grade lifeforms.

The king of the realm was able to make use of his authority to temporarily help the lifeforms within the hunting grounds grow rapidly, so that they could easily ascend to mutated- and superior-grade.

These mutated-grade lifeforms would become the bottom of the food chain; peak-grade lifeforms stood at the top.

"Some of the hunting grounds even have legendary fifth-level beasts."

Fifth-level beasts—in Zhang Lie's terms, those were disaster-grade lifeforms! Zhang Lie was excited, but understandably wary. They were extremely rare even in the third and higher realms, or someone would have shared their existence well before Zhang Lie did.

Furthermore, the disaster-grade lifeforms of the third realm and up were far stronger than in the second realm. Even Zhang Lie, strong as he was now, couldn't take such lifeforms lightly. If they really existed, however, Zhang Lie didn't mind obtaining a few disaster gene fragments ahead of plan...

Chapter 650: The Start of the Hunt

The ninth prince sighed. "Unfortunately, the winner every year is the crown prince."

"Don't worry. You'll be the victor this time."

According to the ninth prince, there was no need to hand over the entire lifeform as proof that it had been hunted; only the head was enough.

Zhang Lie's lips curled up in a smile. In that case, he would be able to fill up essentially all his gene fragments during this hunt.

"Master, my father wants to meet you during the hunt. Will that be alright with you?"

"Very well."

The ninth prince nodded.

Zhang Lie put both hands behind his head and leaned back. "I have to say, your quarters are the worst ones in the palace. I suppose I'll have to make do for a few days, just in case anything happens to you."

The ninth prince was overjoyed. "I'll have a room prepared for you immediately, Master!"

There were no maids around this part of the palace, and the ninth prince had personally fixed his roof when it needed fixing. Indeed, he did all the chores around his quarters.

Was this the due treatment afforded a prince? The ninth prince didn't mind; he had grown used to it since the past. While his mother was alive, she had been the one doing all the chores, and the ninth prince had learned from the very best. He even rather enjoyed doing these chores, because they gave him fond memories of his mother.

Meanwhile, the Wang clan head brought the killing blade back to the Wang clan.

"What do you think, Jian Mo? [1] I can't believe Wang Jian would perish so easily, especially given his talent."

Jian Mo hefted the blade, out of which killing intent surged. As his eyes gleamed, that killing intent suddenly shrunk back and disappeared within the blade. He inspected the blade carefully. "Wang Jian was killed in a single blow without being able to retaliate."

The Wang clan head frowned. "Did the king of the realm himself strike at Wang Jian?"

Right as he spoke, however, he shook his head. "No, it can't be. If that were the case, he would have taken down the Wang clan."

"Who, then?"

The Wang clan head sighed. "A man I've never seen or heard of."

"A foreigner?"

"It's very likely." The Wang clan head scrutinized Jian Mo carefully. "How do you view your chances?"

"There's no one in this world whom I, Wang Mo, can't kill." Jian Mo's body overflowed with killing intent so strong and so condensed that it seemed to waft up from his body, forming a demonic sword behind his back.

Even the Wang clan head had a momentary look of fear. The man in front of him, who was known as Jian Mo and whose given name was Wang Mo, had been the previous bladewielder of the Wang clan. While he was active, the name of the Wang clan had soared to especially great heights, striking fear in all its enemies.

The Wang clan head's eyes narrowed. "Someone who dares kill a Wang bladeswielder cannot go unpunished. I'll leave you to reclaim the ninth prince and his master's heads."

"As you know, no prey has ever been able to escape my clutches."

As the hunt drew near, Zhang Lie and the ninth prince headed toward the designated location. Hills stretched out as far as the eye could see, and a strange power seemed to permeate the air.

This power was a manifestation of natural law, but Zhang Lie's strength hadn't developed to the extent that he would be able to do anything more than sense it—for the moment, he wouldn't be able to understand the foreign power deeply.

The royal hunt was so massive an affair that the princes, their aides, the court officials, and the support staff combined constituted thousands of men. The king of the realm, however, didn't make an appearance. He remained ensconced in a golden tent.

Each of the princes brought their own followers. The crown prince had so many they could have doubled as a military battalion; apparently, he would be simultaneously participating in the hunt and guarding the king of the realm.

The second prince arrived with the Jindao clan. This was the first time Zhang Lie had met them; they were all dressed in golden armor and equipped with golden blades. [2]

They seemed strong, but Zhang Lie couldn't help finding them rather vulgar and ostentatious given their get-up. Ignoring their outer appearance, however, they did seem to be relatively strong. Quite a few among their fighters were at a peak- or post-peak-grade level of strength.

The third prince came along with his own guards and the Wang clan. Every member of the Wang clan was equipped with a sword. One person in particular caught Zhang Lie's attention; the moment he appeared, he had been shooting death glares at Zhang Lie as though there were some great enmity between them. His body was wreathed in killing intent, so strong he had to have butchered countless humans to get to this point.

From him, Zhang Lie sensed a familiar aura, one much like Wang Jian's—the bladeswielder who had stepped down the wrong path in his pursuit of the sword. The man in front of him was even further off-track than Wang Jian, so much so that Zhang Lie was surprised he was still a man rather than a demon.

The third prince told Jian Mo, "I'm very surprised the Wang clan was willing to spare you for such an occasion. Though seeing as you've been glancing at my ninth brother's direction, I suppose they have an ulterior motive for doing so."

Jian Mo laughed. "You're overthinking things, prince. I am ever your aide."

The third prince snorted. "I care not for the Wang clan's plans. Don't you cause trouble for me—and don't forget what his majesty said. This is the Wang clan's final chance."

Jian Mo lowered his head. "I understand, prince."

This was the first time Zhang Lie had seen the fourth prince. His features were rough, his dialect vulgar. He held a great polearm in his hands.

If the third prince were a sword, he was a polearm, fierce, unbridled, and untamed. Behind him were the men of the Feng clan.

The fourth prince glanced in the third prince's direction. "To think the Wang clan has sent Jian Mo. I wonder who they're trying to kill? Do you think you have the skill to stop him?"

The final question was directed at the one-armed bodyguard standing by his side, who glared at Jian Mo with hatred in his eyes. "He was the one who chopped my other arm off."

"No, then?"

The one-armed bodyguard's voice was hoarse, as though his throat had been scraped raw. "Ten years ago, I wouldn't have been able to block his blows. Ten years hence, he will not be able to block mine."

Of all the princes, the fifth was the most gaudy by far. He was draped in satins and silks, gold and silver, jewels and gems. He gave off a palpable aura—a clear sign that he had made progress down the Wang clan's path of strength-through-wealth.

Behind him was a large group of guards, decked out much like the Jindao with gem-studded golden armor and blades. The fifth prince might not be particularly strong, but his showmanship made up for what he lacked.

When he saw Jian Mo in the third prince's retinue, he almost laughed out loud. It looked as though the Wang clan head had truly been annoyed by Wang Jian's death...