

U. Warlord 651

Chapter 651: Meeting the King of the Realm

This was also Zhang Lie's first time seeing the sixth prince. Compared to the other princes, he didn't stand out. Behind him stood members of the Yinlian. [1] The Yinlian were humanoid bugs with silver carapaces. Their four arms were like scythes, and their beady eyes stared around them.

The seventh prince was pale and stick-thin.

Had Heijie Niu lied to Zhang Lie? The seventh prince didn't seem at all a competitor to the other princes—no, he was completely out of his element.

But only when Zhang Lie saw the eighth prince did he understand why Heijie Niu had claimed that the seventh prince had redeeming features, because the eighth prince had absolutely none. He was so weak and frail that he tottered even as he walked, as though he could be blown away by a strong gust of wind.

Two huge eyebags made him look like a panda, and only his presence could make the seventh prince seem like an acceptable candidate. It looked as though he was clear-headed about his prospects of becoming the king of the realm and had long since given in to hedonism.

Zhang Lie became even more curious about the Zijing, who had chosen to sponsor such a useless prince.

Even the ninth prince, who had nothing to his name, would have been a better choice. Anyone could see that the ninth prince was far more excellent a candidate than the eighth in anything but age.

The princes trailed in, one by one. The prince with the smallest retinue was, as expected, the ninth prince. He came with no one but Zhang Lie, who brought White, Whiter, and Red Comet with him.

Zhang Lie noticed quite a few pairs of eyes looking in his direction, and Heijie Niu waved an arm when Zhang Lie glanced his way.

The fourth prince considered, "I heard the ninth prince picked up a mysterious master out of nowhere who managed to kill the Wang bladewielder. What do you think of his strength?"

The one-armed bodyguard replied, "I can't tell."

"You, the top polearm-wielder of the country, can't tell anything?"

The bodyguard shut his eyes and didn't deign the fourth prince's question with a response.

Undeterred, the fourth prince continued, "What do you think of his chances against Jian Mo?"

"They aren't comparable."

"Why?"

"Jian Mo has reached maturity with the Wang clan's techniques, and no ordinary person will be able to block his attacks. I suspect I'm the only one in the capital with the strength to do so."

Zhang Lie had, without doing anything, managed to capture the attention of much of the princes and their retinues—just like a panda in a zoo. Everyone wanted to see what this man who could kill the Wang bladewielder was like.

Who was the Wang bladewielder? The hallmark of the Wang clan, the strongest of his generation—and yet he had been slain by a nameless fellow whom none of them had ever heard of.

The crown prince strode over. "Ninth brother, it's only been a few days, but your mood seems to have improved greatly."

The ninth prince smiled and bowed. "Greetings, eldest brother."

The crown prince looked Zhang Lie up and down. "Is this your master, then? I heard he killed the Wang bladewielder. Are you interested in becoming one of my guards?"

The ninth prince made a face of mock horror. "Eldest brother, I'm right here!"

The crown prince laughed. "Haha! It's just a joke, ninth brother. I have many a guard, but you only have the one master. I could hardly take him from you."

The second prince likewise came over. "I'm very interested in offering you such a position myself. You might be better served by doing so than serving as my ninth brother's subordinate."

The ninth prince bowed. "Second brother, my master isn't my subordinate."

Zhang Lie replied coolly, "I prefer being a master than a guard."

The third prince scrutinized Zhang Lie carefully. "Better than the trash from before, at least."

So too did the eighth prince. "And yet it's uncertain whether or not you'll be able to keep your position."

The sixth prince agreed. "Not everyone can become the master of a prince, even a useless prince."

The crown prince nodded. "Only a sage of the ages would qualify."

"Perhaps not," the eighth prince opined. "After all, he's not Father's get by blood."

The ninth prince bit his lips and refused to speak.

The crown prince frowned. "Eighth brother, you know such words are forbidden within the palace."

The eighth prince seemed unperturbed. "And we're not in the palace, are we? Everyone knows that Father hates this fellow."

Just then, a guard walked out of the golden tent. "His majesty summons the ninth prince for an audience!"

The princes all made way as the ninth prince and Zhang Lie entered the golden tent.

The realm of the king lay atop a massive golden bed, his body seeming half-paralyzed. "You're here, ninth prince."

The ninth prince bowed. Zhang Lie simply cupped his fists. He felt a wave of force wash over him, but he didn't respond.

Beside them, a guard called out stridently, "Kneel in the presence of the king!"

Zhang Lie glared at the guard. "I apologize. I'm suffering from hyperostosis, and I can't kneel down."

"You dare disrespect the crown?" The guard drew his blade.

Before a conflict could arise, the king of the realm spoke. "Enough. I understand that their worlds do not have monarchs. Is that accurate?"

Zhang Lie nodded coldly. That the Jindao, Yinlian, Zijing, and Heijie clans were able to move freely within the capital meant that the king of the realm didn't spurn outsiders.

The king of the realm asked, "What race do you belong to?"

"The human race!"

The king of the realm pondered Zhang Lie's response momentarily. "I've heard of them, but I don't know much."

"Allegedly, the worlds in which they're active are quite a few wormholes away."

"In that case, what do you hope to gain by traveling here?"

"Would you believe me if I said it was an accident?"

"There must be a reason you've stayed."

"I was shocked by the deep potential in your ninth son, and I believe he'll be a peerless king. I was unable to resist the temptation to accept him as my disciple."

"A peerless king? One superior to me?"

"It's only a matter of time."

"Haha, may it be so!"

"It's the truth," Zhang Lie pressed. At least, a fraction of it.

"What can you teach him? Strength and martial ability?"

"I can teach him how to kill the sons you've carefully brought up," Zhang Lie countered snidely.

The guards made to attack him, and even the ninth prince seemed shocked. However, the king of the realm only laughed.

"Very interesting. I'm curious what you'll do. Very well. I leave my youngest son in your care."

Chapter 652: A Prince's Master

"You should be worried about your other children," Zhang Lie suggested to the king of the realm.

The king of the realm glanced toward his youngest son with benevolence. "Learn well from your master. I'm too old to be able to protect you much any longer. I know the ambition in your heart, but I didn't want to embroil you in this mess."

Zhang Lie seemed unperturbed. "Such is the fate of royalty. You might want to free him from that fate, but others won't necessarily agree."

The king of the realm nodded. "With you at his side, I'm far less worried."

That was the end of the conversation. Zhang Lie waved at the king of the realm and the ninth prince bowed. The two of them then walked outside. "Master, just what did you and Father talk about?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him. "Didn't you hear? You were right there."

The ninth prince folded his arms. "Master, the two of you were clearly having a deeper conversation than I could follow. I still don't understand!"

"Think about it some more."

In the end, as the ninth prince harangued him, Zhang Lie had no choice but to be clearer.

"I've seen your father before."

The ninth prince seemed very shocked. "In the palace? Why didn't you mention it?"

"Not formally," Zhang Lie clarified. "Your father must have sensed me skulking around the palace, but he chose not to interfere."

"He chose not to interfere?"

Zhang Lie explained, "He doesn't want to expose just how much of his strength he still possesses."

"In that case, you mean that he's faking his weakness?"

"No—it's true that your father is getting old, but it's not as serious as he's making it out to be. The reason he called me over was to see what sort of person I was. If he could easily do so, he would have gotten rid of me—but he can't.

"As a result, all he can do is ask about my objective here to get a better sense of who I am and what I want. The fact that he's not revealing his true strength means that he's carrying out some plan behind the scenes, one more important to him than you.

"You were too weak to sense it, but the moment I entered the tent, he tried to force me to kneel using the authority of the king of the realm. When I remained unperturbed and refused to kneel, he knew then that I wouldn't be easy to manipulate."

That was why the king of the realm had prevented the guard from forcing Zhang Lie to kneel. He knew very well that Zhang Lie wasn't someone he wanted to—or could afford to—provoke at that point.

"Your father views you more favorably than I expected."

"What do you mean, Master?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "Did you think that your father didn't like you because he doesn't pay you any attention?"

The ninth prince glanced thoughtfully at him. "Master, do you mean that my father has been neglecting me deliberately?"

"He knows that he's growing old, so he doesn't have the strength to protect you. The only way he can ensure your safety is to ignore you and let the other princes underestimate you. As a result, you would naturally be freed from the battle of succession. However, your brothers don't understand

him at all. They believed that your estrangement was real, and the more idiotic among them even tried to kill you."

If not for the assassination attempt, the king of the realm might not have tolerated Zhang Lie's presence.

Zhang Lie laughed coldly. "In some sense, you have to thank the fifth prince."

The ninth prince's eyes revealed a turmoil of expression. He too had mistaken his father's intentions; in the past, he had always been a little scared of his father, as though he were just a stranger who had somehow taken pity on him.

The ninth prince chuckled bitterly. "Don't you think it's ludicrous that his caring for me entails that he pretend not to care for me?"

"That's the manner of royalty, after all. You'll understand when you're older."

The ninth prince laughed. "As though you aren't a king yourself, Master."

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "My kingdom is very different from yours. I don't have to deal with the same problems; he'd likely have gone bald if he weren't supported by the will of the world."

The crown prince ambled over not long after they emerged from the golden tent. "What did Father talk to you about?"

The ninth prince smiled. "He just had a chat with Master."

The crown prince seemed very shocked. "Father agreed?"

"He didn't disagree."

The crown prince scanned Zhang Lie up and down once more, finding him more and more inscrutable with every passing second.

Any master a prince took on had to be carefully vetted, and these masters uniformly had the highest pedigree in their favored field. The master of a prince might one day possess power beyond his station; were the prince to become a king, the master might naturally take on the role of a prime minister, ruling over the court from the shadows.

The relationship between a prince and his master was almost like that between son and father. Such a master would be the prince's greatest aid in ascending to the throne and supporting him once he got there.

As a result, the crown prince could barely believe his ears when the ninth prince claimed that a man he had picked up out in who-knew-where had been approved by the king of the realm himself.

The reason the crown prince had been such a favorite for the throne was because of his three masters, each of which possessed incredible authority in their own right.

The second prince overheard their conversation from afar. He smirked. "As expected, Father's growing old."

The crown prince had to re-evaluate Zhang Lie's standing; he wasn't quite sure how to treat Zhang Lie in the aftermath of this decision.

The ninth prince strode forward and spoke up instead. "Eldest brother, I have a question for you."

"What's the matter?"

"Is there a crack in the relationship between the third prince and the Wang clan?"

The crown prince frowned. "Whom did you learn this from?"

"No one. I simply felt that there was some tension in their relationship..."

The crown prince looked around him before he pulled the ninth prince aside. "Don't tell anyone about this, especially not the third prince. If he hears you, he'll give you a beating."

The ninth prince nodded knowingly. "It's just a superficial alliance, then?"

The crown prince shook his head. "It's hard to say."

"Oh?"

"After all, they're related by blood. Of course, that relationship might have grown tenuous, but it's hardly non-existent. The schism between the Wang clan and the third prince started in the previous generation.

"The third prince was disrespectful of his uncle, and the Wang clan head didn't much like his nephew. That mutual dislike shifted into direct conflict on the topic of the third prince's marriage. The third prince wanted to marry the woman of his desires, but the Wang clan insisted that he marry a daughter of the Wangs. This stretched the relationship between the two parties to an extreme."

Chapter 653: A Flick of His Fingers

"What happened in the end?" Zhang Lie asked the ninth prince.

"In the end, the third prince took no wife. Even now, he only has a number of concubines to his name."

In other words, the relationship between the Wang clan and the third prince had only soured gradually over time; it hadn't been caused by a single, abrupt event. However, while the relationship was fraying, it wasn't yet completely cut off.

Suddenly, as the sound of a horn rose into the air, the crown prince cut short their conversation. "Alright, it's time for the royal hunt to begin!"

The ninth prince bowed. "Thank you for your guidance, eldest brother."

The three of them strode back to the rest of the princes and prepared to set off, raising flags and banners representing each prince.

Zhang Lie asked the ninth prince, "Do you have a banner prepared?"

The ninth prince shook his head.

The royal hunt began with the ear-splitting boom of a drum. An imperial envoy called out, "His majesty expectantly awaits each prince's exemplary performance. He reminds all gathered here that this kingdom was built on the back of skilled warriors who cleared out a patch of safe haven, and..."

Each prince jumped up onto their respective mounts. Many of the princes had superior-grade mounts, whereas the crown and second princes actually had peak-grade mounts.

The two princes glanced at each other with frost and mutual distaste.

Zhang Lie asked the ninth prince, "Do you have any techniques for taming beasts?"

"Of course, Master."

"When we return to the palace, let me have a look at a few manuals."

Zhang Lie wouldn't need such techniques himself, of course, but it would be a different story if he could pass such techniques to Zhang Hanxiang back on Earth.

The kingdom of Limit controlled a large group of peak- and superior-grade lifeforms via Zhang Lie's disaster-grade mistmeld clam soulshard and Zhu's own mental compulsion abilities, but it would surely benefit from methods that everyone could use.

Red Comet whirred by Zhang Lie's side, giving off the aura of a peak-grade lifeform. The crown and second princes both looked askance at the ninth prince, shocked that he too had access to such a lifeform.

Only when the retainers for each prince had gathered neatly together was it blindingly obvious that the ninth prince had almost nothing to his name. The other princes all had dozens of people, whereas the ninth prince's party was composed of three lifeforms and two men.

Jian Mo continued staring at Zhang Lie, his gaze like two drawn swords.

The Jindao, on the other hand, were all focused on the golden tent in which the king of the realm resided. When the second prince coughed, they snorted and turned around.

Zhang Lie's face was a veneer of calm. Rainbow fog surrounded his body, giving him an ethereal appearance.

Not far away, the eighth prince yelped, "Hey, what're you doing?!"

Zhang Lie preferred to ignore trash.

The imperial envoy finally finished, "...in hopes that you will assist each other, valuing fraternity over the results of the hunt. I hereby announce the commencement of the royal hunt!"

The princes all set off at once, rushing into the forested area where the hunt was slated to take place.

At the same time, the rainbow fog erupted from Zhang Lie's body.

"What's going on?!"

Amidst the rainbow fog, a beam of sword energy shot into the air. Jian Mo slapped his mount, which jumped up into the air. At the same time, the other princes made their moves.

The first and second princes' peak-grade mounts bellowed simultaneously, temporarily stunning the other princes' mounts. A few of the weaker guards' mounts even collapsed to the ground.

The Jindao in the second prince's retinue shot toward the fourth prince, beheading their mounts.

The Yinlian supporting the sixth prince brandished their scythes, whereas the seventh prince's Heijie tossed out black cans that spilled an oily, viscous substance onto the ground. Any lifeform that touched the oil slumped over.

The Zijing standing by the eighth prince likewise made their move. [1] A purple, crystalline powder spread through the air, causing anyone who inhaled it to go into a rampage.

Zhang Lie laughed loudly as he rushed out of the melee with the ninth prince. Formless energy shielded him from any errant attacks and pushed aside all those standing in his way. Just then, a wave of sword energy tore apart the curtain of rainbow-colored mist and disintegrated whatever stood in its path as killing intent erupted from the man who had launched the attack.

"Jian Mo!" Everyone present stopped short. The concentrated killing intent that he had revealed made them feel as though a sea of blood and mountains of corpses were about to overwhelm them.

Zhang Lie met the fearsome attack with a smile, as though he couldn't sense the killing intent at all. Calmly, he stretched out a hand.

In the chaos of the melee, only a few people had been able to catch Jian Mo's blow in its entirety.

The crown prince shook his head. "The ninth prince's master is rather arrogant, isn't he?"

The second prince laughed coldly. "Trying to defend against Jian Mo with just a hand—risible."

Even the two of them couldn't guarantee that they would be able to achieve such a feat at full strength.

Zhang Lie's fingers tapped Jian Mo's blade in an explosion of energy. The impact produced what sounded like a sonic boom, as though the ground where Zhang Lie had been standing had just been bombarded by a collection of cannons.

The bystanders looked on in disbelief as Jian Mo and his sword flew out into the distance while Zhang Lie and the ninth prince rode gaily into the forests with their mounts.

The crown prince was agape for far too long before he began to laugh. "And here I thought the ninth prince's master was a clown—but it was me!"

The third prince smiled. "The ninth prince really has hidden his trump card well."

From a distance, the ninth prince turned and bowed to the gathered princes.

The second prince's face turned dark for a moment. "Could you get past this man if he were to block you?"

The Jindao by his side replied, "He's certainly strong, but no match for me."

During the commotion, the king of the realm had stepped outside his golden tent without drawing anyone's attention. As he glanced at the aftermath of the melee, a faint smile danced around his lips. "It's rather exciting this year, isn't it? They've begun to quarrel even before the start of the hunt..."

The guard standing outside the tent jumped up in shock. "Your majesty! Is something the matter?"

The king of the realm waved a hand at him, motioning for him to step back. "I'm not dead yet." His eyes honed in on one prince in particular, upon which he sighed. "I'm really getting old."

Subsequently, he clasped his hands behind his back and returned to the golden tent.

Meanwhile, Jian Mo flushed with shame at the fact that Zhang Lie had dealt with him with just a flick of his fingers.

Two decades ago, he had been the peerless bladewielder of the Wang clan, a honed sword that had never suffered any defeat. However, his embarrassing performance now—in plain sight of the princes and their retinues—would result in countless jokes made at his expense. Such an incident left him unbelievably furious.

Chapter 654: Sweeping Through the Forest

Had his blade grown dull after only two decades? No, it couldn't be—he was Jian Mo, the sword demon! Waves of killing intent poured out of his body, condensing as demonic apparitions that surrounded him.

The sensations he had given up after his retirement came flooding back.

Most Wang bladewielders died during their tenure, like Wang Jian, or descended into madness thanks to the large quantity of killing intent they were surrounded by daily.

Only a rare few bladewielders could survive two trying decades of slaughter and still retire safe and sound. These rare bladewielders would be given the responsibility of killing any future bladewielders who had descended into madness.

In the end, these bladewielders almost uniformly went mad themselves.

When a previous bladewielder killed a current one, the older bladewielder would frequently absorb the killing intent possessed by the current one, dramatically increasing the chance of the older one going mad himself.

Bladewielders boasted authority commensurate with their strength and sacrifice. They sought the peak of the sword willingly, knowing that they would have to suffer the accompanying mental strain that could easily overwhelm them.

If they were able to survive the two decades, they would be able to transmute that killing intent into sword energy which they could use to boost their own cultivation to incredible levels, but such a realm was accessible only to a rare few.

Those bladewielders who had survived their tenure would subsequently have to refrain from killing to augment their own strength, but how many of them would truly be able to do so? Most had long since been corrupted by the pleasure of killing.

Each task they received from the clan could well be their last.

Even so, despite these circumstances, a genius emerged from the heart of the Wang clan—Wang Mo, now called Jian Mo.

As a youth, he had been dazzled by the sword. Even from a young age, none in the clan could stand against him; he rose to the title of bladewielder by killing the previous one and claiming his sword, rather than waiting for him to retire.

Ever since he became the Wang bladewielder, he had never suffered defeat; no one could block his blade. He killed many, most at the top of their craft. The general consensus was that such a genius would be bound by the blade, unable to extricate himself from his position.

The stronger the bladewielder, the more likely they were to go berserk.

However, Jian Mo seemed to be the exception of all exceptions. Not only did he safely conclude his two decades of tenure, he never went crazy afterwards. Most bladewielders ended up being controlled by their blades; he truly wielded his blade.

The man whom he had been now returned in full force. He had a solitary target: Zhang Lie.

"Jian Mo, you've come." A one-armed polearm master stood before Jian Mo.

"If you don't want to die, scram!" Jian Mo's voice was as sharp as a blade's.

The one-armed man clutched the stump of his other arm. "My old wound is hurting again in your presence. I practiced the polearm for two long decades all for the sake of this fight, to avenge myself for the loss of an arm."

Jian Mo frowned. "Who are you? I'm not interested!"

"Whether you remember me is no issue; surely you remember my polearm." The man drew his polearm and hefted it before him, a blow that Jian Mo easily blocked. "Now I remember. You're from the Feng clan, aren't you? A cocky bastard who called himself the best polearm master in the capital, only to have one arm chopped off by my blade. You wouldn't have survived if not for your elders' presence—and you kept training anyway?"

The man snorted. "It's thanks to you that I woke up from my delusions. After my ignominious defeat, I dedicated myself to training. Now, I've truly become the master of the polearm."

Jian Mo drew his blade in earnest. "Is that so? Very well. My skills have grown rusty, so you'll be the first sacrifice to regain my strength!"

[You successfully killed a superior-grade blackwind wolf. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade blackwind wolf, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

After drawing away from the other princes, Zhang Lie and the ninth prince embarked on the hunt. Thanks to White and Whiter's keen senses of smell, they were easily able to find the lifeforms hidden in the forest.

The ninth prince clapped as he walked up to Zhang Lie. "Amazing, Master, you've killed another one!"

Zhang Lie rubbed his lower jaw as he pondered what was going on. "It's strange..."

"What's the matter?"

"I can't seem to control these genetic lifeforms."

His mistmeld clam soulshard couldn't take effect against them, almost as if—well, just like what had happened when he tried to control the beast tribe's tamed lifeforms in the previous world. Could the king of the realm's domain be strong enough to protect these beasts from such an effect?

A red beam of light darted around them as Red Comet brought back the carcasses of another few superior-grade lifeforms. The ninth prince cried out in amazement, "Master, with you around, we'll certainly take first place!"

They had barely arrived in the forest, but they had hunted down ten superior-grade lifeforms already. Zhang Lie had killed four alone, and Red Comet, White, and Whiter had killed the other six together.

Zhang Lie called for a temporary break, cleaned up the carcasses, and began roasting them even as the other parties tried to hunt down these lifeforms as though their lives depended on them for the sake of their respective princes.

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade blackwind wolf, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 21]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade blackwind wolf, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 22]

[For consuming the flesh of a superior-grade blackwind wolf, you received one superior gene fragment. Current total: 23]

"Come, come, have a taste! You're far too thin." Zhang Lie handed the ninth prince a generous portion of meat.

Zhang Lie: a disaster-grade lifeform

Framework: Foundation, Lv. MAX; Ninecarp Transformation, Sixth Form: River Dragon
Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (advanced), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (advanced),...

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 60; Peak, 10

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wyrn (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Mismeld Clam (disaster)

After their meal, they continued to hunt down more such lifeforms.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade wildwind leopard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade wildwind leopard, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade moonlit serpent. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade moonlit serpent, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade icestruck starturtle. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade icestruck starturtle, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

Any lifeform Zhang Lie encountered fell before him in a single sweep. Given the boost from his limit fragments, even a third-realm superior-grade lifeform meant nothing to him.

As for the mutated-grade ones, they started running away the moment they sensed White and Whiter's presence. The superior-grade lifeforms ran away from Red Comet, but by the time they could sense him, they were already dead...

Chapter 655: The Wang Clan's Betrayal

To Zhang Lie, superior-grade lifeforms were no problem at all.

The ninth prince hadn't participated in any previous hunts, but he had heard that mutated-grade lifeforms were the lowest common denominator around, and superior-grade ones were more common than dogs.

Nevertheless, it was still difficult to find a peak-grade lifeform. At the very least, despite Zhang Lie and the others having been in the hunting grounds for so long, they had yet to find a peak-grade lifeform, as though such lifeforms were deliberately avoiding Zhang Lie.

According to the rules set out for the hunt, a mutated-grade lifeform was worth one point; a superior-grade, ten points; a peak-grade, one hundred points. It would be far more efficient for Zhang Lie to hunt down peak-grade lifeforms rather than superior-grade ones.

Unfortunately, he wasn't even able to use his tried-and-tested strategy—to control these lifeforms and have them search for more of their own kind. Just as he was getting perplexed, Zhang Lie sensed a fight breaking out in the distance.

He and the ninth prince crept over to find the third and fifth princes embroiled in an argument. When he then saw the mountainous peak-grade lifeform's carcass between them, Zhang Lie understood the source of the conflict.

The third and fifth princes were fighting over the peak-grade lifeform's carcass, and their retinues had begun to fight. The men of the Wang clan and the fifth prince's guards were embroiled in the heat of battle.

The third prince's sword glowed with sword energy, which smashed down on the fifth prince's troops.

Zhang Lie turned around. "Ninth prince, didn't the crown prince claim that the relationship between the third prince and the Wang clan was fraying?"

The ninth prince nodded.

Zhang Lie smirked. "If the Wang clan suddenly betray the third prince at a critical juncture, do you think that relationship would snap?"

The ninth prince replied, "Of course! Do you have a plan, Master?"

"Heh—just you watch."

The third prince roared in laughter. "Fifth brother, this is your last chance. Leave now, and I won't kill your men."

The fifth prince stood at the back of his forces and allowed them to fight the third prince on his behalf. He replied calmly, "Who can say how the battle will go?"

The third prince shook his head. "Fifth brother, you know we're different. You've never liked swordplay even from a young age.

Meanwhile, I've been trained by the Wang clan since my childhood. Our father founded his kingdom on the basis of martial strength. He became the king of the realm because he was at the pinnacle of his power. As princes and successors, we have to emulate him."

The fifth prince nodded, drawing his sword. "Oh, I very much agree!"

The third prince laughed. "You, a swordsman? Haha! Do you fatty really think you can compare to me?"

"Let's test it, shall we?" the fifth prince replied coolly.

The third prince lifted his blade high overhead. The aura of royalty emanated from him as he swept his blade straight down. The fifth prince's aura of wealth merged with his sword energy and defended against the third prince's strike.

Strong as the third prince's royal aura was, the fifth prince's aura of wealth eclipsed it on the basis of sheer magnitude alone.

When the third prince found himself forced back, he cried out, "Y-You know the Wang clan's arts?!"

Just then, a flash of sword energy struck the third prince's chest from behind. Before the energy could strike his body, a thin barrier of light materialized into existence and nullified the attack.

Given the third prince's status, it was only natural that he would possess such life-saving artifacts. In order to protect his nine sons, the king of the realm had infused part of his own energy into jade pendants which he had handed out to them. At that crucial moment, the third prince's pendant protected him from the life-threatening blow.

Suddenly, the members of the Wang clan rose up and slaughtered the rest of the third prince's guards.

The third prince thundered in anger, "Betrayal from the Wang clan, then?! Betrayal of my blood!"

The fifth prince himself was rather shocked. He had prepared an excuse as to why he knew about the Wang clan's arts, not expecting that the Wang clan would reveal their betrayal so publicly.

They hadn't even mentioned a word of this to the fifth prince beforehand, but it was certainly a welcome surprise.

The third prince called out, "When did the Wang clan get in cahoots with the fifth prince?!"

None of the Wang retainers answered. Their eyes shining with a rainbow sheen, they sliced at the third prince.

The third prince snorted and swung his sword in a wide arc, slaughtering the betrayers—and leaving himself unguarded for the fifth prince's counterattack.

The third prince stumbled back, significantly wounded by the assault. He spat fresh blood out of his mouth. The betrayal of the Wang clan was a heavy blow, both spiritual and corporeal.

The fifth prince smiled. "On account of our fraternity, I'll end matters here. You're no match for me."

"Do you think you can overcome me?!"

The fifth prince shook his head. "You don't understand, do you? Your aura is meant to be a king's, but you're nothing more than a prince—and the third prince, at that. Above you lie the crown and second princes, and you're a fake king twice over."

"And so what?"

The fifth prince's aura blossomed. "On the other hand, my aura is one of wealth and prosperity. It can grow without extent—and given my fortune, my sword shall be peerless.

The third prince snorted. "Your fundamentals are lacking. No matter the strength of your aura, your sword will be weak."

The fifth prince began to laugh. "But as we've seen, money solves all problems. Regardless of how lacking my fundamentals are, as long as I keep cultivating my aura, my wealth shall make up for any other deficiency."

The third prince's guards had been suppressed. The members of the Wang clan and the fifth prince's guards surrounded the third prince.

The third prince sighed. "I had intended to demonstrate this sword technique on my eldest and second brothers, but it looks as though you'll be my guinea pig instead. Indeed, I can't underestimate any of my royal brothers."

The fifth prince smiled insincerely. "At this point, what can you do?"

The ninth prince was shocked by how affairs had played out. He was sure no one expected the Wang clan's sudden betrayal, but Zhang Lie only laughed at the sight as though he had anticipated it well in advance.

He turned and scrutinized Zhang Lie's expression. "Master, did you know this was going to happen beforehand?"

"More or less."

Frowning, the ninth prince continued, "Master, did you arrange this beforehand?"

Zhang Lie's smile grew wider. He was naturally the mastermind behind the Wang clan's sudden betrayal.

In truth, even before the hunt began, Zhang Lie had activated his disaster-grade mistmeld clam soulshard on everyone present—everyone save the princes, who were protected by the king of the realm's authority.

However, their retinues were unprotected, and Zhang Lie easily put them under his control. That was the cause behind the Wang clan's sudden betrayal.

Chapter 656: A Fruitful Collaboration

The ninth prince asked, "Master, should we save the third prince?"

Zhang Lie hummed. "It's up to you. Both choices will benefit us."

If they didn't save the third prince and allowed the fifth prince to kill him, the ninth prince would have one fewer competitor. On the other hand, if the third prince were to survive, he surely would strike back against the fifth prince and the Wang clan, miring the princes in conflict.

The ninth prince smiled. "In that case, I'll choose to wait and see what happens."

"Very well."

Zhang Lie gave him a meaningful smile. "The third prince might not need your support, after all. Look at his expression."

Despite being surrounded by the Wang clan and the fifth prince's troops, the third prince's expression was placid. He drew a sword from his back, a black, scaled sword whose hilt was engraved with a dragon's head. The sword let out the cries of a dragon, as though it were truly alive.

"This blade is called Zhanlong," the third prince introduced. [1]

As though he had suddenly noticed something, the fifth prince called out, "Retreat!"

The third prince waved his sword in a graceful arc. Sword energy erupted in the form of a gigantic dragon, sweeping over the men who surrounded him.

The fifth prince hurriedly defended with a strike of his own. As the draconic aura swept toward him, several guards strode forward and blocked the killing blow.

The fifth prince shuddered, his forehead beading with sweat. "I hadn't expected you would have such a technique, third brother. I'm truly impressed."

The third prince sighed. "I'd intended on using it against our eldest and second brothers—but you forced me to show my hand, fifth brother."

The fifth prince's eyes narrowed. "Even the Wang clan were unaware of this blade and this technique. Third brother, you're truly skilled at subterfuge."

"Ha! There's no one we can trust around here besides ourselves, is there? We're brothers by blood—but that hasn't stopped us from targeting each other."

"Everyone thought that you were developing a king's aura, but you were developing a draconic one instead! A masterful blow indeed—and one that almost lost me my life."

"The Wang clan had suggested the path of kingship—and solely the path of kingship. In other words, either I grew up to become king, or my life's cultivation would be worthless.

This was the source of perennial conflict between me and the Wang clan. Everyone believed that I didn't get along with my uncle, but the truth is more fundamental: I don't believe in the Wang clan's philosophy. Their path is too narrow and inflexible, and they would only have dragged me down. Fifth brother, I hope my experiences serve as a warning to you."

Cultivating a king's aura sounded impressive, but it was a far more difficult path than it sounded on the surface. Before truly becoming king, the third prince's cultivation would be significantly weaker than those of his generation.

Only when he had truly become king would his authority and strength soar without limit—but he needed that strength to become king in the first place.

"Stuck in this quandary, I decided to travel down a different path—I would cultivate two different auras simultaneously, focusing on the other one to give me temporary strength. Once I grew strong enough to claim the throne, I would return to cultivating the king's aura."

The third prince drew his blade of kings with his left hand, and his draconic blade with his right. The two auras melded into one, forming the visage of the dragon king.

"Thus, my approach. I have to say, I'm rather pleased with my decision. Cultivating two auras at once gives me roughly double the strength, after all."

Given the third prince's resources, it was straightforward for him to cultivate two auras simultaneously. For his draconic aura, all he needed to do was to kill draconian or half-draconian lifeforms and collect their blood, which he would use to nourish his blade.

For the third prince, the difficulty lay not in finding these lifeforms, but rather in doing so without being discovered by the Wang clan and the other princes.

In the end, the third prince had succeeded.

The fifth prince stepped back, thinking to retreat. The reason he had dared to fight against the third prince was because he thought that the third prince's cultivation was lacking—a king's aura was eminently unsuited to one who wasn't a king.

However, if the third prince had a draconic aura, matters were different. As the third prince had claimed, the fifth prince's swordplay was fundamentally flawed, whereas the third prince had all but reached mastery. In that case, there was no way the fifth prince could win against the third.

Zhang Lie turned to the ninth prince. "It's time for us to make a move."

The ninth prince continued staring at the confrontation.

"The fifth prince doesn't dare to fight with the third prince now that the third prince's secrets have been revealed. He'll have his guards delay the third prince with their lives while he sneaks away. In the end, the third prince will win this battle—but to what end?"

The Wang clan had betrayed him; the third prince no longer had a backer.

Zhang Lie struck.

[Fists of the Silent Sea]! Ripples of energy circled Zhang Lie's fists and arms. What seemed like a tornado crashed down where the two princes stood.

"Who is it?!" Neither prince had expected the presence of a third, stealthed party, especially not one who would launch a sneak attack.

Spatial fluctuations combined with water-attuned genetic energy in a humongous explosion that cracked stone and split the ground.

Their guards were blown away into the distance; the two princes were barely able to stand where they stood. Against such a frightening attack, all they could do was hunker down and shield themselves.

By the time the two princes reacted, the peak-grade lifeform between them was gone.

Considering the strength of that blow, however, the two princes only gulped, swallowed their saliva, and pretended not to notice a thing. All they had lost was a peak-grade lifeform, after all; if they were to give chase, they might lose their lives as well.

That said, it wasn't as if Zhang Lie would give them the chance to catch up. He had long since run off with the ninth prince.

"Did you get the peak-grade lifeform?" the ninth prince asked.

"When have I ever failed?" Zhang Lie replied cockily.

He chopped off the peak-grade lifeform's head and stored it inside his superior-grade potbellied-toad pouch.

On the other side of the forest, the second prince and members of the Jindao clan were currently meeting with a mysterious figure.

The second prince asked, "Are the preparations ready?"

The mysterious figure was draped in a large cloak that covered his entire body. "Don't you trust us by now? We've gathered all the peak-grade lifeforms together already. It's why we've snuck so many superior-grade lifeforms into the hunting grounds to begin with."

The second prince replied seriously, "We only have this one chance. I'll only accept success—not failure."

The mysterious figure turned to the Jindao bodyguard by the second prince's side. "The martial god of the Jindao, aren't you? #93 on the combat leaderboards of the third realm, supposedly with the power to destroy a galaxy—with him around, there's nothing to fear."

The Jindao raised his head proudly and countered, "You're one of the hundred strongest races too, aren't you? I'm rather surprised that you'd participate in this world's battle for succession, myself."

The Jindao clearly knew the cloaked figure's identity; unlike the Jindao, however, that representative was likely in the upper echelons of strength, perhaps in the top twenty strongest fighters on the leaderboard.

The mysterious figure smiled. "Lucky that we have different objectives, then—you the primordial starflower, and I the resources that this world possesses."

Chapter 657: The Jinghun Clan

The famed Jindao warrior idly murmured, "If you hadn't approached us, we wouldn't have known that your race were participating in this battle as well. Just what is your true objective?"

The second prince clapped his hands. "That's enough! We're all working together now—let's focus on achieving our goal. If you can aid me in becoming the king of the realm, I'll satisfy all your requests."

The mysterious figure asked, "Is it time to make a move?"

The second prince rubbed his hands in anticipation. "I can't wait."

The mysterious figure snapped his fingers, as though sending out a signal. Purple ripples of light emanated from his hand. The effect of the snap was obvious. Moments later, the howls of subdued beasts could be heard all over the hunting grounds.

Purple crystals grew out of the superior-grade lifeforms within the hunting grounds; their eyes took on a purple sheen.

In a hidden part of the hunting grounds, the peak-grade lifeforms that had been gathered together began to roar the moment they sensed the signal. Crystalline purple horns grew out of their heads, and their eyes likewise turned purple.

As he heard the echoing roars in the air, the second prince laughed wildly. "Roar and howl, you beasts! Your blood and flesh shall propel me to the throne!"

All the lifeforms gathered in the hunting grounds suddenly began to rampage, forming a massive stampede that shook the ground wildly. Even the air was vibrating, as though fireworks were being set off continuously in the distance.

The beast stampede rushed in one direction: the entrance to the hunting grounds, from which the king of the realm was located.

The Jindao warrior jumped onto his mount. "It's time for us to set off as well."

The second prince nodded and motioned for satchels of blood to be distributed to his guards. "Make sure you act properly later, you hear? Don't raise any suspicions. Now, set off—we must save the king!"

The sudden stampede surprised Zhang Lie and the others.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Zhang Lie's fist caused a geyser of water to erupt. The sea and the sky shook. Frighteningly strong water-attuned genetic energy, imbued with the power of space, swallowed up a huge wave of beasts in a tsunami.

Blood and flesh scattered across the ground, which had exploded into shards of granite and dust.

The will of the world's notifications chimed endlessly in Zhang Lie's head.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade strikebreaker leopard. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade strikebreaker leopard, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade demonic starlion. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade demonic starlion, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade brightsnow ox. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade brightsnow ox, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

Before Zhang Lie had the time to collect their carcasses, another wave of genetic lifeforms had emerged.

The superior-grade lifeforms in the hunting grounds were so densely packed that only Zhang Lie's personal farm boasted a higher density of such lifeforms.

The ninth prince, White, and Whiter rushed around the battlefield, collecting Zhang Lie's spoils. The ninth prince grumbled, "Just what's going on? Why did these beasts suddenly begin to stampede?"

Zhang Lie asked, "Did something like this happen before?"

The ninth prince retorted, "Master, given Father's strength, would he have allowed this sort of thing to happen in the past?"

Zhang Lie quickly noticed that the superior-grade lifeforms' carcasses all seemed to have a crystalline, purple growth. When he tried to pull out the crystals, he found that they seemed to have grown out of the lifeforms' brains.

"This is... some sort of mental manipulation?" It was somewhat like the mistmeld clam soulshard he possessed; the difference was that his soulshard was more like hypnotism, whereas these crystals were parasitic growths that physically controlled their targets' brains.

Zhang Lie smashed a crystal with his fist.

"The Jinghun race!" [1]

He suddenly recalled a name. They were among the top twenty races of the galaxy, and their name alone would cause a stir among much of the galaxy's races. They had risen up rapidly in strength because they had a special ability to control genetic lifeforms.

By feeding lifeforms a diet contaminated with crystalline powder, they were able to induce the growth of a crystal in their bodies that would eventually invade their brains and gradually gain control of their nervous system. As necessary, this crystalline powder could grow into a crystalline shard that would be able to manipulate these lifeforms' bodies directly.

The Jinghun were rumored to be unable to control intelligent lifeforms, whose brains were far more complicated to be subject to the Jinghun's powder.

Only this rumor saved the Jinghun from extinction—otherwise, the other races of the Milky Way would have banded together in an attempt to eradicate this threat once and for all.

"To think that some of the Jinghun have managed to sneak into this world..." That would be rather troublesome to handle.

Among the hundred strongest races of the galaxy, the top fifty largely had the ability to conquer a middle-sized world. The presence of the Jinghun here meant that there was something they wanted to acquire on this world at any cost.

The ninth prince shouted, "Master, another wave of beasts is approaching!"

"How troublesome!"

The water-attuned genetic energy in Zhang Lie's body frothed as space around him started to distort and fray.

Zhang Lie's fists rippled with energy. When he punched forward, that energy erupted and exploded amidst the beast horde in a torrent of water, sending frightening waves of energy emanating from the point of impact. A tornado of energy swallowed up half the beast horde in an instant, leaving nothing but bone and blood behind.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade starbreath tiger. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade starbreath tiger, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade amber dragonturtle. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade amber dragonturtle, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade dark ox. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade dark ox, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

The will of the world's notifications continuously rang out in his head. Red Comet whizzed through the superior-grade lifeforms, killing more with every second.

White, Whiter, and the ninth prince worked tirelessly to amass Zhang Lie's spoils, which had grown to the size of a small mountain. Zhang Lie stored it all in his soulshard with the wave of an arm.

The ninth prince, weakest among Zhang Lie's party, grumbled tiredly, "When is this stampede going to dissipate?!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "It looks as though I'll have to revise my strategy."

Zhang Lie had intended on killing all the lifeforms that came his way. That wasn't a problem, but he was now more interested in the beast horde's target, as well as what exactly the Jinghun were up to.

Chapter 658: Jian Mo

The Jinghun, by virtue of their natural talents, were troublemakers one and all. They had single-handedly provoked much of the serious fighting within the galaxy owing to their ability to manipulate and control others.

As a result, the other races of the galaxy had largely banded together against them, and the Jinghun had no choice but to lie low in the shadows.

The ninth prince asked, "Master, have you been able to identify something?"

Zhang Lie replied, "These superior-grade lifeforms aren't coming for us—they're just passing by.

Our opponents' objectives are clear. They're trying to get rid of all other living creatures in the hunting grounds."

The ninth prince's eyes widened. "The entire royalty, then."

"Perhaps not everyone..." Zhang Lie smirked.

"Master, you mean that this might be a manmade disaster?"

He glanced in the direction in which the lifeforms had rushed off, and his face grew alarmed.

"Father's in danger!"

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" Zhang Lie punched forward once more, using a technique with such strength it made the very air warp.

Waves of genetic energy pulped whatever lifeforms they came across.

[You successfully killed a superior-grade thousandeye serpent. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade thousandeye serpent, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade stargleam weevil. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade stargleam weevil, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

[You successfully killed a superior-grade deathbane butterfly. By consuming the flesh of the superior-grade deathbane butterfly, you may receive one to ten superior gene fragments.]

He hopped up on White and called out, "Return to the entrance to the hunting grounds! We'll uncover the truth there!"

The ninth prince rushed up onto his mount. Zhang Lie's words from before had changed his perspective on his father. Now that his father was in danger, the ninth prince couldn't sit still.

"We'll go save him!" Zhang Lie leapt over the carcasses strewn all over the ground as he headed toward the king of the realm's golden tent. The lifeforms behind didn't follow him; instead, they began eating their fallen comrades.

Zhang Lie frowned.

The Jinghun had clearly given the lifeforms three orders. The priority was to kill all foreign life around, the second was to devour their fallen comrades, and the third to rush toward the king of the realm's golden tent.

The third command was the objective, but upon arriving at the tent, the lifeforms would focus on carrying out their priority objective.

Zhang Lie was a little worried that the surviving lifeforms would grow stronger and stronger as they devoured each other, much in the same way that he had artificially "grown" disaster-grade lifeforms in his farm, but there wasn't time to worry about such matters now. His own priority had to be to check in on the king of the realm.

White and Whiter rushed forward with full force, ignoring the lifeforms behind them.

On their way back, they saw the third and fifth princes embroiled in battle. The two princes were enemies, but they had allied together to face the threat of these lifeforms. Their backs to each other, they fended off the beast stampede.

The two princes hardly had the time to notice them.

The ninth prince asked, "Master, shall we help them?"

Zhang Lie tilted his head. "Are you certain?"

The fifth prince had tried to kill the ninth prince, after all...

The ninth prince grimaced, but he replied, "They're still my brothers."

Zhang Lie snapped his fingers and had Red Comet zip toward the two princes, easily killing the lifeforms that surrounded them.

Zhang Lie felt that this decision would come back to bite the ninth prince, that the ninth prince needed to be more cold-hearted, but he did as the ninth prince asked. The ninth prince had to experience this truth for himself, after all.

Of course, his help only amounted to killing a wave of lifeforms surrounding the two princes. Whether they could survive would have to depend on themselves.

The third prince noticed a sudden red glow at the edges of his vision. He frowned and shouted, "Isn't that our ninth brother's fourth-level beast?"

"It doesn't matter—focus on breaking out of this mess first!"

With the last of their strength, the two princes eventually managed to free themselves.

After leaving the two princes behind, Zhang Lie suddenly smelled a concentrated stench of blood from up ahead. The ground before them was littered with carcass after carcass.

The ninth prince frowned. "Should we detour?"

"There's no need."

Zhang Lie rushed forward. Before them, superior-grade lifeforms formed a mountain of carcasses, numbering perhaps in the thousands.

Atop the mountain, at its apex, was a man with a black sword. Black, cloying aura surrounded him—killing intent made manifest. Where it combined with his genetic energy, it formed a whirlpool of black, reaching out to its surroundings with what looked like feelers and tendrils.

The ninth prince's face turned pale. "Master, that's Jian Mo!"

"So what?" Zhang Lie shrugged.

Jian Mo slowly raised his head. His eyes gleamed the color of blood. When Zhang Lie fixed his gaze on him, death stared back.

"I've finally found you!" The reason Jian Mo had unleashed such slaughter was in order to find Zhang Lie.

"Master, Jian Mo—Jian Mo's gone mad!" All the lessons the ninth prince had had on the Wang bladewielders came flooding back to him in a moment of intense clarity. These bladewielders could grow uncommonly strong by killing others, but many of them ended up being corrupted by their killing intent through this process, turning them into murder machines.

This was the fate to which Jian Mo had finally succumbed.

When Jian Mo slew the one-armed polearm master who had challenged him, his killing intent rose up once more. Then, however, he had still been conscious and in control; what had caused the madness to descend was the beast stampede.

Jian Mo had no choice but to slaughter the beasts that came his way, and the burgeoning killing intent that resulted was the last straw for him.

When Jian Mo struck, a black slash engorged with killing intent shot toward Zhang Lie. Those fighters who had weak wills or insufficient mental strength would likely be frozen stiff with fear—"Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade!"—but Zhang Lie wasn't one such.

A black serpent materialized behind his back, shooting forward with a punch of his fist. The serpent devoured Jian Mo's killing intent as it soared into the skies, striking Jian Mo's body with an explosion of corrosive energy and sending Jian Mo flying back.

"[Rune: Control]!"

Jian Mo was the only opponent that Zhang Lie had found even moderately interesting since entering the third realm.

Zhang Lie raised an arm into the air and sent the gravity and anti-gravity tablets crashing down by the monarch's side. Ripples of energy criss-crossed the space whose boundaries were marked by the two tablets.

Jian Mo, mad with killing intent, found the energy in his body rampaging with even more ferocity. Killing intent shot out of his body, tearing skin and flesh apart...

Chapter 659: The Beast Stampede

Jian Mo roared. Killing intent surged over his body, fusing his blood, flesh, and bones.

"Kill, kill, killkillkillkillkillKILL!" As he mumbled to himself, his killing intent sharpened once more.

From the ninth prince's perspective, Jian Mo was turning into some sort of monster. In the chaos, Jian Mo's body and killing intent melded together more strongly than ever before, transforming him into a monstrous lifeform.

Zhang Lie waved a hand to defend himself and the ninth prince from the blades of energy spawned by Jian Mo's killing intent, sending sparks flying into the air as the killing intent scrabbled to find purchase amidst Zhang Lie's defenses.

Jian Mo morphed into a black shadow that shot toward Zhang Lie.

"I suppose I'll have to get serious while you're in this state, won't I?" As Jian Mo pressed on relentlessly, Zhang Lie found his fingers starting to hurt. He retrieved a blade he had left unused for quite some time: Guicang.

As Zhang Lie struck with his blade, a formless aura enveloped White, Whiter, and the ninth prince and pushed them away.

Zhang Lie and Jian Mo clashed in a brilliant explosion of light. The aftermath of that confrontation scarred the ground, leaving wide gullies criss-crossing the battlefield.

Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed with rainbow light. Jian Mo, crazed as he had become, wasn't susceptible to Zhang Lie's mental compulsion, but his mind did freeze up for a split second as a result of Zhang Lie's attack.

That was all the opportunity Zhang Lie needed.

"[The Boundless Blade]!" Guicang flashed. Zhang Lie's blow penetrated Jian Mo's chest, and his accumulated sword energy exploded in Jian Mo's body and tore it to pieces.

Zhang Lie sucked in a breath and sheathed his blade again. "Let's go!"

The ninth prince, White, and Whiter, hiding by a corner of the battlefield, popped their heads out. "You've killed Jian Mo already, Master?" the ninth prince called out in surprise.

"Look at the battlefield—can't you see?" Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him.

The ninth prince was agape in shock. "Master, how did you kill Jian Mo so quickly? He was devoured by madness!"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "He's not as strong as you think. If he can't even control his will, do you think he can really control his sword?"

Could a swordsman manipulated by his sword be considered a true swordsman? Jian Mo was only intimidating because of his killing intent, and that killing intent didn't necessarily translate into strength.

The ninth prince laughed nervously. "You might be the only one around who can claim that, Master."

Zhang Lie leapt up onto White and continued rushing forward.

"We're almost there," he suddenly said, after they had traveled some distance ahead.

The ninth prince seemed confused.

"To the stampeding peak-grade lifeforms, right over there!" Zhang Lie pointed to his front, where they could all see a group of ten peak-grade lifeforms all charging forward in a certain direction.

The ninth prince was very shocked. They hadn't seen any trace of peak-grade lifeforms during their hunt, but there were ten of them right here!

Shock quickly gave way to fear.

"Fourth-level beasts!" the ninth prince cried out, his face turning pale. "Master, could the mastermind be controlling these fourth-level beasts as well?!"

"It's quite possible." After all, it was clearly unnatural for them to see a pack of ten peak-grade lifeforms all gathered together when they hadn't even seen one during the hunt.

The ninth prince's face turned ugly. "There are quite a few of these fourth-level beasts within the hunting grounds, and even fifth-level ones as well. If they're all under the mastermind's control, just what kind of forces will he possess?!"

"There's no rush. We'll deal with the ones here, first. [Rune: Resonate]!"

The image of a dragonturtle appeared over him as the four tablets revolved in mid-air. They crashed down in a square, surrounding the peak-grade lifeforms.

A black array spawned to life. The four tablets began to resonate, sending ripples of black energy into the enclosed space within, sealing it off from space and time.

The peak-grade lifeforms halted to a standstill. Zhang Lie leapt down from White. "[Shadow and Light]!"

His sword technique broke the spatiotemporal seal and left countless bleeding slashes across each of the ten lifeforms' bodies. With a snap of his fingers, the four tablets dissipated. The ten lifeforms fell to the ground, dead.

The will of the world's notifications chimed in his head.

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

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

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

After all, Zhang Lie had reached his disaster gene capacity in the second realm alone.

Given the additional limit fragments he had acquired from his foundational breakthrough and Potions #1 through #4, he might even have been able to take on ten disaster-grade lifeforms at once, let alone ten peak-grade ones.

By now, he had largely filled up his gene fragments in the third realm. He might not be a famous third-realm hunter yet, but his strength was far beyond what anyone could have expected.

After claiming all the peak-grade carcasses, they set off again toward the king of the realm's golden tent.

"We're almost there!"

By then, the tent and its surroundings had been ravaged by the stampede of lifeforms, but the king of the realm's elite bodyguards were barely holding the beasts back.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" Upon seeing what was going on, Zhang Lie made his move. An underworld river hurtled into existence, roaring toward the ground and decimating the beast horde.

The ninth prince waved and called out, "General!"

The general guarding the king glanced at the reinforcements in surprise. "N-Ninth prince?!"

White and Whiter were so fast, and Zhang Lie so adept at dealing with the obstacles in their way, that the ninth prince was the first prince to return to the king's side.

"Ninth prince, y-you're the first to return!" The general was particularly shocked that his body barely showed any signs of injuries at all.

The ninth prince asked, "Is Father alright?"

The general patted his chest. "With me around, his majesty shall come to no harm!"

Just as Zhang Lie and the ninth prince arrived at camp, a group of fighters could be seen storming back from the left. Upon seeing them, the general called out,

"It's the crown prince, the crown prince! Send an escort to bring him back!"

A group of elites rushed out of the beast horde and cleared a way for the crown prince.

When the crown prince returned to the camp and found the ninth prince present, his eyes grew wide. "Ninth brother? What are you doing here?"

"I've just returned, eldest brother."

The crown prince was covered in dust and grime, and he had been bloodied on the way back. His guards all boasted injuries of their own.

However, the ninth prince seemed entirely unharmed.

It was only reasonable that the crown prince was so shocked—the ninth prince was known to be a weakling, but he had somehow made his way back through the beast stampede unharmed and unscathed, arriving before the first prince himself.

If not for the creases in the ninth prince's attire, the crown prince might even have suspected that the ninth prince had remained in the camp all along.

He knew that the ninth prince had no capabilities to survive such a stampede by himself, so the only factor that could have made a difference was...

Chapter 660: The Golden Tent

The crown prince's gaze landed on Zhang Lie. Not only had Zhang Lie not suffered any injuries, his clothes weren't dusty at all. He seemed like someone who had just taken a walk in a garden rather than having escaped a beast stampede.

This sort of situation made Zhang Lie seem even more inscrutable.

Just then, the general asked, "Crown prince, what happened to the rest of your retinue?"

As far as he could recall, the crown prince's party initially had almost a thousand members. Now, there were fewer than a hundred left.

The crown prince replied, "The beast stampede happened far too suddenly. In order to rush back as quickly as I could, I only brought a group of elites back with me. Along the way, we encountered two or three waves of fourth-level beasts, and we ended up losing quite a few members of our party."

The general sighed. "How unlucky!"

The crown prince asked in worry, "Is Father alright?"

The king of the realm's safety would determine whether he could become the next emperor. He thought that there was a very good chance that he would inherit the throne barring any mishap, but if something were to happen to the king of the realm now...

The ninth prince replied, "With the general guarding the camp, how could something have happened?"

"In that case, ninth brother, let's make sure that Father's alright ourselves."

"You've spoken my mind, eldest brother."

The two princes arrived at the entrance to the golden tent, whereupon they were admitted.

"Father, we apologize for coming to your assistance too late."

The king of the realm lay in his bed, weak and tired. "I'm perfectly fine—my life hasn't been threatened, and you've all done nothing wrong. Come, enter!"

The king of the realm's face looked particularly pallid and ashen. As the two princes entered, he began to cough wildly, as though he were truly not long for this world.

Zhang Lie coughed himself, inwardly muttering about the king of the realm's flair for the dramatic.

The first prince replied, "Out of concern for your safety, Father, we rushed back as soon as we could."

The king of the realm replied hoarsely, "It must have been a difficult journey for you both."

The crown prince's eyes flashed with anxiety and tears. "I was so worried for you, Father!"

Zhang Lie glared at the ninth prince. Look at how good an actor your eldest brother is! He could easily have received an Oscar back on Earth—he's an actor in his bones, waylaid by the blood of royalty!

The ninth prince hurriedly stepped forward. "Father, I couldn't bear the thought of you being in danger."

Zhang Lie nodded. Very good—at the very least, he could keep up with the crown prince.

"Now that I've confirmed that you're safe, Father, I'm very relieved." Suddenly, however, the crown prince clutched at his abdomen.

The general grew alarmed. "What's the matter, crown prince?"

The crown prince gritted out, "It's nothing. I was injured on the way back, but there were more important things to worry about at that point. With Father safe, though..."

"Eldest brother, let me help you bandage your wound!" the ninth prince offered.

"No, no, there's no need."

Zhang Lie smiled to himself. He stepped out of the golden tent and shouted, "Imperial physician! We need the imperial physician! The crown prince is about to succumb to his injuries!"

The crown prince's forehead beaded with sweat. "No, no, I'm quite alright. It's only a minor injury, and there's no need to make such a fuss."

The ninth prince advised, "No, eldest brother, you need to be more careful! These beasts are cunning and vile, and who knows what sorts of poison and disease they might carry?"

The crown prince realized that he had taken his acting a step too far, and the ninth prince and Zhang Lie were taking advantage of that opening.

The king of the realm sighed. "That the two of you could return so quickly is all I could ask for."

The king of the realm tried to smooth things over, his eyes betraying his words and revealing that he had seen through everything.

Nevertheless, it was too late. The imperial physician was already making his way over. After inspecting the crown prince's injuries, he was subject to a murderous glare from the crown prince.

He coughed and stammered, "The c-crown prince's injuries are r-rather serious..."

The crown prince was still looking at him expectantly, causing the imperial physician to suddenly change his stance. "...but thanks to his strength, vigor, and youthful physique, he's already starting to recover. I'll write him a prescription to speed up his recovery and prevent infection."

The king of the realm nodded slowly. "Very well."

Only then did the imperial physician, his forehead beading with sweat, retreat. He glared at Zhang Lie as he stepped out of the tent.

The king of the realm's gaze landed on Zhang Lie. "You did very well. Even the crown prince suffered serious injuries, while you managed to protect the ninth prince perfectly. A reward is due, I believe."

The ninth prince lifted a hand to his mouth to cover up his smile.

The crown prince bowed and interjected, "Father, perhaps we should deal with the beast stampede first?"

The king of the realm nodded.

The general asked, "Princes, the two of you returned from deep within the hunting grounds. Were you able to discover any reason for the stampede?"

The reason the general hadn't asked this question earlier was because he didn't expect the ninth prince to know anything. On the other hand, the crown prince, who had once quelled a rebellion, had some experience dealing with this sort of affair.

The crown prince shook his head. "All I can say is that this beast stampede happened so suddenly and in such great numbers that it was likely a manmade incident, but I have no proof of such."

The ninth prince added, "It was the Jinghun clan."

The king of the realm frowned. "The Jinghun clan!"

"Do you have any evidence, ninth brother?"

The ninth prince shook his head. "I learned of the matter and their involvement from my master."

The king of the realm turned to Zhang Lie. "Indeed?"

Zhang Lie bowed. "Your majesty, I am confident in my hypothesis."

"And what do these Jinghun have to do with the beast stampede?"

"They're able to control genetic lifeforms—the beasts that you refer to. The third- and fourth-level lifeforms I slew possessed crystalline growths that serve as evidence for their involvement."

The ninth prince took out a translucent shard of crystal, which he had claimed from the carcasses.

"These crystals were introduced into these lifeforms' bodies by the Jinghun, who subsequently induced their growth and masterminded this stampede."

The king of the realm asked, "Can we break them free of this compulsion?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Only the Jinghun clan can control these crystals. Unless you destroy the crystalline growth on these lifeforms' bodies or kill the lifeforms themselves, you can't break them free of the compulsion. Fortunately, the Jinghun can't control lifeforms that are too intelligent."

The crown prince understood the subtext behind Zhang Lie's words. "In that case, you suspect that there are Jinghun within the hunting grounds. Are you able to find them?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Unfortunately, that's outside of my abilities."

Zhang Lie wanted to watch the show unfold, after all.