

U. Warlord 661

Chapter 661: Deviation

The king of the realm pressed Zhang Lie for more details. "What else do you know?"

Zhang Lie made something up. "I expect—and I'm sure you share this guess, your majesty—that one of the princes is behind this stampede—"

Before Zhang Lie could finish, a guard called from outside the tent, "The second prince requests an audience!"

The king of the realm replied, "Send him in."

The second prince was covered in dust and grime, and there were visible wounds over his body. He knelt immediately as he entered. "Father, I rushed straight back worried that something had happened, but it seems I was still too late. Please punish me, Father!"

The king of the realm shook his head. "There's no issue—I'm right here."

"I'm very relieved, Father."

Just then, the second prince clutched his abdomen, an expression of pain marring his face.

"I suffered wounds on the way back, but I was so concerned for your safety, Father, that I neglected to tend to them. Now—"

The crown prince's lips twitched, as though he were experiencing a bout of *deja vu*.

Zhang Lie nudged the ninth prince. "Look at your two older brothers—learn from their antics!"

The king of the realm sighed. "Send for the imperial physician and have him remain here, this time! The princes will need medical attention after braving a beast stampede—for now it seems as though there's only been abdominal pain, but if any of the princes were to come in on stretchers..."

Zhang Lie was about to leave the tent when the crown prince gestured that he would be the one to do it this time.

He rushed out of the tent and called urgently, "Summon the imperial physician! My second brother's about to perish! His injuries are life-threatening!"

The second prince's mouth began to spasm.

The imperial physician rushed over and examined the second prince's injuries. His forehead began to bead with sweat. "...the second prince is grievously wounded, but...thanks to his strength, vigor, and youthful physique, he's already starting to recover..."

The king of the realm didn't want to listen to the nonsense any longer. "Enough. Have his wounds bandaged and prepare some medicine for him."

After the second prince left, the king of the realm sighed, "I'm more worried about the rest of your brothers."

The crown prince consoled him, "Father, there's no need to worry. The princes are all guarded by the will of the world, and they aren't weak. They'll at least be able to protect themselves."

"Let's hope so, then." The king of the realm paused. "If there's nothing else, let's end this audience here. I'm a little tired."

As they walked out of the tent, the crown prince began, "I intend to help shore up our defenses. The imperial troops should make their way over in a matter of moments to clean up this mess. What are your plans?" He turned expectantly to the ninth prince and Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie glanced at the ninth prince before replying, "We'll join you."

Neither the king of the realm nor the crown prince had any intention to retreat. Behind them lay the kingdom at large; if these beasts were to escape the hunting grounds, it would spell doom for the citizens whom they protected.

There were far too many superior- and peak-grade lifeforms for the cities of the kingdom to handle on their own, so unless it was a matter of life or death, the royalty wouldn't retreat.

The crown prince frowned. "Why isn't Father retreating himself?"

The general sighed. "I advised his majesty to retreat, but he insisted on seeing all his sons safe and sound first."

The second prince, who had just been bandaged, left the medical tent just in time to see the others.

"I intend on guarding the perimeter. Shall we head there together?"

The crown prince retorted, "How about your injuries? They seemed rather serious..."

The second prince narrowed his eyes. "Before I headed to Father's tent, I heard that you were on your deathbed, eldest brother. Aren't your injuries serious?"

Zhang Lie and the ninth prince smirked as the crown prince smiled awkwardly. "The imperial physician is particularly skilled, and I'm alright now."

The two princes' verbal battle awed Zhang Lie and the ninth prince.

To his surprise, Zhang Lie noticed that the second prince's troops were largely intact. As far as he knew, the second prince was weaker than the crown prince, so what was the factor that had preserved his troops?

Zhang Lie's gaze landed on a masked Jindao fighter, from whom he could sense the aura of the strong. That man would surely be a challenge to face.

The masked Jindao fighter, sensing Zhang Lie's gaze, looked back at him and nodded his head slightly.

Another wave of superior- and peak-grade lifeforms approached them all.

"Everyone, charge! We protect his majesty!" the crown prince shouted, drawing his sword.

The crown and second princes charged forward with their retainers, followed by Zhang Lie and the ninth prince. Zhang Lie nodded at their strength; both princes had surpassed the level of a peak-grade lifeform. Zhang Lie could see that the second prince was holding back, but the one who was hiding even more of his strength was the masked Jindao fighter.

Zhang Lie himself was participating in the defense. Water-attuned genetic energy wrapped around his palm and wrist. As he punched forward, he infused the power of space into the mix and produced high-energy explosions in the midst of the beast horde, annihilating an entire group of superior-grade lifeforms in one fell swoop.

As the defense against the beast stampede dragged on, the guards in the camp grew noticeably weary and wounded. Their stamina could be recovered with potions to an extent, but not their mental exhaustion.

The second prince whispered to the masked Jindao fighter, "It's time. Prepare to make our move!"

The second prince noted that the guards and even the crown prince himself were in bad shape, but the Jindao shook his head. "Second prince, we had better wait. This is a critical period, and we can't afford to be careless."

The second prince frowned. "Wait? No, we can't wait any longer—if we keep waiting, it'll be too late!"

The Jindao replied, "It's not yet time. We need to wait—there's a factor we hadn't considered in our plans that's throwing off our predictions."

They had expected that the guards would be close to their breaking point by now, but they still seemed able to fight. The sole reason was an additional fighter in their midst: the ninth prince's master.

One man though he might be, Zhang Lie's effect on the defense was as impactful as a whole battalion of elite soldiers. His seemingly careless blows had devastating impact on the beast hordes, and Red Comet was killing quite a few lifeforms by itself as well.

The second prince frowned. "It looks like we've underestimated this fellow. I can't believe that the ninth prince was responsible for this..."

The Jindao fighter warned, "He's very dangerous, and we need to be extremely careful of him."

The second prince was taken by surprise. "Didn't you say he would be easy to deal with initially?"

Chapter 662: Holding Nothing Back

The masked Jindao fighter replied, "I still can, but I mis-evaluated his original strength."

The second prince whispered, "Good, then. We can't miss this opportunity—we have to strike now!"

"But these troops still have the stamina to keep fighting, don't they?"

The second prince shook his head. "Regardless, we have to strike now, or we won't have a chance to do so. If I'm not mistaken, the imperial guards are almost on their way here. Once the main force arrives, our opportunity to strike will be over."

The Jindao fighter sighed. "Second prince, patience is key."

The second prince frowned. "You don't dictate my actions. Release the fourth-level beast horde."

"Now, this early?"

The second prince nodded. "We have to destroy the defenses in one fell swoop, and it gives us the cover to strike."

The Jindao fighter knew the second prince's behavior to be a reflection of his anxiety. He had spent over a decade in preparation for this plan, and he was only one step away from success. He didn't want to give up so easily. After all, if this plan were to succeed, the second prince would surely be able to claim the throne for himself.

The Jindao fighter had no choice but to pretend to agree. He sent a message to the Jinghun via a specialized technique.

Not long after that, the beast stampede began to evolve. Behind the current horde of beasts came a group of peak-grade ones, so densely packed together that the general's face crumpled.

Zhang Lie frowned. That the peak-grade lifeforms would only appear now, and in such a large group...

The mastermind behind this stampede had to have been preparing this assault for a long time. This was a middle-sized world, and there were at least five hundred peak-grade lifeforms charging toward them. Such an incredible number of these lifeforms would have taken an equally long amount of time to prepare—and it would be trivial for them to destroy one weakly defended city after another.

After so much fighting, the guards were already getting weary. Many continued to fight despite their wounds; the biggest problem was their lacking medical supplies, rather than combat ability.

In order to protect the king of the realm, the general had prepared a month's worth of rations and medical supplies for the entire guard, but no one had expected this to be a prolonged siege. The medical supplies had been exhausted, and the reinforcements from the imperial troops had yet to arrive.

The beast horde seemed to have picked exactly this moment to strike.

"Protect his majesty! Protect him—retreat!" the general cried out.

The second prince immediately held them back. "General, we can't retreat! The capital's not a hundred miles away from us. If these peak-grade lifeforms were to break through, it would be a disaster for our kingdom!"

The general's face turned pale. "But his majesty—"

By then, the second prince had already unsheathed his sword and was about to behead the general when Zhang Lie appeared by his side and caught the second prince's blade.

The second prince was fast, but someone else had been faster.

"My goodness, second prince, whatever could you be doing?" Zhang Lie called out.

The general was so scared that he fell to the ground.

The second prince snorted as he sheathed his blade, knowing that he would have no further chances to kill the general. "During times of strife, how dare he disrupt the morale of the troops? None of us princes have sounded a retreat—it's no place for a general to countermand us."

Zhang Lie sighed. "He was only worried for his majesty's safety!"

The second prince narrowed his eyes, which gleamed with frost. "Do you mean that I don't care for my father, that I'd like him to die?!"

Zhang Lie ignored the second prince's idle pretense. "Who can say?"

The second prince's eyes burned with rage. "You—"

By this time, the crown prince had noticed what was going on and headed over to break up the conflict. "That's enough! The fourth-level beasts are about to attack us—we can't break out in internal conflict now!"

The second prince snorted. "For such a weak-willed general to be commanding us would be an even worse travesty."

The crown prince shook his head. "To kill the general of the guards at this crucial moment would be the worst thing you could do for morale."

The second prince snorted again. "I'll defer to you, eldest brother, but if this fellow dares talk about retreat again, I won't show him clemency. None of you will be able to deter me then, I assure you."

The general stood up. "Crown prince, are we truly not going to retreat?"

The crown prince shook his head. "The second prince's actions might have been inappropriate, but he didn't act without reason. Behind us lies the capital. If this fourth-level beast horde reaches it, it would spell disaster for our kingdom. If we contain the fighting here, those who perish will be guards—if we retreat, those who perish will be ordinary citizens!"

The general explained, "Crown prince, I'm not afraid of death, but your highness and his majesty are right here! Neither of you can perish!"

The crown prince shook his head. "Father hasn't spoken a word. No one can retreat now."

The general nodded firmly. "I understand, your highness!"

The crown prince declared, "Everyone, we fight to the last! The imperial troops will make their way over within half a day!"

As the defense continued, Zhang Lie put in more effort than before against the peak-grade horde. After all, he still had a lot of peak gene fragments that he needed to obtain.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Zhang Lie's fist smashed into the ground and sent ripples into the distance. The ripples erupted in a shockwave of force, making heaven and earth tremble. Roiling energy swept over the peak-grade horde, causing them to rampage in earnest.

Compared to superior-grade lifeforms, peak-grade ones were superior in all aspects. Even Zhang Lie couldn't take them down easily bare-handed. Even Zhang Lie had to take the fight seriously; the guards had it much worse.

The defensive lines seemed on the verge of breaking, and it was up to Zhang Lie to shore up any holes.

Zhang Lie's fists rippled with water-attuned genetic energy imbued with spatial force. The streams of water revolved more and more quickly around his wrist, augmented by the two streams of energy, sending a hurricane of force spiraling up around him.

The weaker staff hurriedly hid in tents; even the guards themselves seemed to be on the verge of being blown away.

Chapter 663: The Heart of Man

The princes present were unable to believe that such an aura could emanate from a single person. Zhang Lie was still charging up for his attack, but it almost looked as though his attack had already landed.

The skies were trembling, the earth shaking, the wind roaring—it felt as though the heavens themselves were impressing their authority on the realm.

The crown prince's eyes widened. "The ninth prince has truly found an imposing master..."

The guards were all shaken. "Who could this be? Who could boast such strength?"

The entire camp shook—everything swayed but in one location, the king of the realm's golden tent.

Finally, as the energy Zhang Lie gathered up reached a critical threshold, he released it in what was purportedly a technique but which seemed to have reached an entirely new level of strength.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" The sea devoured everything in sight. The heavens seemed to lose their color, and an oppressive silence descended on the realm.

A tsunami devoured the peak-grade horde, vanquishing them as though they had never existed.

The hunting grounds were scoured into flat, featureless land as the troops' morale rose greatly.

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

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

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

Zhang Lie's one punch had cleaned up a hundred peak-grade lifeforms, dramatically decreasing the burden that the guards around him had to bear.

The crown prince lifted his sword and held it high. "An alien hero has helped us in this time of crisis—my fellow warriors, we can't lose out to them! Charge! Charge, in the name of our homeland!"

Reckless though it might seem, the crown prince's decision was the correct one. If the troops were to remain on the defensive, they would eventually be forced back by the peak-grade lifeforms.

The troops didn't have much of their strength remaining, but the peak-grade lifeforms coming at them seemed endless. Now that Zhang Lie had turned the tides of battle—even if for just a moment—the crown prince had to take this opportunity to try to magnify that advantage, even at risk to his life.

The crown prince led the charge himself, a lone man and his sword against a tide of beasts. With brute force, he beheaded a peak-grade lifeform, then ran toward the next without even looking back.

Seeing their fearless leader in action, the troops' morale rose greatly. "Charge! Follow the crown prince's lead!"

The masked Jindao fighter frowned. Zhang Lie's unexpected appearance was on the verge of derailing their plans. He looked toward the second prince, but the second prince said nothing.

The Jindao fighter was certain that, no matter what happened next, the second prince wouldn't call off this plan.

"Look!" the second prince hissed, pointing at Zhang Lie. "That likely had to be that man's full strength—he's not making any further moves!"

Whereas the crown prince and his men had gone charging forward, Zhang Lie was leisurely sitting down and setting up a spit on which he could roast meat.

The Jindao disagreed with the second prince's judgment: this didn't look like a man who was entirely out of energy. On the other hand, he was simply too lazy to keep fighting.

"Move!" the second prince shouted, following the crown prince into the distance.

He had to admit to himself that he wouldn't have been as decisive and bold as the crown prince; that difference between the two of them made him even more jealous, even more certain that the crown prince had to die.

The Jindao fighter stayed where he was. After some time, he slowly made his way toward the king of the realm's golden tent.

The crown prince had succeeded in his endeavor. Despite facing nigh-insurmountable odds, he had endowed his troops with a vision of victory. He, who had been nurtured by the king of the realm as his next successor, was an impressive prince.

If nothing untoward were to happen, the crown prince would successfully kill the remaining peak-grade lifeforms and reach a new level of renown, one which would cement his position as the crown prince—and the king of the realm's successor.

The crown prince was so qualified that others couldn't help but be envious of him; he might not have been a natural ruler, but the king of the realm had molded him to be his most suitable successor.

The crown prince was overjoyed by success. He turned around and called out, "Second brother, I'll leave the rear to you. Take this opportunity that the ninth prince's master has given us to clear out these beasts—"

A sword slid into the crown prince's chest from the back and penetrated through his front, with such strength that it annihilated the king of the realm's protection. The crown prince's eyes widened.

"Why?" He forced out that one word with trembling lips and quivering voice. "Why, second... brother?"

The crown prince knew how cruel the succession of kings could be, but his father had stabilized it all during his long reign. He knew that the ninth prince had suffered an assassination attempt, but surely that was something that could never have happened to him. He knew the other princes all

wanted to get rid of him, but also that they would never try something like this in the public eye—or would they?

How could the second prince dare to strike him down with so many eyewitnesses around? It was meaningless—he could never hope to gain the throne this way, unless...

Chapter 664: King of the Realm

...unless Father was gone himself... At the point of his betrayal, the crown prince seemed to see through everything.

He had underestimated the second prince and devoted all his attention to dealing with the threat of peak-grade lifeforms that lay before them instead. Survival was the most important thing—he expected that everyone, like him, would be focused on the threat of the peak-grade horde.

Most importantly, his brothers were a blind spot of his. He was so far ahead of his other brothers, and his father all but viewed him as his successor. As a result, the crown prince never expected any of them to pose a threat to him—or indeed to backstab him.

"Why?" the second prince asked rhetorically. "Isn't that obvious?"

"Crown prince!" The crown prince's guards finally rushed forward.

The advent of the peak-grade horde had caused the troops to split up. The crown prince had rushed ahead of his guards by too much, giving the second prince an opportunity to strike.

The second prince continued, "Eldest brother, you're too outstanding, so outstanding it makes the rest of us jealous, so outstanding none of us would ever have a chance against you. I don't understand why Father chose you; I don't think myself any worse in comparison. Unfortunately, because of your presence, Father won't acknowledge my strengths—so I have to kill you in order to have Father give me a chance."

The crown prince clutched his bloodstained chest. "Second brother, are you crazy? Look at what's happening around us—how do you expect to take down these fourth-level beasts?! The ninth prince's master gave us a fighting chance, but you've just destroyed that chance!"

"Perhaps so. I've contracted a terrible illness, after all—jealousy. Out of jealousy, I had no choice but to do all this. Don't you think it strange that there were suddenly so many lifeforms stampeding around the hunting grounds?"

The crown prince's eyes widened. "You can't have—"

The second prince burst out in laughter. "Indeed, I was the culprit behind all this! The lifeforms that battled you and me, that killed all the guards around, all those that you see—they're all under my control! I caused this disaster!"

The crown prince could barely believe his ears. "Are you mad?!"

The guards all around them had seen the second prince launch a sneak attack on the crown prince. They were staring at the confrontation now, their eyes bulging, thoughts whirring through their heads.

The crown prince, ignoring the fact that every motion was tearing his wound ever wider, the fact that blood had dyed half his body red, roared out, "You crazy fool! Don't you know what sort of devastation these beasts will wreak if we can't defend against them? Have you thought of the consequences?!"

The second prince smiled coldly. "And even so, I chose this decision. I chose this outcome. Otherwise, the throne would have landed in your hands—this would have been Father's kingdom, your kingdom—never mine. Why should I feel bad about ruining it?"

The crown prince clutched his head. "You're mad, absolutely mad! How could you have become his way? Was it the aliens?!"

The second prince chuckled coldly. "At this point, there's no need to pretend to care about me, brother. In order to induce this calamity, I secretly sent lifeforms under my control into the hunting grounds one after the other. The setup alone took me years; I only had this opportunity thanks to Father's declining health."

"It really was you—I knew there was a mastermind, but you?"

The second prince shook his head. "Such is the battle for succession, after all." Hearing this, the guards all began to panic.

"The second prince caused this calamity?"

"The second prince is trying to kill the crown prince!"

"What should we do?"

The crown prince snorted and pointed his blade at the second prince. "Don't forget that Father's still around. It won't be so easy for you to take the throne."

"Don't worry—I've planned for this. Someone will take care of Father."

Suddenly, a Jindao fighter within the camp rushed into the golden tent, sending a golden pillar of light roaring into the air.

"What?!" The crown prince's face crumpled.

The second prince drew his blade and shouted, "Where are you looking, brother? I'm your opponent!"

The guards fell into a panic after the second prince's sudden assault on the first, and the peak-grade lifeforms barreled forth.

The second prince never intended to leave any eyewitnesses behind. Without a commander to guide them, many of the guards perished in the first charge.

The second prince laughed evilly. "Don't worry, Brother. After you die, I'll send Father and the other princes to the underworld with you so you won't be lonely!"

Even after getting rid of the crown prince, the second prince couldn't be certain that he would be able to claim the throne on account of the other seven princes he had to face. If he were to kill them all, however, the second prince, the sole survivor, would by necessity become the winner of this battle of succession, as well as the next king.

The crown prince had been heavily wounded by the second prince's sneak attack. Despite his superior martial ability, his body was weakening dramatically the longer the fight dragged on.

He was just about to lose to the second prince when something suddenly happened back at the base camp.

A frightening aura rose into the sky, causing heaven and earth, grass and shrub and tree, air and water, to tremble. It seemed that the entire world was paying its respects to the man who had invoked this aura. Even the rampaging peak-grade lifeforms halted, trembling.

The aura seemed to activate some primal part of their bodies that allowed them to shake off the Jinghun compulsion and to instead submit to their rightful king—the king of the realm, who ruled over all that the world had to offer.

Even the crown and second princes couldn't help stop their battle and turn back toward the base camp.

"Father!"

"Father!" One prince's voice was jubilant; the other's, horrified.

Sensing the king of the realm's aura, the guards all began to kneel. "Long live the king of the realm!"

As long as the king of the realm were alive, they would be safe—he, the king of the realm, could compel all living creatures of this world.

Chapter 665: A Third-Realm Disaster

Despite the fact that the crown prince's blood was turning his armor red, he still roared out in laughter, "Second brother, it looks like your plans have gone awry—Father's not so old as to be incapacitated just yet!"

The second prince's eyes turned blood-red. He slashed forward with his sword. "It doesn't matter—if I kill you, I'll be Father's only successor. I'm far superior to his other choices!"

The crown prince snorted and blocked his blade. "Give up, second brother! Apologize now to Father and he might still forgive you. Give up now and we can still be brothers!"

"Shut up! My path is set in stone, now—there's no backing out for me."

The crown prince spat out a mouthful of fresh blood. He didn't know if he could hold out until the king of the realm got to him; he could only fight with his words. "Second brother, your beast stampede has been defeated. Why remain so stubborn—you don't have a choice? Kneel down and apologize to Father; that's the only way you might be able to live."

"I don't need a way out!"

The crown prince replied, steel in his voice, "Then you're destined to fail."

The second prince lifted his head to the skies and roared out in laughter, "Don't you think I would have a backup plan?"

A frightening aura descended from deep within the hunting grounds, one that made it feel as though a disaster was nigh. The aura struck at the guards' minds and souls oppressively, enervating them

and canceling the morale boost from the king of the realm. The peak-grade lifeforms stilled and turned instead to this imposing existence.

The crown prince's face fell. "How could you—no, impossible, you can't control an existence of that caliber!"

The second prince shook his head. "As you know, nothing in this world is absolute—you simply need to use the right technique."

"You managed to control a fifth-level beast?!"

A fifth-level beast was a disaster-grade lifeform, the source of calamity, the talk of legends. Allegedly, these lifeforms could destroy whole cities just by walking through them, and destroying whole kingdoms wouldn't be much more of a struggle.

As the crown prince, he knew very well just what these fifth-level beasts represented. They were existences even the king of the realm had to be careful with.

That the hunting grounds would possess fifth-level beasts was an accident, one that even the king of the realm had never expected. In fact, this was the first time the king of the realm was sensing a legendary fifth-level beast for himself.

It might not be impossible for them to kill the beast, but they were too close to the capital for comfort. If they were to strike now, the capital would surely be affected in the aftermath.

The fifth-level beast had actually been in the king of the realm's hunting grounds for some time. The reason it hadn't left was because it was enjoying its stay, considering that people were deliberately feeding it and providing it with amenities.

The crown prince shook his head in disbelief. "Impossible. No one can control fifth-level beasts, not even the Jinghun clan."

The second prince was rather surprised. "You know that name, eldest brother? Ah, I see—the ninth prince's master, again. He's an alien too, after all."

The crown prince frowned and narrowed his eyes at his second brother. "Just how did you do it?"

"We knew we couldn't control it fully, so we didn't try. All we did was make it want to fight."

Within the camp, Zhang Lie was happily consuming his roast meat.

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade jade rattlesnake, you received one peak gene fragment.
Current total: 70]

The snake meat was fresh and delicious, and the entertainment was quite interesting as well. When he saw the second prince backstab the crown prince, Zhang Lie whooped in delight.

"He's finally made a move! Is it time for the climax?" He wasn't surprised; this was within his predictions. The second prince had been behaving erratically, and Zhang Lie suspected that one of the princes was the mastermind.

The ninth prince certainly couldn't have done it, and the crown prince didn't have a motive. He was the successor to the throne in all but name.

In that case, the culprit had to be among the seven princes. The third and fifth princes were mired in battle, caught unawares by the beast stampede, so he could exclude them both as well. Zhang Lie found the second and eighth princes most suspicious.

The reason he suspected the eighth prince was because he still didn't understand why the Zijing clan was willing to become his backer, but it was the second prince's strange behavior that ultimately drew his eye.

The second prince lived constantly in the crown prince's shadow, just one step from the throne. As long as the crown prince were around, the second prince would never be able to succeed; that feeling would eventually overwhelm him and cause him to do something crazy.

As a result, Zhang Lie wasn't surprised when he learned that the second prince was the mastermind. He had the power to stop the second prince from attacking the crown prince, of course, but he chose not to interfere.

He had no reason to do so; the crown prince's death would only help the ninth prince. As the second prince had said, the crown prince was far too outstanding, and such an outstanding competitor had to die. Otherwise, he would have to face the ninth prince in battle someday.

The crown prince might be the ninth prince's only backer now, but the ninth prince would gain more from the crown prince's downfall than he would lose. After all, the crown prince himself posed more of a threat than the other seven princes combined.

Just then, a golden beam of light shot toward the air, and Zhang Lie turned around. The Jindao fighter was making his move. Before the pillar of light could do anything to the camp, however, an even more imposing aura emanated from the golden tent at its center.

All living creatures of the world, in that one immortal moment, seemed to prostrate themselves to the king of the realm.

"He's made his move, has he?" The king of the realm might have seemed to be on his deathbed, but Zhang Lie knew that he had kept some of his strength in reserve.

The Jindao fighter might be strong, but he was nothing in the face of the king. It took just a moment for the king of the realm to annihilate him.

Within the tent, the king of the realm stood up with such authority that everyone knelt down. The ninth prince bowed his head and called out, "Your majesty!"

The guards present did the same, their gazes scorching. This was their king, the king of the realm!

Suddenly, from behind the second prince, deep within the hunting grounds, came a competing aura, a primordial aura that heralded disaster. Zhang Lie knew what this signified—a third-realm disaster-grade lifeform. It looked as though he couldn't remain a bystander any longer...

Chapter 666: Worldbreaker

The disaster-grade lifeform seemed to be a golden tortoise, one carrying a mountain on its back. It was massive, and they could see it lumbering toward them from a distance.

Zhang Lie's eyes lit up. If such a lifeform were to produce a soul shard, it would clearly be a high-grade defensive one.

Just then, however, the king of the realm told Zhang Lie, "I'll take care of the fifth-level beast—I leave my son's fate in your hands."

"On what grounds?" Zhang Lie was rather unhappy at having this prize be taken away from him.

"I'll thank you lavishly afterwards."

Before Zhang Lie could accept or reject this offer, the king of the realm flew off toward the disaster-grade lifeform.

"Wait! Let me touch it first!" Zhang Lie shot a blade of sword energy toward the disaster-grade lifeform from afar, then sighed as he trudged toward the two fighting princes, ready to take on the role of a nanny.

He activated his stealth, walked up to the second prince, then downed him with a single punch.

The crown prince coughed out blood with every gasp, and his armor had turned a lurid red. "Why were you hiding your strength? I almost died!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "Well, you clearly haven't died completely."

The crown prince:...

Zhang Lie was likely the only person he had met who had dared to be so rude to his face.

The crown prince clutched the wound on his chest, ignoring Zhang Lie's acerbic tone—he didn't have the strength to care, after all. "Quick! I'm about to die!"

Zhang Lie replied confidently, "Don't worry, I'll save you when you're on your last breath. Your father had me come over, so I guarantee you won't die."

If the crown prince had already died, then Zhang Lie would have walked away without any fear of reprisal, but with the crown prince still alive, the king of the realm would clearly be angered with Zhang Lie if Zhang Lie didn't save him.

Zhang Lie wasn't afraid of trouble, but he did want the lavish rewards the king of the realm had promised. Furthermore, if he didn't save the crown prince, the king of the realm might disfavor the ninth prince because of him.

"Why do you need to wait until I'm at death's door? Can't you save me now?"

"No, of course not. Otherwise, how could I prove my importance—how could I be deserving of my promised 'lavish reward'?"

"You—!" The crown prince, drawn to anger, spat out another mouthful of fresh blood

Only then did Zhang Lie finally, unwillingly, slap a palm on the crown prince's chest and marshal his genetic energy to subdue the foreign energy rampaging in his wounds. Subsequently, he retrieved two Yeluo restoration vials and poured them into the wound on the crown prince's chest, causing the flesh to regenerate at a rate visible to the naked eye.

When the crown prince woke from his sudden unconsciousness, he cried out in surprise, "What miraculous potion is this?!"

Zhang Lie had easily saved him from life-threatening danger.

He ignored the crown prince's question until the crown prince added, "Do you have any additional vials? I'd like to distribute them among the soldiers!"

Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed. "I do. What can you afford to trade for them?"

Beside him, one of the crown prince's royal guards called out, "For you to donate your potions to us valiant fighters is an honor—argh!"

Before he could finish his words, Zhang Lie had slapped him aside. He flew out into the distance like a bullet.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Someone just got knocked away by a peak-grade lifeform. Did you all see that?"

The crown prince glanced in the direction in which his guard had vanished, swallowed a gulp of saliva, and nodded.

Zhang Lie next headed in the direction in which the king of the realm and the disaster-grade lifeform were facing off. The king of the realm had the upper hand; he was able to make use of the strength of the realm, so his upper limit was naturally above disaster-grade.

Even Zhang Lie, who had yet to finish acquiring his peak limit fragments, might not be a match for the king of the realm.

After all, Zhang Lie had recently ascended to the third realm. He might be able to defend against the world's formless will, but he hadn't yet amassed so much strength as to ignore it entirely like in the second realm.

However, the disaster-grade lifeform the king of the realm was facing was rather unusual in its own right. It had ridiculous defense and a rampaging ability that allowed it to grow stronger in combat.

Given its humongous size, a drawn-out fight would surely disfavor the king of the realm.

The crown prince offered, "As long as you're willing to give me those potions, I'll agree to any request that's not unreasonable!"

"What counts as unreasonable?"

"Telling me to die or to give up my position as successor to the throne, for example..."

"Remember what you promised, then!"

Zhang Lie tossed him a pouch of vials. "Have the guards collect all the peak-grade carcasses on the battlefield for me."

"You want them all?" The crown prince was shocked—these carcasses would be a wealth of treasure.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Just a fraction, preferably the ones that would be easier to cook and consume. I have a great need for them."

Given the extent of the stampede, there had to be at least a thousand or so peak-grade carcasses strewn over the hunting grounds. Zhang Lie couldn't be certain which ones he had killed and which ones he hadn't, so he had simply asked for them all. That would save him considerable effort.

By then, the disaster-grade lifeform had been dealt a serious blow by the king of the realm, and the mountain on its back was crumbling away.

Even so, a disaster-grade lifeform was no joke. Sensing that its life was in danger, it fought at full strength. It charged up a beam of golden light from its mouth and shot it into the distance with frightening strength.

The beam was headed straight toward the crown prince. Without even stopping to think, the king of the realm caught the beam with his own body, crying out as he was sent flying from the impact.

In order to protect his son, the king of the realm had no choice—and the disaster-grade lifeform had successfully turned the tables on him.

If the king of the realm had been at full strength, he might still have found the disaster-grade lifeform a challenge, though certainly not such a threatening one. Unfortunately, in his old age, he was barely able to use 70% of his peak strength.

Sensing that the king of the realm was in danger, Zhang Lie launched a punch at the disaster-grade lifeform.

Zhang Lie's fists rippled with water-attuned genetic energy imbued with spatial force. The streams of water revolved more and more quickly around his wrist, augmented by the two streams of energy, sending a whirlwind gusting through the entire battlefield.

The guards all around him had to thrust their weapons into the ground lest they be blown away themselves.

The attack seemed to have drawn the attention of even the will of the world. As Zhang Lie infused more energy into his arm, the entire world seemed to shake. Finally, as the energy Zhang Lie gathered up reached a critical threshold, he released it in one fell swoop. A sea of energy flooded everything in sight, roaring as it headed straight for the disaster-grade lifeform, crushing the mountain on its back.

The disaster-grade lifeform let out a cry that shook the skies as it fell to the ground...

Chapter 667: Quelling the Threat

Zhang Lie wasn't finished. At the same time, he punched forward with his left fist. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!"

The world shook. The skies trembled. The ground beneath his feet quaked.

Before Zhang Lie's punch could land, however, a man flew through the air and beheaded the disaster-grade lifeform with a chop, stealing Zhang Lie's kill.

[You successfully assisted in killing a disaster-grade world-bearing tortoise. By consuming the core of the disaster-grade world-bearing tortoise, you may receive one to ten disaster gene fragments.]

Zhang Lie, unable to dissipate the force he had gathered in his left fist, redirected it at the ground instead. A crater formed out of nowhere, causing the entire hunting grounds to shake. It was so large that perhaps a third of the tortoise could have fit within it.

Upon seeing that crater, the guards present—and even the crown prince himself—all swallowed a gulp of saliva. If Zhang Lie's attack had landed on any of them, they would die without a corpse.

Zhang Lie smiled. "I apologize, your majesty—I was unable to hold back."

The king of the realm's face was turning green. "It's quite alright—I understand."

The figure who had darted out to claim the disaster-grade lifeform's head was, of course, the king of the realm. Glancing at the damage that Zhang Lie had wrought, even he couldn't help but worry about what might have happened if the blow had struck him, instead.

Fortunately for Zhang Lie, his blow did enough damage that the will of the world had counted him as a participant, or he wouldn't have received anything from that fight.

With the disaster-grade lifeform dead, the king of the realm easily subdued the remaining peak-grade lifeforms.

Once all of them had been killed and the hunting grounds were once again free from threats, all the guards began to cheer as they collected the spoils of war and tended to the wounded. The crown prince directed the guards to store those carcasses in the camp.

According to his agreement with Zhang Lie, he was collecting all the carcasses for him to sift through.

The second prince was brought back to camp trussed up and tied down. The other princes gradually made their way back from deep within the hunting grounds—first the third and fifth princes, clearly wounded.

When the third prince returned, he quickly inquired, "How is Father?"

The ninth prince replied, "Please don't worry, third brother. Father's still hale and hearty. He slew a fifth-level beast and quelled the stampede."

The fifth prince sounded as though he couldn't believe his ears. "What did you say?"

The ninth prince clarified again, "Father hasn't yet lost his strength."

The third and fifth princes couldn't believe it. They had seen the king of the realm grow so weak that he had to be supported even when walking—but now the ninth prince was claiming that he hadn't lost his strength?...and that he had even killed a fifth-level beast?

The ninth prince continued, "Father was just pretending to be old in order to ferret out any conspiracies against the crown."

The third and fifth princes glanced askance at each other. No wonder!

The third prince exclaimed, "I knew it! Father's heroism surely can't be defeated by age."

The fifth prince nodded. "Indeed. As the king of the realm, even in old age, Father would still have the strength to quell any threat."

The remaining princes slowly trickled back to camp: first the fourth, then the sixth, and finally the seventh and eighth princes.

This could be viewed, in some sense, as a ranking of their respective strength.

The third prince was wounded and his guards had all died, but the severity of his wounds didn't require immediate treatment by the imperial physician. His dual-blade cultivation had proved immensely valuable for his strength, and he was a post-peak-grade fighter in his own right.

The fourth prince's guards had been so heavily wounded that they required immediate attention from the imperial physician, but his troops were already remarkably well preserved compared to those of the other princes.

The fifth prince, who had returned with the third prince, likewise had lost most of his guards, and he himself was wounded as well.

The sixth prince, protected by the Yinlian, returned with only a scant few guards. He had even lost an arm.

The seventh prince's Heijie had also suffered grievous losses. He might have been covered in dirt, grime, and blood, but he was at least in better shape than the sixth.

Zhang Lie was most surprised by the eighth prince. Although his guards were wounded, he had barely a wound on him. Only the crown and second princes had survived the stampede better.

It looked as though his guards were surprisingly strong, but in that case, why didn't they try to make their way back to base camp? If they had done so, the king of the realm would surely have taken note of their strength.

The princes were all shocked and later overjoyed to hear that their father had retained his strength, but their supporters and backers were much more ambivalent.

The third and fifth princes came over to Zhang Lie to thank him personally. Zhang Lie shook his head, indicating that it was no big deal.

The third prince smiled. "It might only have been a small gesture to you, but it was a big help to us."

The fifth prince even suggested, "Would you like to become my guard? I'll fulfill any request and satisfy all your terms!"

The princes had all noticed Zhang Lie's strength; having experienced it for themselves, they knew how difficult it was to make it out of the beast stampede and how strong Zhang Lie had to be to have done all that alone.

The ninth prince and Zhang Lie had been the first to make it back. They knew how weak the ninth prince was, so the only reason they had succeeded had to have been Zhang Lie alone.

The princes tried to tempt Zhang Lie with ever higher compensation, but Zhang Lie rejected them all.

The eighth prince snorted. "Who do you think you are, to refuse us all? A strong alien, perhaps—but still an alien nonetheless."

Zhang Lie ignored the eighth prince's remarks as he continued devouring peak-grade lifeform meat with gusto.

Just then, the king of the realm's personal guards walked over to them. "His majesty would like to invite the princes and the ninth prince's master for an audience."

The princes and Zhang Lie walked into the tent to find the king of the realm seated upright on his throne, giving off such an imposing aura that the seven princes were forced to their knees.

Their foreheads beaded with sweat as they felt the king of the realm's imposing aura for themselves, overjoyed that the king of the realm was still strong enough to protect the world, but simultaneously worried that they would never be able to obtain an opportunity to inherit the throne.

Chapter 668: The Outcome of the Stampede

The king of the realm, ignoring their complicated feelings, motioned weakly for them to get up.

The seven princes felt a strange force beneath their knees lifting them up.

The king of the realm continued, "There were many... surprises... that occurred during this hunt. It was only thanks to your eldest and ninth brothers that I survived unscathed."

The crown prince bowed. "Father, that's nonsense! It would have been trivial for you to deal with the stampede even without your assistance."

The king of the realm waved a hand curtly. "That the two of you were able to make it back was impressive enough. If no one has any objections, I'll consider both of you winners of this year's hunt."

The eighth prince called out, "Hold on, Father! I acknowledge my eldest brother's contributions, but what did my ninth brother do?"

The ninth prince was always in last place; now that he had suddenly risen to the top of the standing, the eighth prince was feeling threatened.

The crown prince replied, "Our ninth brother rushed back with his master and has been working hard to repel the beasts. It's all thanks to his master that we were able to muster our defenses and save the lives of our guards!"

The crown prince turned to the king of the realm. "Father, I have to object to my being crowned the victor of the hunt. To be frank, my life was saved by the ninth prince's master as well."

The other princes all looked toward Zhang Lie with shock. Just what had happened while they were absent?

The ninth prince shook his head. "No, eldest brother! If not for your guards defending the camp, none of us would have survived."

With the wave of a hand, the king of the realm announced decisively, "We'll deal with the matter of the victor and the prizes later. For now, bring forth my wayward son."

The guards called out, "Summon the prisoner!"

The flap to the golden tent lifted. The second prince was escorted in between two guards. His hair was messy and untied, but his eyes were gleaming like a wolf's.

The crown prince shouted, "Second brother, do you acknowledge your crimes of attempted fratricide and patricide?!"

The second prince inclined his head to the sky. "I made a bet and lost—that's it. The crime I'm most guilty of is not seeing past your false veneer! Father, you truly are a skilled actor. You were hiding your strength all along while the rest of us thought you were growing old—but it turns out that we were all mistaken."

The crown prince shouted again, "Insolence! Do you have no shame for your crimes?!"

The second prince chuckled coldly. "There's nothing I regret. If you were in my position, eldest brother, you would have done the same. Of course, if I were like these other trash behind me and far from the throne, I wouldn't bother trying to go for it. I'd just sit tight and wait for you to be crowned king, eldest brother, then live a happy life as a prince."

The princes standing behind the second prince all began to berate him.

"You bastard, don't lump us in with the likes of you!"

"Clearly, you're the trashiest among us!"

"You call us trash, but you're the one who failed to execute your plan and kill us all!"

Everyone turned to the last speaker, the eighth prince, who raised his head to the ceiling of the tent and didn't meet their gaze.

"Father, you truly are a skilled deceiver. All of us failed to see through your disguise for over a decade—I was in too much of a hurry, indeed." The second prince sighed. "And the sudden appearance of the ninth prince's master—the king of the realm is the king of the realm, I suppose. As long as you remain alive, the world will protect you."

The second prince believed that Zhang Lie's sudden appearance was thanks to the will of the world—and Zhang Lie found this explanation surprisingly plausible.

After all, the king of the realm was essentially being protected by the entire world, and many plots and schemes against him would be dissolved by what seemed to be a series of coincidences. Even in his old age, the world and the realm at large was still protecting him.

When the ninth prince was being chased by superior-grade lifeforms and found his way to Zhang Lie, their chance encounter could be chalked up to random chance—or a manifestation of the power over fate that the king of the realm possessed.

If the ninth prince hadn't met Zhang Lie, even if he managed to escape the superior-grade lifeforms chasing after him, he would still have been killed by Wang Jian. If the ninth prince hadn't brought Zhang Lie back with him, Zhang Lie wouldn't have participated in the hunt.

If the will of the world really had made a move, that suggested the king of the realm would have perished in battle without Zhang Lie.

Was he unable to take down a disaster-grade lifeform alone? Zhang Lie frowned as he thought back to the fight. Surely not—the king of the realm might have had a hard time, but he should have been able to win easily.

In that case, could it be that there were some future incident awaiting the king of the realm? Perhaps there was still a strong enemy lying in wait, hoping to kill the king of the realm when he thought himself safe...

The interrogation of the second prince was still ongoing when Zhang Lie snapped back to his senses. The king of the realm mused, "Are you dissatisfied?"

The second prince snorted. "Of course! If I were some distance away from the throne, I wouldn't have minded, but I'm just one step away! I can almost grasp victory—all to be stymied by my eldest brother. Why shouldn't I try to claim the throne for myself, then?"

The crown prince frowned. "Why didn't you attack me directly, then? Why do something so foolish?"

The second prince sneered. "Eldest brother, if you were to die, who would become the prime suspect? Surely not the third or fourth princes, nor the ninth prince, farthest from the throne. No, I would be the suspect—I would be the prime beneficiary of such a crime, after all. So why not set my sights on the throne directly instead?"

The crown prince sighed. "You're truly ambitious."

The third prince cried out, "Second brother, you didn't use to be this way. What happened to you?"

The fourth prince folded his arms. "Second brother, is power so important that you would scheme against your family like so?"

The second prince snorted. "Ridiculous. Would either of you give up the throne for this so-called fraternity?"

The crown prince continued gravely, "It's all because of those foreigners, isn't it? I've told you not to get too close to them—who knows what their true plans are? They're not trustworthy!"

Chapter 669: A Mysterious Shard

The second prince snorted. "No, I'm not being controlled by an outsider. Taking over the throne was my idea!"

The king of the realm frowned. "Come clean. Which of the princes are working with you, and where's the Jinghun clan?"

Upon hearing the king of the realm's words, except for the crown and ninth princes, the remaining princes' faces uniformly turned pale.

The third prince asked, "Father, do you mean that you're suspecting one of us as well?"

The king of the realm nodded. "Your second brother spent years importing third- and fourth-level beasts into the hunting grounds without being discovered—a clear sign of the manpower of the group sponsoring him."

To catch these beasts and to import them into the hunting grounds required tremendous amounts of manpower and resources, and while the second prince had quite a list of backers, their strength wouldn't have been enough to carry out this ambitious plan. It was therefore natural to deduce that the second prince was working with a yet-unnamed party.

The king of the realm sighed. "I did underestimate you—no, we all did. You're a much stronger schemer than I expected."

The king of the realm did have to praise the second prince's ability to scheme and his patience.

"You never exposed yourself despite years of planning. The kingdom hosts an annual hunt, but despite all the beasts you've smuggled in, you never gave into the temptation to claim victory for yourself. Instead, you let your eldest brother claim all the glory, gritting and gnashing your teeth year after year. It must have been difficult, no?"

The second prince's smile was wry. "It's useless to talk about this now—in the end, I failed."

The king of the realm replied, "You were always intelligent from a young age, and it was difficult for me to choose between you and your eldest brother. As your father, I'm ultimately responsible for what you've done.

Reveal the mastermind behind this affair, the princes you're working with, and the location of the Jinghun. If you do so, I'll consider this matter resolved."

The second prince turned around.

The crown prince sighed. "Second brother, why don't you reveal the truth? If you don't, Father won't be able to let you go."

The king of the realm took a deep breath and waved a hand. "Very well. If you refuse to speak, then we're done here. Guards! Take my traitorous son away and behead him!"

The crown prince immediately got on his knees and begged, "No, Father! That's my brother—your own son!"

The king of the realm glared at the second prince. "Do you suggest that I should leave him alive so he can keep plotting to overthrow me?"

"Father! He—"

The king of the realm pointed at his second son. "If he refuses to see reason, there's nothing I can do."

The crown prince turned to the second prince. "Second brother, don't bicker with Father—he'll really kill you!"

The ninth prince drew his sword and held it by his neck. "Father, if you're going to kill my second brother, you'll have to kill me first!"

The king of the realm stood up in shock. "What are you doing? Are you threatening me?!"

The ninth prince cried out in sorrow, "Father, I only have one second brother!"

Zhang Lie folded his arms as he watched the drama ensue. He was really quite impressed by the entire family's ability to act. The king of the realm had pretended to be half-dead, and now he was taking on the guise of a disappointed father who wanted to claim his son's life. The crown and ninth princes, understanding his intent, supported their father in his act.

The third prince, glancing around and realizing what they were all up to, suddenly called out, "Second brother, don't you remember who pulled you out of a pond you fell into when we were young? It was our eldest brother!"

The crown prince continued, "When you fell seriously ill in your youth, I remember that Father paced outside your bedroom for the entire night without sleeping."

The third prince added, "When we did something wrong, the three of us were silent no matter how Father tried to question us—and we always shared the same punishment. Have you forgotten all that?"

The crown, second, and third princes were all relatively similar in age, and they shared quite a few memories.

The third prince continued, "Don't you remember how our eldest brother would shield us from the mistakes that we committed?"

In the end, his lips trembling, his eyes tearing up, the second prince finally cried out, "Father, I was wrong. Brothers, I apologize!"

Everyone smiled in relief.

The second prince began, "The idea was initially proposed by the Jindao."

The king of the realm asked, "And what about the Jinghun clan? Did the Jindao bring them into the fray?"

"The Jinghun clan actually... actually—aaaaargh!"

The second prince's eyes suddenly glowed with purple light as a small shard of purple crystal emerged from his skull.

The king of the realm and Zhang Lie noticed the problem immediately. Something's wrong!

However, before they could react, the second prince, clutching his head and keening in pain, exploded right before their eyes.

Blood and brain matter splashed onto the king of the realm and the princes' faces.

The king of the realm trembled, his fists clenched tightly, his body quivering in anger. This—the Jinghun clan were deliberately trying to provoke him!

The crown prince stood still, shaken by what had happened, his pupils narrowed. The other princes were likewise petrified. Their own brother had died in front of their eyes in just a matter of moments, without any prelude whatsoever.

The princes were all enraged and scared—it was only now that they truly understood that their battle for succession had been corrupted by the entrance of another party.

Those who lost this battle never used to die; at worst, they would be sent to the borders of the kingdom, with little grasp of the kingdom's politics—but none of them had expected such an outcome.

The eighth prince slumped to the ground in shock. His brother, who had just been about to repent, had exploded right before his eyes...

Chapter 670: The King's Anger

What was most frightening about the incident wasn't that the second prince's head had exploded, but rather that it might happen to any of the princes at any time.

The eighth prince's face turned pale, whereas the seventh prince, unable to hold it in any longer, vomited on the spot.

The king of the realm howled into the air—he was distraught at the fact that his son had died right before his eyes. He had never intended to kill the second prince; it was all an act to get the second prince to confess to his crimes and give up whatever information he possessed.

His aura exploded around him, overturning the golden tent and sending the air roiling.

A huge crater spawned into existence by the princes' feet. Zhang Lie pushed the ninth prince behind him and dispelled the king of the realm's explosive aura.

The king of the realm was so enraged that the entire world seemed to shake. The skies turned blood-red, and cracks propagated through the heavens. A rain of blood began to fall.

"Your majesty, please remain calm!" Zhang Lie was undoubtedly the calmest person present. After all, he didn't much care that the second prince had died. He had infused a bit of his will into his words, which pricked the king of the realm into sudden consciousness.

He picked up a shard of purple crystal which had fallen to the ground amidst the explosion. "Beware the Jinghun clan."

The king of the realm calmed down almost instantly as Zhang Lie made his move. Quashing the anger and pain that threatened to overwhelm him, he gritted his teeth and asked, "The Jinghun clan, again? What's going on?"

Zhang Lie handed over the crystalline shard to the king of the realm. "As you can see, the second prince had a crystal shard lodged in his brain, just like the peak-grade lifeforms that were the vehicle for this invasion."

The king of the realm narrowed his eyes. "Do you claim that my son became one of those mindless beasts?"

The king of the realm refused to touch the crystal shard, so Zhang Lie stuffed it in the crown prince's palms instead.

"The parasitic shard wouldn't have impacted the second prince's thoughts. If that had happened, your majesty, you would have noticed immediately. With your protection, it would have been immensely difficult for the princes to be controlled by a third party. In addition, as I've claimed, the Jinghun aren't able to control intelligent species."

The king of the realm seemed a little disappointed. On one hand, he didn't want his children to be subject to mental compulsion; on the other, he hoped that the second prince hadn't done something so foolish of his own accord.

"The point of the crystal shard was to prevent the second prince from revealing what he knew." Zhang Lie mimed an explosion with his hand.

The princes turned pale as they recalled what had happened.

Zhang Lie added, "It's possible that the second prince might have been affected by the shard to some extent—perhaps not to the point of total control, but it could certainly have warped his thoughts and emotions. Its primary purpose, however, is to seal the second prince's mouth."

The crown prince clutched the shard of purple crystal in rage. "These aliens—how dare they perform such a vile act!"

Zhang Lie analyzed coldly, "As far as I can tell, this shard was implanted willingly."

"On what grounds?" the king of the realm asked.

"In order to guarantee that both parties would take their alliance seriously. As far as I know, the Jinghun aren't so strong that they'd be able to implant these shards without consent."

The king of the realm was so incensed that he was almost vibrating. "Oh, my foolish son! To think he was willing to stake his life on the line for this so-called cooperation..."

The crown prince frowned. "Who would go this far for the throne?"

"I think he was duped."

Everyone turned toward the ninth prince, who had just spoken.

"I don't think our second brother would be so easy to fool. He would surely be against the idea of leaving his life in another person's hands—I think there's a very strong chance that he was duped, or that he accepted the terms unknowingly, or—"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "It's impossible for him not to know—he's certainly strong enough to sense the shard lodged in his brain. However, it's certainly possible that the second prince didn't know about just how dangerous these crystal shards were."

The crown prince nodded. "Perhaps the Jinghun told him that this shard was only to prevent people from leaking details of the plan."

Zhang Lie nodded, and the crown prince continued, "But what the second prince didn't expect was that it would explode and kill him to prevent him from leaking any information about the Jinghun clan."

The king of the realm clenched his fist tightly. "For killing my son, the Jindao and Jinghun clans will pay. I hereby expel them from the realm—the Jinghun shall never get a foothold on this world!"

The king of the realm turned back to his second son's headless corpse, sighing as he glanced at it again. "We will host a grand funeral for my son. Don't speak of his betrayal. To the world at large, we'll announce that he was assassinated while protecting me with his body."

"Yes, your majesty!"

In the end, the king of the realm was still a father, and he couldn't bear for his son's name to be sullied given the circumstances of his death. He sighed again as though he had aged a decade in an instant. "I'm very tired, and I'd like to have a rest now. I'll award the prizes for the hunt subsequently."

Zhang Lie leaned back and replayed the second prince's words in his head. Was there another prince under the Jinghun clan's control? The Jinghun were a dangerous existence, one that had to be eradicated at any cost.

Which prince bore the most suspicion?

Zhang Lie turned around and surveyed all eight remaining princes. The crown and second princes were exempt, of course; the second prince was dead, and he had attempted to assassinate the crown prince before his death, and that assassination attempt would have succeeded if not for Zhang Lie's presence and the king of the realm's hidden strength.

The ninth prince was innocent as well; he had been with Zhang Lie all along. Zhang Lie was confident in his ability to judge one's character, and he was certain that the ninth prince had no connection with the Jinghun.