

U. Warlord 671

Chapter 671: Trouble in the Capital

As for the remaining six princes, Zhang Lie couldn't really tell which of them were traitors to the realm. Who was in cahoots with the Jinhun clan?

The third and fifth princes were the crown prince's closest competitors. Even though Zhang Lie had seen them struggling amidst the beast stampede, he couldn't rule out their involvement completely.

The remaining four princes all had a credible motive for conspiring with the Jinhun as well.

The crown prince suddenly announced, "I'll get Father a new tent."

The king of the realm was just about to retire for a rest when a small group of a few dozen wounded troops rushed into the encampment.

The crown prince glanced at the troops with a frown. "They seem to have come from the capital."

The ninth prince folded his arms. "After this long? We've resolved the problem already!"

"Something's wrong. It's impossible that only so few imperial troops have come as reinforcements—and they're all injured!"

The princes all rushed out to have a look. "What's going on?" the crown prince hollered.

One of the guards dismounted from his horse and knelt on the ground. "Crown prince, something's very wrong! The capital's about to be overwhelmed!"

"What?!" The princes all glanced at the guard in dismay. Matters at the hunting grounds had just been resolved; had something happened to the capital in the meantime?

The guard reported, "The capital's been attacked by a large number of beasts, including a significant number of fourth-level ones. The imperial guards are desperately defending against the onslaught."

Another guard reported, "The capital's defenses have almost been breached. We humbly request that the king of the realm return to the capital immediately to defend the kingdom!"

The crown prince's frown deepened. "The capital's defenses should be more than up to par for a beast stampede."

The capital of the kingdom was the heart of the world and the king of the realm's residence, and the king of the realm would obviously lay down his strongest defenses there.

The walls of the capital were constructed with the best materials available in the world, and they should have been able to resist even disaster-grade lifeforms.

The first guard explained, "While the capital was under siege by the beasts, a rebellion took place within the capital itself. Those damned bastards rushed toward the palace and tried to wrest control of it, and now everything's in a mess!"

The crown prince paled. "Who did this?!"

"A foreign race—the Jindao clan!"

"The Jindao clan?!"

The Jindao had been present in the world for quite some time, and they had managed to sneak a large number of strong fighters into the capital without drawing any attention to themselves. Now, those fighters had caused a huge fiasco.

Zhang Lie smiled coldly. "It looks as though the second prince was simply a pawn in the Jindao's plans."

The ninth prince sighed. "I wonder how my second brother would have felt to learn of this..."

The third prince shook his head. "This might be part of the Jindao's plans, too. The moment they realized that their plans had gone awry, they had to make their move and secure their objective before the king of the realm could get rid of them."

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Regardless, the Jinghun also have to be involved somehow."

The guards added, "The imperial guards are working with the Yinlian clan to subdue the Jindao, but at this rate, with both the beast stampede and the Jindao rebellion occurring simultaneously, it's only a matter of time before the capital falls to these invaders. We need his majesty to return."

The crown prince turned around. "I'll report this to Father immediately."

However, the king of the realm was already standing right behind him. "I've heard everything I need to."

"Your majesty!"

"We greet his majesty!"

The guards and princes all bowed down, but the king of the realm cut them off with a curt wave of his hand. "We must return to the capital immediately."

He turned to Zhang Lie. "Master, I don't believe I've asked for your name...?"

Zhang Lie was just about to state his name when he realized that the Jinghun clan were still around. The reason the Yinlian and Zijing clans hadn't recognized him was because he had disguised his appearance.

If he were to reveal himself now, the other princes would know his name, and those princes' backers would likewise be informed of his presence. However, Zhang Lie was so famous that they would surely make the connection to him from name alone.

Thus, Zhang Lie gave a pseudonym, the first name he could think of. "My name is Hong Tianqi!"

The Yinlian who accompanied the sixth prince looked Zhang Lie up and down. The Heijie clan knew of Zhang Lie's true identity. They were a little shocked to see him report a false name, but they didn't comment on it.

"Let's proceed to the capital, then, Master Hong." The king of the realm escorted Zhang Lie through a rift he had sliced open in the world, which led them directly to the capital.

The capital had clearly seen better days. On the outside, it was being battered by an entire stampede of beasts—peak-, superior-, and mutated-grade alike. All these lifeforms had a crystalline purple shard on their heads.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but remark, "What an investment..."

He simply couldn't fathom where the Jinghun had obtained so many lifeforms, nor why they were willing to expend so many on this world.

The king of the realm's face gradually grew pale, as though he had just thought of something.

The interior of the capital was faring much better than the exterior; the Jindao had made a beeline for the palace without attempting to wreak havoc. The palace was heavily guarded, and the Wang and Feng clans had temporarily allied in order to defend against the outside threat.

However, as one of the top hundred races of the Milky Way, the Jindao fared well even against these imperial guards and local clans. Their resources and strength were incomparable to those of the natives.

Zhang Lie's Zenith Dojo was still a weaker force compared to these races, but once those hunters from the kingdom of Limit ascended to the third realm, he was confident that they would fare well against any of the top hundred races.

Perhaps he might even be able to take over the third realm, just as he had with the second?

Even if not, Zhang Lie was confident that the kingdom he had devoted his efforts to would bear fruit. Once the hunters of Limit ascended, the entire realm would know of the kingdom.

Although the Jindao were able to hold off the defenders for the moment, they knew that prolonging the battle would ultimately be against their favor.

While the rest of their clan clashed against the defenders, a small group of elites broke through the defensive lines and headed straight for the imperial treasury.

Zhang Lie recalled the Heijie mentioning that the Jindao were interested in the primordial starflower that was in the imperial treasury, and his face turned dark in an instant. The primordial starflower was meant to be his!

It looks like the Jindao are out of patience. Sensing that the second prince's coup was a failure, they decided to seize the treasure by force. Zhang Lie called out, "I'll deal with the palace. You can handle the border of the capital."

Surprised to be given a command, the king of the realm hesitated for a moment, nodded firmly, and rushed off in the opposite direction.

Chapter 672: The Jindao Assault

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Water-attuned genetic energy frothed over Zhang Lie's fists, sending ripples of energy into space.

As Zhang Lie punched forward, that energy erupted in a flood, spreading out around Zhang Lie like a hurricane of water. Everyone within the capital felt a sudden chill and breathlessness.

As the hurricane revolved, the buildings nearest the palace were uprooted and sent flying. Pillars of shattered stone and balconies of wood whipped through the air, and even the palace infrastructure seemed as though it would topple at any moment.

The entire capital was caught in the vortex of the hurricane, including the fighters battling it out at the entrance to the palace.

As the water vapor dissipated, Zhang Lie frowned. A member of the Jindao had been able to block his attack.

"A human?"

The Jindao fighter who had successfully defended against Zhang Lie's attack bowed. "I am Jin Yu of the Jin Dao, 90th on the leaderboard of warlord-class fighters. May I ask your name?"

Jin Yu knew that the current human warlord was Chen Xiao, but Chen Xiao didn't use water-attuned genetic energy. Jin Yu didn't think anyone but a warlord would be able to produce such a powerful blow.

"Would you be willing to show your true appearance?" Although Jin Yu's opponent presented himself as a human, Jin Yu was certain that his opponent was anyone but.

The human race had suddenly grown famous over the entire universe thanks to the appearance of a certain fighter, the champion of mankind, Zhang Lie, but humanity as a whole was still nothing more than a weak power in the third realm.

On the other hand, many of the major races of the galaxy had absolute authority in a number of worlds, and they even controlled a few of their own.

The third realm was far larger than the second; if the second realm was like a high school, the third realm was a university. The full might of many races was only made known in the third realm, where there was considerable room to expand and no dominant race like the sura.

In fact, if not for the unusual existence known as the asura, as well as the ridiculous penalty for descending from one realm to the next, control over the second realm would never have passed to Zhang Lie.

After all, Musi Yu, famed third-realm warlord of the Musi clan, had grown so weak after his descension into the second realm that he had been taken as a sura concubine.

Musi Yu wasn't particularly strong among the third-realm warlords, but even so, the fact that he had been subdued by a sura king was testament to the intensity of the penalty.

On the other hand, it also shone a light on how abnormally strong Zhang Lie had been to be able to wrest control of the second realm from the sura at large.

Even so, despite the existence of hunters like Hong Tianqi and Zhang Lie, humanity was a weak race on the whole, and it would remain weak until the widespread adoption and development of limit-breaking potions.

To the Jindao, who were among the hundred-strongest races in the third realm, the humans were so weak as to be non-participants in the politics of the third realm, because their fighters were too sub-par.

Although humanity boasted occasional flashes of brilliance, those genius hunters whizzed through the third realm and quickly ascended to the fourth. As a result, humanity's foundations in the third realm remained weak, and it only had one warlord-class fighter in the third realm at present: Chen Xiao.

Jin Yu had never heard of another human warlord.

In the past, mankind had had a second warlord-class fighter, Musi Yu, who forcibly returned to the second realm and was subsequently slain by the champion of mankind, Zhang Lie.

Jin Yu was shocked by Zhang Lie's strength, and he had even sought to learn more about this unusual fighter who was able to kill a third-realm warlord in the second realm.

He had heard that Zhang Lie had recently advanced to the third realm, but Jin Yu never thought to connect that piece of information with the man standing before him. It was true that Zhang Lie was very strong, that he had managed to establish his own kingdom within the second realm, but there was no way someone who had just ascended would boast such overwhelming strength.

Thus, if the man in front of him wasn't Chen Xiao, then he couldn't be a human at all. He had to be a member of another race, in disguise! The reason Jin Yu had this notion was because of the Jinghun clan.

From Zhang Lie's perspective, he was also very surprised to see another warlord from the Jindao clan present. As expected of one of the hundred strongest races of the third realm!

Zhang Lie still had to be careful around warlords; even the lowest-ranked warlord was beyond the level of a peak-grade lifeform, and corresponded to a hunter who had maxed out all his peak gene fragments.

They boasted all sorts of techniques and mysterious soulshards, and quite a few could even stand against a disaster-grade lifeform on their own.

Most importantly, they were both representatives of the Milky Way. Zhang Lie, who had ascended to the fourth realm in the past and knew about the secrets of the fifth, understood that they bore the same fate.

A hunter who could ascend to the level of a warlord would surely be able to contribute to the Milky Way during the epoch of disaster, so under ordinary circumstances, Zhang Lie didn't want to kill warlords of the Milky Way—evil bastards like Musi Yu being the exception.

Zhang Lie asked, "Are you here for the primordial starflower?"

Jin Yu nodded, cupping his hands again. "If you're willing to stand aside, sir, the Jindao will surely reward you."

"I'm afraid I can't. You'll have to get through me first. [Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Zhang Lie confirmed the Jindao's motives and swung a punch at the warlord-class fighter.

The world shook. The ground beneath his feet quaked. The skies trembled, and stars seemed to fall from the heavens.

Jin Yu's golden blade shone as brightly as the sun. He drew it and swung it down to defend against Zhang Lie's fist. A flood of water erupted from the point of impact, and the ground caved in where

the Jindao warlord stood. The force of [Fists of the Silent Sea] pressed down on him like a thousand-year-old glacier.

The ground continued to collapse around the Jindao fighter.

Gritting his teeth and bearing with the oppressive force, he shouted to his companion, "Run! I'll hold this fellow off!"

The other Jindao fighters immediately rushed toward the imperial treasury.

While Zhang Lie had the ability to take care of the Jindao warlord's companions, he chose not to do so. Instead, he quirked his lips. "Do you really think you can hold me back? [Rune: Gravity]!"

The image of a dragon turtle appeared behind him as a black tablet came crashing down onto the ground. The Jindao warlord, who was barely holding his own against Zhang Lie's attack, groaned as he was forced to one knee, blood dripping from his nose and mouth...

Chapter 673: Formless Will

Even so, the Jindao warlord didn't intend to give up. Zhang Lie wasn't in a rush, either. He was waiting for the Jindao to break open the treasury first. The Jindao were clearly prepared; they might actually be able to manage such a feat.

The imperial treasury was where the king of the realm amassed the rare and precious treasures he had acquired with his authority over the world.

Just as Zhang Lie thought the Jindao warlord was about to give up, the Jindao warlord howled. The radiance of a soul shard emanated from his body, transforming Zhang Lie's oppressive pressure into a force which propelled the Jindao's next attack.

The Jindao was supremely confident in his attack; it was what allowed him to defeat the previous 90th-ranked warlord.

The strength of this attack was commensurate with his opponent's techniques. It combined the force of Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea], the gravity from his dragon turtle tablets, as well as Jin Yu's own martial ability.

The resulting counterattack shook the entire capital. Even the king of the realm, quelling the beast horde gathered outside the capital's borders, could feel the strength propagating through the air.

Sword energy flashed through the entirety of the capital.

"Interesting." Zhang Lie chuckled, curling his fingers leisurely. He wasn't at all panicked by the counterattack.

Jin Yu's soul shard-and-technique combination would prove quite interesting to behold.

Jin Yu howled, "Fall to your own blade!"

"You're trying to attack me with my own techniques? I don't think so—[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Zhang Lie punched forward once more, using a technique with such strength it made the very air warp and crushing all resistance in its way.

"How could this be!" Jin Yu was shocked, but he was a veteran of such battles and was able to respond quickly. Another beam of sword energy shot into the air.

The image of a dragon turtle materialized behind Zhang Lie once more as the two gravity-altering tablets crashed down by Jin Yu's side. Black ripples emanated from the two gravity-altering tablets, forming a localized region of distorted gravity.

Jin Yu, who had just leapt into the air, lost all his momentum immediately and almost fell straight down.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Zhang Lie's fist morphed into a demonic serpent which shot out into the air, dissolving the space around it to strengthen its physical form. Where the serpent passed by, it left behind a small patch of dark void, like a pitch-black stream.

Jin Yu knew that he would be unable to defend against this technique. He had no choice but to use his final trump card.

Jin Yu's sword swung through the air, harvesting the energy of the realm. A golden qilin's scale manifested out of thin air, forming a shield that stood before Jin Yu. It was formed out of a combination of gold-tuned energy and spatial force.

As the demonic serpent clashed against the golden qilin shield, a huge explosion rang out. Waves of energy buffeted Zhang Lie and Jin Yu. The ground shook, and a gigantic pit opened up beneath them.

The golden qilin shield were strong enough to bear the initial wave of corrosive energy, but the serpent still lingered even after the attack, causing the shield to rapidly tarnish with its presence.

Jin Yu's face grew alarmed. No one had ever managed to break through his defense using such a technique before!

Once again, he launched a counterattack with his technique that reflected an opponent's blow. The demonic serpent's corrosive energy twined with the golden qilin shield.

Jin Yu caused the shield to explode, shattering the serpent's form. The corrosive energy that erupted from the explosion combined with the golden qilin's energy, growing sharper and more penetrating as Jin Yu infused spatial force into the attack.

As expected of a third-realm warlord—this was his ace in the hole.

Zhang Lie thought that Jin Yu's combat style was focused on defense, but he had been mistaken. Jin Yu focused on capturing his opponents' attacks with his defense, then retaliating by converting those attacks into his offense. Not only that, his attacks weren't weak in their own right.

Jin Yu's current combat strength was infinitesimally close to that of a disaster-grade lifeform, but unfortunately for him, it was nothing in comparison to Zhang Lie's, who had already been deemed a disaster-grade lifeform by the will of the world.

"[The Boundless Blade: Expulsion]!" Instead of drawing his sword, Zhang Lie simply made a stroke with his finger. A formless will shot forth, dull and colorless, but the strongest fighters situated in the capital all took note.

It seemed entirely unthreatening, but the moment Jin Yu sensed the energy, his eyes grew wide.

The energy cut through Jin Yu's aura, through his sturdy golden qilin scales, with effortless ease, as though it was only natural. That was what made the attack so sinister. Jin Yu's golden scales, sturdy as steel and reinforced with spatial aura, could hardly be cut so cleanly or easily, and Zhang Lie's corrosive energy was much the same.

However, Zhang Lie had easily cut apart something that should not have been cut, as though the energy that dissipated from Zhang Lie belonged to a higher dimension.

Jin Yu had no choice but to materialize another golden qilin shield, a whole row of them, forming an impenetrable wall.

Each scale was composed of gold-attuned energy and reinforced with spatial force, then reinforced once again by the array Jin Yu was utilizing for the technique.

However, the formless energy sliced through this wall as easily as any obstacle that had come before, as though it were made of papier mache.

How could this be? The Jindao prided themselves on the strength of their gold-attuned genetic energy, purer, sharper, and stronger than those of other races. How could their pride have been sliced apart so easily by Zhang Lie?

Jin Yu was truly at a loss...

Chapter 674: A Treasure in Hand

Nevertheless, in a testament to his skills as a warlord-class fighter, Jin Yu quickly realized the crux to Zhang Lie's superior penetrating strength. It was a matter of quantity, it had to be!

Gold-attuned genetic energy was excellent at offense and defense, but the quantity of genetic energy that Jin Yu had brought to bear was nothing in comparison to Zhang Lie's.

If Jin Yu's defense consumed a lake's worth of genetic energy, then Zhang Lie's attack was an entire sea's worth—all compressed into a thin, slender blade of energy.

Just the compression required was unimaginable; it was only natural that the resulting attack would be able to penetrate through anything and everything. Getting punched by a fist would hurt, but if all that energy was compressed to the size of a needle, it could pierce you through.

Jin Yu might have been able to muster a strong defense, but it was spread out over too wide an area and lacked the compression that Zhang Lie's techniques possessed. Zhang Lie's needle-like beam of sword energy easily penetrated Jin Yu's defenses.

This knowledge had come at far too high a price—Jin Yu's life.

As the beam of sword energy landed on Jin Yu, it burst in an explosion of light so intense that Jin Yu was reduced to atoms.

Jin Yu had learned his lesson too late. If he had another opportunity to relive the last few minutes, he wouldn't have dared to bar Zhang Lie's way. Running away would have been the smart move. Not only that, he had even been so foolish as to think he could kill Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie shook his head in exasperation. "Is this what amounts to 90th on the warlord leaderboard?"

That leaderboard was a measure of the strongest third-realm hunters, and the ranking was recognized by even the world federation itself. Before his death, Musi Yu had been one of those warlords on the last decade of the leaderboard.

In his past life, Zhang Lie had thought the warlords far superior to his lowly self. He had stayed in the third realm long enough to finish maxing out his mutated gene fragments, then moved on to the fourth realm as nothing more than cannon fodder.

He hadn't expected to encounter a warlord so quickly in the third realm. In his subconscious, he continued thinking of them as far removed from ordinary hunters, and it was only after this fight that he re-evaluated his perspective.

Now that he had maxed out his superior gene fragments and obtained more than half his peak gene fragments, it was surprisingly trivial for him to deal with even warlord-class fighters. Disaster-grade lifeforms were truly powerful, after all.

Once Zhang Lie had the time to finish maxing out his peak gene fragments, he doubted he would be able to find a rival in all of the third realm.

Even after killing Jin Yu, Zhang Lie didn't rush into the imperial treasury. He stood quietly outside, even going as far as to retrieve a stool and table from his soulspace. He brewed a cup of tea as he waited.

Those Jindao who had rushed into the imperial treasury finally emerged, only to see Zhang Lie waiting for them.

He beckoned them over. "Would you like to sit down for some tea? This might be your last opportunity to drink any."

The Jindao grew alarmed. "What happened to Warlord Jin Yu?"

Zhang Lie cocked his head and smiled. "I'm sitting right here brewing tea. What do you think happened?"

The Jindao reared back in shock. "Impossible—he's a warlord!"

Zhang Lie's gaze landed on the treasures that the Jindao were holding, and his smile deepened. "I can't be bothered to waste time on the likes of you. Hand over the treasures."

The Jindao clutched the boxes tighter toward themselves and took a step back.

Just then, a purple beam suddenly emerged from the ruins. A figure had lain hidden, waiting for the Jindao to emerge.

"Ha! I've been waiting for you for quite some time."

However, Zhang Lie was completely unsurprised. He strode before the Jindao and summoned the blade Guicang, then struck forward with a technique.

The two beams of energy intersected in a brilliant explosion, as though the sun had crashed into the earth. The explosion of light overwhelmed the entire capital; in a matter of moments, Zhang Lie and his mysterious opponent had struck each other hundreds of times.

By the time the light finally receded, the ground was a mess. The doors to the treasury were knocked off their hinges, and the ground was pitted and cracked.

Zhang Lie held two boxes in his hands, and his mysterious opponent was whizzing through the skies. As he glanced at the crystallized limb that lay on the ground, as well as the corpses of the Jindao strewn over the ground, Zhang Lie's eyes turned cold.

Just then, the king of the realm rushed over. Zhang Lie slid the boxes into his extradimensional space. "What's going on by the border?" he asked smoothly.

"I've dealt with the incursion," the king of the realm replied. He turned to the palace in growing anger. "Just what happened here?"

"There was a man skulking around, and I was almost caught unawares." Zhang Lie pointed at the crystalline limb on the ground. "The assailant was stronger than I expected, and I only managed to divest him of an arm."

The king of the realm's frown deepened as he turned to the wide-open hole in front of the treasury where its doors had once stood. "And the treasures they stole?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I was unable to retrieve what my assailant took. He guarded whatever he had taken with his body; if I see him again, I'll rip him to pieces."

The king of the realm's lips pressed firmly together as he glanced at the Jindao corpses on the ground. There was no trail to follow now.

"The opponent deliberately targeted the Jindao as he fled. He's very strong—on par with a warlord, I'd say. It's all my fault. I wasn't able to catch him!"

Zhang Lie sent his genetic energy roiling until a trickle of blood crept out of his mouth.

Upon seeing that Zhang Lie was injured, the king of the realm hurriedly reassured him, "Master Hong, you've done more than I could have expected. It's clear that our opponents have been planning for this assault for quite some time."

Zhang Lie might have been sighing outwardly, but he was snickering to himself inwardly.

Most of what he had told the king of the realm was the truth—the mystery assailant was warlord-level in strength, and he had deliberately killed the Jindao. However, Zhang Lie hadn't expected him to be willing to risk severe injuries to get at the treasures that the Jindao had claimed.

Otherwise, Zhang Lie wouldn't have let him take even a single treasure from his grasp.

However, the opponent had paid a steep price for what he had taken. He hadn't only lost an arm—Zhang Lie thought that there was a good chance that he might never see the mystery assailant again.

At the very least, Zhang Lie had claimed the primordial starflower, which was now safely in his soulspace, and he had managed to push the blame for this robbery onto the mystery assailant.

Even if the king of the realm suspected him of anything, he could hardly prove it. He released a long sigh. "As fate wills."

All the Jindao within the treasury were dead, but all those who had remained by the imperial palace hadn't managed to escape from the capital. The king of the realm caught them all. At the very least,

he was able to preserve a fragment of his honor. Subsequently, he began to restore order to the capital.

Not long afterwards, the eight princes returned with their remnant forces. They all sighed in relief when they saw that the capital was still standing, but the destruction that had been wreaked in the aftermath made them wince.

The capital would be the princes' burden now. With everything resolved for the moment, Zhang Lie asked the crown prince where his peak-grade carcasses were being stored, then snuck off for a feast while the princes deliberated on the capital's reconstruction...

Chapter 675: An Offer of Alliance

Zhang Lie left the palace and headed outside the capital, whereupon he retrieved the two boxes he had reclaimed from the Jindao. He didn't know if there were any security precautions the king of the realm had taken that would alert him when his treasures were claimed, so it wouldn't be safe to open up the boxes within the capital.

The first box contained what felt like a burning star, resplendent in its beauty and possessing overwhelming energy. Any hunter would be struck dumb by such a treasure—this was the primordial starflower that Zhang Lie had been searching for. He hadn't expected to have obtained it so quickly; it was meant to be a reward for securing the throne for the ninth prince.

The second box contained a scrap of a tattered map, but it was quite a bit smaller than either of the two pieces he had reclaimed from the ninth prince or the alcohol tribe.

He couldn't help but wonder what was in the remaining box that the mystery assailant had taken...

Given the contents of the second box, it looked as though the Jindao—or perhaps the Jinghun?—were also searching for pieces of this map. That would be a headache for him. How many scraps did the Jindao possess, and how many did the Jinghun possess?

If they were to hide the scraps back in their homeworld in the Milky Way, it would be far harder for Zhang Lie to get ahold of them.

Well, he would leave it to chance.

After storing both boxes carefully, Zhang Lie headed back to the ninth prince's quarters and waited for the ninth prince to return.

Now that he had gotten what he had come for, there was no need to continue helping out the ninth prince, but Zhang Lie wasn't one to give up halfway. He had promised the ninth prince that he would lead him to the throne; he would keep that promise.

Furthermore, if he were to leave now, it would easily rouse the king of the realm's suspicions. Indeed, it was quite likely that the king of the realm had already closed off all the wormholes leading to other worlds.

It wouldn't be easy for Zhang Lie to leave even if he wanted to, and there was still the matter of the peak gene fragments that were waiting for him to claim.

His spoils were quickly delivered to the ninth prince's quarters, and Zhang Lie began to roast some meat right then and there. Everyone else was busy restoring the palace and the capital to order, so

Zhang Lie's actions were particularly awkward. However, no one who realized what he was doing said a word.

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade arclight grouse, you received one peak gene fragment.
Current total: 11]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade starrune leopard, you received one peak gene fragment.
Current total: 26]

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 (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (advanced), Blade of the Heavens (intermediate)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 40; Disaster, 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 consuming two peak-grade and one superior-grade lifeforms' worth of meat, Zhang Lie suddenly grew tired of his feast.

He frowned and headed outside in search of a cook who could help him prepare something more interesting to consume, but just as he was about to leave, he found the third prince walking in his direction.

The third prince was beaming, and the guards behind him carried a huge bundle of gifts. "I heard that someone was so daring as to be roasting meat in the ninth prince's quarters. The only person I knew who fit the bill was you, Master!"

Zhang Lie frowned. "I've never accepted you as my disciple."

The third prince blinked innocently. "If you were willing to take my ninth brother as a disciple, why not me too?"

Zhang Lie refused him immediately. "I won't accept you as a disciple. If that's all you're here for, please return!"

The third prince continued seriously, "Master, when I saw your prowess in the hunting grounds, I was shocked to see such a heroic figure. From then on, I was determined to apprentice under you. Master, please accept me!"

Zhang Lie made a gesture with his hand. He didn't touch the third prince at all, but the third prince found himself unable to bow. "Don't try to drag me into your politics. You're trying to find a new backer after the situation with the Wang clan, aren't you?"

Within the hunting grounds, Zhang Lie had exposed the Wang clan's treachery.

This wasn't the first time the Wang clan had tried to get rid of the third prince; not only had the Wangs tried to pin the blame of the ninth prince's assassination attempt on him, they had even tried

to kill him within the hunting grounds. The third prince could hardly bear this betrayal—he had to end this relationship once and for all.

Keeping any Wang retainers around was like leaving the sword of Damocles hanging over his neck. After splitting away from the Wang clan, the third prince had to find another backer who would support him.

The crown prince was supported by basically all the officials of the court; he was a faction unto itself. Furthermore, he had the backing of the king of the realm. He alone could face off against the other princes combined.

The second prince was dead, and the Jindao had been branded traitors.

The fourth prince was being supported by the Feng clan; nothing had changed there.

The fifth prince had the Qian clan—and now, seemingly the Wang clan as well—as a backer, and he had suddenly eclipsed the other princes as a result.

The sixth prince had the Yinlian; the seventh, the Heijie; the eighth, the Zijing. The ninth prince, who should have been the weakest, had somehow ended up with a master like Zhang Lie. He had quickly closed the distance between him and the other princes during the hunt, given the impressive results that Zhang Lie had shown.

On the other hand, he, the third prince, had dropped a few ranks thanks to the betrayal of the Wang clan. At this point, he was sure that even the fourth and fifth princes had eclipsed him in strength—and he wouldn't take that lying down.

Before the hunt, the crown prince had been the top contender, the second prince was second, and he was the third. This was only natural; the older princes had more time to amass their strength.

However, the hunt had changed everything. He had lost his base of power, and he couldn't maintain his strength. If that were the case, the power and authority whose scraps he had clawed for all these years would be for naught—and he would either be eliminated or be absorbed into another prince's faction.

The second prince, who had died, was clearly the biggest loser of the annual hunt, but since he was now also out of the competition, that dubious honor naturally fell to the third prince—he had lost his backer entirely.

However, the third prince didn't regret his decisive actions. The Wang clan had been a hidden enemy, one that was now exposed. If they hadn't struck during the hunt, they would have struck during an even more critical period, and the third prince had not cut off their avenue of attack.

Now, it was time to find a reliable partner to work with. The other princes' backers would hardly welcome him, so his only choice was the ninth prince's master. That was why he had come to visit him...

Chapter 676: In Search of a Backer

Zhang Lie was the most likely backer the third prince could think of.

The other princes had all cultivated long-lasting relationships with their respective backers over a prolonged period of time, and it would be foolish for him to attempt to tear a rift in those relationships over the short term.

On the other hand, the ninth prince's master was a rising star, a soaring meteorite, one who had immediately made his name known after the royal hunt.

According to the third prince's investigation, the ninth prince's master was so strong he could even topple a fifth-level beast with one blow and strike the second prince down in an instant.

The person who had saved the crown prince from the second prince's assassination attempt, and who had caught the second prince alive, was precisely Zhang Lie.

If the third prince could wrest him away from the ninth prince's side, it wouldn't be impossible for him to compete against the other princes—or even to replace the crown prince.

The third prince had trained in swordsmanship from a young age, and he believed there would be much in common between him and Zhang Lie. He hadn't expected that Zhang Lie would refuse him outright.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him. "You intend on treating me like a replacement for the Wang clan, don't you?"

The third prince laughed awkwardly. "Master, surely not! The Wang clan is nothing compared to the likes of you."

"Well, I'm not interested."

The third prince refused to back down. "But Master, I'm interested in you! If you're going to support a prince, why not support a better candidate like me instead?"

Zhang Lie looked him up and down. "And what about you is better?"

"I've been carefully developing my power within the capital for decades, and I bring much more to the table than my ninth brother can. All I'm lacking is a strong backer! Conveniently, with the second prince's death, much of his accumulated power and connections is up for grabs. If we work together, we're sure to be able to claim them all."

Zhang Lie chuckled. "You seem very certain of yourself. Are you sure you'll be able to wrest it all?"

"What do you mean, Master?"

"We can discuss a potential collaboration later, but it'll be after the next court session."

"I understand, Master! It's important to take the time to think through matters carefully, after all." The third prince beckoned for his guards to leave the gifts behind.

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Take back these gifts. I haven't promised you anything."

The third prince demurred. "This isn't for taking me as a disciple, Master, but rather for saving my life within the hunting grounds. If you're willing to take me on as a disciple, I'll certainly prepare something even more lavish."

The third prince bowed and left with his guards.

Zhang Lie unwrapped the gifts to find a few vats of alcohol, some spiritual herbs, and various articles of clothing made with the fur and leather of peak-grade lifeforms.

Zhang Lie then turned behind him and called out, "As a prince who intends to become the king of the realm one day, you'd better not develop the bad habit of eavesdropping on people."

The ninth prince ducked his head as he crept out from behind a building. "I can't fool you, Master."

Zhang Lie retorted, "If you could, I wouldn't be qualified to be your master."

"Did you plan all this during the hunt, Master?"

The ninth prince was referring to how Zhang Lie had saved the third and fifth princes.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "Don't forget—you agreed to it too."

The ninth prince had to admit that that was true.

"Why? What are your thoughts about this?" Zhang Lie added.

The ninth prince bowed. "Master, I could hardly stop you from doing what you want. If nothing else, I'm thankful for your pointers and your care all this time. I've learned a lot from you, and your lessons will stay with me for my entire life."

"Ha! Well, I like your personality. Don't worry. The third prince might be a decent candidate, but guiding you to the throne is a far more interesting prospect."

The ninth prince relaxed with a sigh of relief.

"Saving the princes was just a passing kindness, nothing more."

The ninth prince asked, "Master, why did you say you would consider collaborating with him, then?"

"If it works out, it would be a partnership between you, me, and him, not just me and him."

The ninth prince frowned. "Is there some benefit to doing so? What am I not seeing, Master?"

Zhang Lie smiled mysteriously. "You'll find out in the next session of court. I think your father's about ready to make his move."

"Master, can't you tell me directly?"

Zhang Lie ignored the question and instead asked, "Do you know any of the cooks around here?"

"You're going to poison someone, Master?"

Zhang Lie rapped the ninth prince's head with his knuckles. "I'm not going to wrap myself up in courtly intrigue! I just want to have someone prepare the peak-grade lifeforms that we brought back from the hunt. I'm tired of roasting my own meat."

The ninth prince rubbed his head as he replied, "I heard that, except for my father and my eldest brother, everyone else has to bribe the cooks if they want anything good prepared for them."

He didn't know whether it was true; after all, he had never had money before.

"It's convenient that the third prince has just brought us these gifts, then, isn't it? Bring these to the kitchens and have them make us a feast tonight."

The ninth prince walked over to the kitchens, only to have the cooks refuse his gifts. "We could never accept your money, ninth prince! It's our duty to prepare the carcasses the princes have brought back from the hunt."

He was wholly unused to receiving such friendly smiles and polite gestures from the cooks, who had previously treated him with contempt and disdain. "Please, take these gifts. We've brought back quite a few more carcasses than the other princes."

Afterwards, Zhang Lie praised the ninth prince for what he had done. "Very good. Insisting on giving them the gifts was the right choice."

The ninth prince found himself unaccustomed to the difference in treatment he was suddenly receiving overnight—not just from the cooks, but also the palace maids and guards.

In the past, the ninth prince had been an outcast in the palace, and he had never received such deferential treatment.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him. "Information travels quickly within the palace. We've just returned, but half the palace knows what happened during the royal hunt by now.

The servants that survive within the palace have all already developed information networks of their own, after all."

"You mean it's related to what happened during the hunt, Master?"

"That's obvious. You performed outstandingly during the hunt and was recognized by the king of the realm himself, and everyone in the palace knows it. It's only natural that their attitude toward you would shift as a result. More simply, the palace revolves around the king of the realm. However well he treats you will be how the servants treat you, too."

The ninth prince scratched his head. "I'm a little unused to it..."

Zhang Lie warned, "You have to get used to it sooner or later. You're aiming to become the king of the realm, aren't you? People's attitudes to you will shift daily based on your actions, and you need to be able to respond appropriately."

The ninth prince nodded, thanking Zhang Lie for his advice.

Very quickly, the kitchen staff came by the ninth prince's quarters with plate after plate of delicacies. Zhang Lie swallowed a gulp of saliva and quickly sampled each plate as it arrived.

With a pair of chopsticks in his left hand, he picked up a thin slice of stir-fried peak-grade dragonsnake, which was coated in a thin layer of spices which exploded with flavor in his mouth.

Then, he grabbed a roasted demonwolf drumstick with his right hand. The gamey taste of the meat was completely covered up by either the seasoning or the method of cooking the meat, and Zhang Lie devoured it all within moments...

Chapter 677: Unusual Rites

The will of the world's voice rang out in Zhang Lie's mind.

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade dragonsnake, you received one peak gene fragment.
Current total: 41]

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade demonwolf, you received one peak gene fragment.
Current total: 47]

Subsequently, Zhang Lie had a bowl of astral hydra porridge, which he pronounced irresistibly fresh and delicious.

[For consuming the flesh of a peak-grade astral hydra, you received one peak gene fragment.
Current total: 51]

All sorts of delicacies were served to the ninth prince: crispy fried duck liver, iced monkey brain, wintermelon chicken soup, steamed bear claw—as expected of imperial chefs, their cooking was impeccable.

Zhang Lie vacuumed down the food almost as quickly as it came in to the accompaniment of pleasant chimes in his head.

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 (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (advanced), Blade of the Heavens (intermediate)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 120; Disaster, 0

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

Zhang Lie leaned back and burped when he simply couldn't eat any more.

He was done with his superior gene fragments now, and he only needed thirty more peak gene fragments. Those would be easy to obtain, so it was well past time to focus on his disaster gene fragments.

The ninth prince's stomach was so full it almost seemed as though he was pregnant; he couldn't consume anything more.

To be frank, the ninth prince hadn't consumed much food, not even a hundredth of what Zhang Lie had eaten. The difference was that the intelligent races of the Milky Way were able to convert that food into gene fragments, whereas alien races didn't have this advantage.

That said, consuming high-quality meat like this would eventually allow them to grow stronger, and the alien races had specialized professions or techniques for increasing the rate of absorption.

The ninth prince, who had never had such opportunities, was naturally the weakest among the princes.

There was still plenty of food remaining on the table. The ninth prince wanted to keep the leftovers for the next day, but Zhang Lie shook his head immediately. "Dump it all."

"Wouldn't that be too wasteful?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "You're not the same ninth prince you were the day before—you're the victor of the royal hunt! All eyes in the palace are on you, and if you continue living the same way you used to, they'll start looking down on you again."

"But no matter what, we shouldn't be wasteful. That's what Mother always told me..."

It wasn't as though the ninth prince was starving for food; he simply wasn't used to banquets with such extravagance. There were hundreds of dishes arrayed in their quarters, and Zhang Lie had only taken a bite out of many. Dumping it all felt like a huge waste.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes again. "When you become the king of the realm, you can implement such policies all you'd like, but for now, you have to act like a proper prince. Surely you aren't worried you won't have such banquets again with me around?"

The ninth prince sighed and replied resolutely, "Alright, I understand."

"We'll have such a feast again once the remaining carcasses from the hunt are brought back."

It took just one day for the king of the realm and the imperial guards to restore the capital to minimum working functionality. Before the restoration could continue in earnest, the king of the realm called for a day of mourning.

The entire capital seemed to be draped in white. All businesses had closed up for the day, the buildings shrouded in white cloth. Families hung white banners from their windows as the entire capital observed a day of grieving.

The king of the realm stood atop the stage in the central plaza of the capital, seemingly having grown much older overnight.

His speech began, "Yesterday, the capital was besieged by a large group of beasts, killing large swathes of our imperial guards. These same beasts attacked the royal hunting grounds, and my second son perished in the attack while defending against the beast onslaught. We have all suffered casualties and losses."

The aliens were all dressed in black or white, their heads lowered as they listened to their king.

"My son, the second prince, was a brave fighter and a virtuous man. He who should have led us to light and glory instead departed from the world too early—a tremendous loss." Tears trailed down the king's face. "I was very proud of him. He died a true hero, just like our fighters who stood against unimaginable odds for the sake of all."

From beyond the city gates, six princes draped in white marched toward the plaza bearing the weight of a coffin between them.

The ninth prince led the procession, throwing paper money into the air, which floated toward the ground like snowflakes. The third prince carried a portrait of the deceased second prince, and the second prince's wife carried the second prince's token of identification. Behind the princes were an honor guard playing the bugle in a funerary dirge.

An oppressive air of solemnity overcame the onlookers.

Just as the procession reached the plaza, however, the nature of the ceremony changed abruptly. The six princes all broke out into dance, still carrying the coffin as they did so.

Zhang Lie reared back in alarm. This was—a part of the aliens' ceremony?

Paper money floated above their heads, tossed toward them by the onlookers and honor guard.

The six princes danced wildly and vigorously amidst a shower of paper money. The coffin shook and rattled, as though the second prince himself were dancing along with them.

The princes' moves grew wilder and wilder, as though they were breakdancing.

Zhang Lie was horrified by the culture shock; it felt as though he was seeing a boy band intrude on and completely disrupt a solemn ceremony...

Chapter 678: The Second Prince's Coffin

The next moment, as the dance reached its apex, the third prince stepped forward and burst out in song. "He lay there—quietly, his last breath having expired—! As though he were—a fallen leaf, floating in the wind—to his soul we pay our respects, our tears!"

The fourth prince took over. "With my mournful voice—I sing out my sorrow, in order that— you may depart with ease—!"

Zhang Lie didn't know whether the second prince would indeed depart with ease; if he were the one in the coffin, he certainly wouldn't.

Nevertheless, the song and dance continued. It was the fifth prince's turn. "As though you had—dreamt a marvelous dream—never to wake up again, your smile as gentle as a breeze. All things change in time—even the stars will move—but our love will remain here, here where you spilled blood—in passion and glory!"

An official remarked to his neighbor, "The princes are really amazing! The hardest part of this dance is to keep the coffin from touching the ground—that would be bad luck.

The more intensely the coffin rattles, the more successful the ceremony is, but the more likely it becomes for the coffin to touch the ground. Nevertheless, the princes have shown us an amazing dance while balancing all these factors—the royalty are truly incredible!"

Zhang Lie's lips spasmed. It was indeed interesting—so much so that the coffin was making all sorts of flips and rotations in mid-air.

Finally, the remaining five princes stepped forward together, singing in a chorus, "Please, depart with ease—leave your earthly roots behind!"

Zhang Lie was flabbergasted.

All the funerals he had been to were dreary affairs, but this one had overturned all his expectations.

The citizens watching the rites all began to clap and dance.

Even the second prince's wife began to sing. "To live is to hurt—there's far too much in life that's unfortunate—! But all we can do is—to tell ourselves steadfastly, never to let go! Stand back up, stand back up out of the ruins of our collapse—calm our hearts and breathe in the miracle of life!"

Her voice was outstanding, and a joyous smile filled her face. She looked unusually happy, completely out of place at this funeral. If this were to happen in China, she would be considered a public disgrace, one who would drown in the face of negative public opinion.

However, Zhang Lie hadn't seen the last of the surprises just yet.

The princes and their wives began to sing earnestly, all together, "Our tears have formed a river, but still—still we live! Love will allow us to live on, to be one with the world! And when our love and hope face the sun—our tears of yesterday shall evaporate. Do not give up on the morrow—dream your dreams, wish your wishes, fill yourself with strength and courage—let your love and hope shine by the moonlight!"

Zhang Lie forced himself to stifle his laughter, but some among the Heijie were unable to do so. The cultural disconnect between this funeral and what they were used to was simply too shocking. Those among the Heijie who had made such gaffes quickly clapped to hide their laughter.

As they sang and danced, the princes grew close to the plaza. Their practiced steps, efficient actions, shocking physique, attractive appearances, and completely unconventional songs and dances made Zhang Lie feel as though they really could become a boy band that would take the galaxy by storm.

"Turn back and take a look at your homeland—the future lies in wait, a myriad paths to travel—I opened the window and basked in the welcoming dawn!"

The crowd in the plaza split into two, leaving room for the princes to maneuver. The princes placed the coffin right in the middle of the plaza, as though they were giving him the seat of honor. Then, they stood around the coffin like a campfire, clapping their hands as they spun, sang, and jumped.

Zhang Lie watched the proceedings with a shudder. He couldn't bear the thought of dying in this world, then having his funeral publicized and watched by all, his corpse forced to rattle in its coffin, without a shroud of solitude and solemnity.

It was only natural that there would be differences between cultures, but Zhang Lie hadn't expected one so extreme. Earth tended to favor solemnity, and those solemn funerals were intended to make the living cry out their grief and pain.

On the other hand, in this world, funerals were joyous occasions in which friends and family would send the dead off with happiness and festivities, hoping that the dead would be able to leave the world with a smile, and that the living would turn away from grief.

Once the princes had finished their performance and returned to their seats, the crown prince stepped onto the stage. This performance was dedicated to the dead imperial guards, rather than the second prince.

"They lay there—quietly, their last breaths having expired—! As though they were—fallen leaves, floating in the wind—to their souls we pay our respects, our tears!

"Even the wind cannot capture any trace of their passing—but they live on, they live on in our hearts forevermore! Life passes like a dream—a dream of gold, a dream of pleasure—a dream of honor on the battlefield, honor in death, honor in sacrifice!"

Zhang Lie listened calmly as the ceremony proceeded. The king of the realm himself should have officiated the ceremony, but the fact that the crown prince was doing so instead revealed the king's intentions to have the crown prince succeed him.

Few others had noticed this subtle shift.

The crown prince continued, "Everyone's hearts, ripped apart by loss, by tears—the mountains and rivers mourn you! These dead guards, just like the rest of us gathered here, have their own names and families. They led simple lives filled with hope. They are brothers and sisters to us all. On this day, as the crown prince of the realm, in the name of this world, we commemorate the dead who have given their lives that we may live."

This ceremony marked the end of this incident that shook the capital and threatened the succession of the throne.

The princes felt as though this was the worst it would get, that they were mired in the most intense battle for succession in the history of this world, that they would be able to secure victory by uniting under the leadership of the king of the realm to resist the masterminds behind the attack, the Jinghun clan.

Little did they know that this was only a portent of things to come...

Chapter 679: Finally Entombed

Given the strength the king of the realm had revealed, the princes believed that he would easily be able to survive two or three more decades. The battle for succession would be drawn out as a result.

The crown prince continued to speak even as tears fell from his eyes; this finally made Zhang Lie feel as though he really were at a funeral.

"Today, the entire world shall grieve for your absence, the greatest of respects we can pay—a memorial to disaster and the resulting humanity we witnessed in its aftermath. Disaster may have struck, but we remain standing. It may have weakened us temporarily, but I assure you all, we shall grow stronger for it.

"We have worked together to overcome this crisis, and we can do so again. Our dead stand with us; we cannot let them down. Lie in peace, our dead brethren. To you we give our tears and grief, candles lit amidst the darkness. May the strength of this world bolster us."

Zhang Lie glanced around him as the crown prince's speech neared completion.

"We live on because of your sacrifice, with love and strength and endurance aplenty. We know that this will be the best way to commemorate you, that this is what you would have wished for, from a world away."

The crown prince bowed solemnly as the citizens of the capital clapped, recognizing his authority as the successor to the realm. As time passed, the king of the realm would gradually let the crown prince host all sorts of events, until the public and the officials were familiar with treating the crown prince as though he were the king himself.

Zhang Lie privately swore that he would never attend an alien funeral again; watching it all had been too much to bear. Commemorating the dead wasn't the issue—Zhang Lie simply found it far too hard to stifle his laughter for so long. [1]

Zhang Lie thought that the end of the crown prince's speech would mark the end of the funeral rites, but there was actually more.

The princes all stepped up on stage, and Zhang Lie felt an uneasy premonition overwhelm him.

Indeed, in the very next moment, the princes lifted up the second prince's coffin, and the guards of the plaza and their friends and family lifted up the dead guards' coffins.

All the coffins that had been laid out in the plaza were now up in the air, supported by the dead's friends, relatives, and comrades-in-arms.

With the crown prince leading the ceremony, the princes began to sing and dance with the second prince's coffin as they led the procession out of the plaza, followed by the groups of people carrying the other coffins.

All those who had been chosen for this ceremony were trained in this unusual art form, and their performances were no inferior to that of the princes.

The procession passed all the way out of the capital, where the king of the realm had designated a plot of land in which to bury the dead who had given their lives to defend the capital.

The second prince should have been buried in the royal mausoleum, but his traitorous behavior before his death had repercussions, and this was one such. Although he was heralded as a hero who had died in defense of the king, he too was buried with the imperial guards. The families of those guards were very satisfied with this decision—it was a rare honor for their sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, to be buried together with royalty.

The ceremony ended once the last coffin had been securely buried underground.

As several families grieved before the graves of the dead, the crown prince walked over to Zhang Lie. "I apologize, Master Hong, for being unable to spare any time for you over the past few days while I was busy with the palace and my second brother's funeral."

Zhang Lie waved a hand, indicating that he didn't much mind.

"The remaining fourth-level beast carcasses should be brought back to the palace by tomorrow. I'll have the best cuts of meat prepared in the royal kitchens and sent to the ninth prince's chambers. In addition, I intend on hosting a private banquet tomorrow. Would you be interested in attending, Master Hong?"

Zhang Lie frowned. "Despite having just buried your second brother?"

The crown prince explained, "It's a small, private banquet hosted annually after the royal hunt, in which we consume the spoils that we princes have hunted."

Zhang Lie shook his head, causing the crown prince to sigh. "It's a shame. Master Hong, you saved my life, and I hope to be able to repay that favor in kind."

"I prefer to dine alone or with a few close confidantes," Zhang Lie replied mildly.

The crown prince smiled and nodded his head, with the grace and bearing that dignified royalty.

"May I ask for your plans for the remaining fourth-level beasts, Master Hong?"

Zhang Lie had killed a large portion of the peak-grade lifeforms. According to the rules of the hunt, those carcasses were now his spoils.

However, he certainly hadn't killed them all, and a significant fraction had been killed by the guards in the princes' retinue.

If Zhang Lie insisted on claiming all the peak-grade carcasses, the royalty would have to give appropriate compensation to the guards who had worked hard for their kills and even, in some cases, placed their lives on the line.

Zhang Lie asked, "Do you have any suggestions, crown prince?"

The crown prince replied, "The carcasses of fourth-level beasts can be dismantled for furs, meat, and all sorts of medicinal ingredients. If you prefer not to consume them all, Master Hong, you may exchange their bodies for gold, gems, jewels, or spiritual herbs."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I don't need wealth. Have it be exchanged for a suitable quantity of spiritual herbs, then."

Zhang Lie was an herbalist and pillmaster, after all, and he'd be able to do far more with herbs than gold.

Talking with the crown prince was relaxing; unlike the other princes, he never offered to recruit Zhang Lie outright. If not for his promise to the ninth prince, he believed that the crown prince would easily succeed the king of the realm.

After sending the crown prince off, Zhang Lie found the ninth prince rushing toward him, sweat staining his robes. "Master, how was my dance? I didn't embarrass you, did I?"

Among the princes, the eighth and ninth princes had the least strength. The eighth prince had flopped around like a salted fish after the ceremony, his face deathly pale. The ninth prince was in better shape, but even so, he looked as though he had just run a marathon.

Zhang Lie's mouth spasmed. "I've never had a chance to witness an alien funeral before, and I simply can't get used to it. That said, you princes were indeed the star of the ceremony."

The ninth prince blinked. "Thank you, Master. I'll keep working hard to catch up to my brothers."

Zhang Lie suddenly rapped the ninth prince on the head. "Your goal is to become the king of the realm, not to emulate your brothers in these funeral rites!"

The ninth prince yelped as he clutched his head. "Master, I had to spend a great deal of effort beforehand to keep up with my brothers for this ceremony!"

Zhang Lie sucked in a deep breath. "Then you've wasted all your time!"

Chapter 680: A Reward of Land

Sensing that Zhang Lie was really growing angry, the ninth prince hurriedly changed the topic. "Master, what did my eldest brother want with you?"

His face turned uneasy.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at him. "Are you that insecure?"

The ninth prince shrugged. "You misunderstand me, Master. I just wanted to know if the crown prince was making his move against us, in case you wanted to discuss some sort of strategy."

Zhang Lie coughed. "I'm afraid he would squish you within moments if he really wanted to. He mentioned that he was hosting a private banquet and invited us, but I declined."

The ninth prince thought about Zhang Lie's words. "A private banquet—I heard that a few princes would do that regularly after each royal hunt, but I've never been invited."

Zhang Lie nodded.

The ninth prince asked, "Master, do we need to host such a banquet too?"

"Only the weak would need to form packs; the strong can thrive alone."

The ninth prince was speechless. "Surely I need loyal men for when I become king?"

"Now's not the time."

"Why not?"

"No one knows where the Jinghun clan are hiding. Are you certain that whatever men you recruit now will truly be loyal?"

The ninth prince shrugged. "But I'll need men of my own eventually, won't I?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "Are you dissatisfied with me?"

"No, of course not, Master! I'm just hoping to plan for the future."

"We can worry about the future later—there are trials we'll need to overcome now."

"Trials? What trials?"

"You'll find out in court tomorrow."

After the funeral ended, the various princes all invited Zhang Lie to their private banquets. He became the target of all the princes' attention.

Those who hadn't participated in the royal hunt didn't understand why Zhang Lie had suddenly experienced a meteoric rise in popularity; after all, he was new to this world, and no one had ever heard of him before.

More shockingly, despite receiving invitations from all the princes, he rejected them all and remained entirely focused on the ninth prince. This behavior cast a mysterious veil over Zhang Lie's background and identity.

That night, as the crown prince had promised, the peak-grade carcasses had all been made into a series of delectable dishes for Zhang Lie and the ninth prince, which they consumed with gusto.

Zhang Lie's gene fragments shot up once again.

As a disaster-grade lifeform, Zhang Lie was easily able to handle absorbing so many gene fragments in such a short period of time, but an ordinary hunter might explode from the shock if they tried to emulate his behavior.

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 (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (advanced), Blade of the Heavens (intermediate)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 150; Disaster, 0

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

Zhang Lie's peak gene fragments had just maxed out overnight, and he could clearly feel the increase in his strength. A simple punch was enough to cause space around him to cavitate; his body was bursting with energy.

Just as in the second realm, he felt as though he was now in control of the space around him.

The ninth prince asked, "Master, if Father decides to award the prizes for the royal hunt tomorrow, what should we ask for?"

"I've decided on my reward for protecting the emperor. As for your victory in the hunt—well, you can think of something suitable yourself."

"Do you have any suggestions, Master?"

Zhang Lie mulled it over for a moment, then said decisively, "Land."

The ninth prince frowned. "Why land?"

"Land gives you the right to raise your own troops—and with those troops, you'll be able to develop that land, incentivize people to settle there, and build wealth and power. You'll need all the resources you can get."

"What for, Master?" the ninth prince asked, cocking his head.

"Within the capital, there's no way you'll be able to defeat the other princes, who have amassed their power steadily for years. As a result, you won't be competitive for events within the capital. Even if someone like the second prince dies all of a sudden, you'll hardly get any of his wealth or resources—they'll only be consumed by the other princes. It would be near-impossible for you to build up a base of operations within the capital."

The ninth prince thought that Zhang Lie's words were very sensible.

"If you try to build a base of operations within the capital, the other princes will surely send their men in as spies. Thus, you have to start by targeting land beyond the reach of the capital."

"Master, do you mean that we should start beyond the capital and then expand inwards later?"

Zhang Lie nodded. "This is your best chance at developing a power of your own."

"But, Master, didn't you object to me trying to do so now?"

"No—I simply object to you doing it in the capital. The capital is far too developed for the likes of you, but you could easily start to amass power beyond the capital and work your way within. Furthermore, that's only an excuse. There's a more important reason to get land right now."

"But wouldn't all the princes be given land after the battle for succession ends?"

"Those are two completely different matters," Zhang Lie replied.

"But why, Master? If I ask for land far away from the capital, where power is concentrated in this kingdom, wouldn't that be equivalent to giving up on the throne?"

"No, it simply gives others the impression that you want to give up on the throne. Whether or not you do, of course, is up to you."

The ninth prince contemplated Zhang Lie's words for a few moments in silence. "Master, I still don't understand. What's the true reason behind this suggestion?"

"I'll let you know after the court session."

The ninth prince pursed his lips. Court, once again! Just what did his master think would happen there?

The next morning, the king of the realm specially sent messengers to the eight princes, heads of the three large indigenous clans of the capital, and even Zhang Lie requesting their attendance at court.

The ninth prince glanced at Zhang Lie in exasperation. "Master, do you intend to attend court like this?"

"What's the matter? Do you expect me to beautify myself just for a session at court?"

"No, Master, but can't you at least dress more formally? I could prepare a set of formal court attire for you..."

"Formal? What, don't you think this is formal enough? I'm not one of your court officials—we can go as is!"