

U. Warlord 681

Chapter 681: In Court

Court was held daily in the morning, but not all officials were eligible to be present.

Those who had matters to report were expected to be present; those who didn't, to excuse themselves. Not all officials had the privilege to attend, but most did.

The standard court sessions were intended to deal with urgent business; larger court sessions, which all officials were expected to attend, were held only monthly or even once every few months.

Such court sessions were meant to report on events that affected the kingdom on a large scale, and which none of the individual officials had the authority to adjudicate.

These larger court sessions were held whenever such an event occurred, and the number of people in attendance was a metric for how important the event was.

This time around, all eight princes and all officials were formally mandated to be present, and even the heads of the major clans of the kingdom had been summoned. Such a major court session hadn't been held in a very long time, and everyone present naturally realized that something massive must have happened.

The second prince's death and the attack on the capital all pointed toward one culprit: an alien race, the Jinghun.

Few knew of the Jinghun, not even the royalty. When they tried to learn more through their information networks—the other alien races present in the realm—they were immediately and uniformly told that the Jinghun were trouble, that they stirred up trouble and were wrapped up in trouble and always left trouble behind them.

Whenever the Jinghun appeared in the third realm, they manifested disaster after disaster.

Their racial ability was also a pain to deal with. Given the extent to which they could manipulate genetic lifeforms and the trouble they caused, they were a higher-priority target than genetic lifeforms for more races.

The royalty and court officials were naturally worried about the presence of the Jinghun in this realm given their unsavory reputation, and this court session was undoubtedly intended to deal with that problem.

The session began with the usual salutation to the king of the realm: "May his majesty live a thousand years!"

The gathered figures all bowed to the king of the realm. After the funeral, the king of the realm looked far older and more weary than before, but the domineering aura around him had only grown stronger.

"I assume everyone has heard of what happened during the royal hunt?" the king of the realm asked.

One of the officials called out, "It was a heart-wrenching disaster, your majesty—all our hearts are with you!"

"A sudden disaster caused the death of tens of thousands of troops. We grieve their loss, especially the loss of the second prince."

"Indeed! Losing the second prince in this freak accident is a terrible blow to the future of the kingdom."

"An accident?" the king of the realm echoed. "No, this is no accident! According to an internal investigation, the culprit and mastermind behind this attack was the Jinghun clan. I hereby pronounce them wanted criminals!"

"A wicked race, wicked! We've been far too kind and lenient toward these aliens—no such disaster would have occurred otherwise."

The Wang clan head's eyes stared grimly at Zhang Lie with anger and hatred.

Jian Mo hadn't returned from the hunt, and the unexpected defection of the Wang kinsmen from the third prince's retinue had led to the alliance between the Wang clan and the third prince formally breaking down.

The Wang clan head blamed all this on Zhang Lie—everything had been going well until his arrival!

However, the Yinlian, Heijie, and Zijing all looked toward the Wang clan head after he made this pronouncement.

The Heijie representative chuckled coldly as he stated, "The capital has just suffered from a grave disaster. What do you intend to accomplish by sowing discord within the kingdom at this critical juncture?"

The Yinlian representative called back, "It looks to me as though the Wang clan head is trying to mire the entire capital in chaos!"

The Wang clan head hurriedly appealed to the king of the realm. "Your majesty, did you hear what these vile aliens are saying? We can't trust them—they might stab us in the back out of nowhere! Your majesty, I implore you to expel them from this world!"

The king's eyes narrowed. When the crown prince caught that subtle gesture, he spoke up. "Clan Head Wang, it's too reckless to make such a move, especially before we find the Jinghun clan."

The Wang clan head shook his head and replied firmly, "It's precisely because we're in such a situation that we have to act even more urgently!"

The king of the realm finally spoke up, his voice overwhelming all others. "Clan Head Wang, do you think me such an easy person to fool?"

The Wang clan head shivered, lowering his head and not daring to speak further.

The crown prince continued, "We can't afford to make hasty generalizations just because of the actions of the Jinghun and Jindao. I believe that there are aliens who truly deserve our trust and cooperation—aliens like Master Hong."

The Wang clan head lowered his head and gnashed his teeth—that Master Hong the crown prince spoke of was exactly the enemy he wanted to expel!

"If not for Master Hong's generous aid, I would have perished during the hunt as well," the crown prince finished.

The Wang clan head sighed. "I understand, your highness."

The king of the realm turned to the crown prince. "Crown prince, you were present at the royal hunt, and you were one of the earliest to come to the camp's defense. What are your thoughts on the incident that day?"

The crown prince stepped forward out of the throng of officials.

"Your majesty, may I begin by summarizing the affair as I understood it?"

"Naturally."

"This incident began at the royal hunt. A beast stampede overtook the hunting grounds, one comprising large quantities of third- and fourth-level beasts.

"Following information provided by Master Hong, we were able to identify crystalline purple shards on the heads of the rampaging beasts, which he claimed to be the characteristic of beasts under the mental compulsion of the Jinghun clan."

Many of the officials turned to Zhang Lie then.

The crown prince continued, "I returned to base camp with a group of elites, whereupon I met Master Hong returning with the ninth prince. With his help, and with the help of the second prince and his forces, which returned next, we stopped the beast stampede in its tracks.

"Subsequently, a mythical fifth-level beast appeared, seemingly under the control of the Jinghun as well. His majesty managed to handle the crisis, but unfortunately, my second brother perished in the aftermath."

The atmosphere at court seemed to suddenly grow heavy.

"Later on, we learned that the stampede was meant to divert his majesty's attention and weaken his strength. Our opponent's true objective was the imperial treasury. We learned that, while we faced off against a beast stampede, so did the capital. The Jindao made their move then, and they rushed toward the imperial treasury."

Everyone present had suffered the effects of the incident for themselves.

"Thanks to his majesty and Master Hong, the capital was saved from the beast onslaught, but the mastermind behind the attack managed to steal three treasures from the treasury."

The king of the realm interjected, "Are there any results from interrogating the members of the Jindao?"

The official overseeing the interrogation spoke up. "Your majesty, the Jindao are proving resilient to our tactics. We need more time!"

"You have three days—give me results as soon as possible!"

"Three days, your majesty? Three days is a little—"

"What, is it too long? If you don't have results for me within three days, I'll have you replaced with someone who can get me those results!"

The official gulped. "Yes, your majesty!"

Chapter 682: Scapegoat

The king of the realm then turned to the crown prince. "What are your thoughts on what happened during the royal hunt?"

The crown prince replied earnestly, "Your majesty, after long consideration, I feel that the Jinghun have to have some other supporters we don't know about."

The king of the realm propped himself up on his armrest. "Indeed? Elaborate on your thoughts."

"Your majesty, don't you think that there were too many third- and fourth-level beasts around? Surely the Jinghun couldn't have managed to capture and transport them all unnoticed."

The king of the realm nodded. "I feel similarly. The royal hunt is conducted annually, and although I've manipulated the hunting grounds to produce more third- and fourth-level beasts, they would not naturally appear in such large numbers. The only possibility is that the beasts were not originally within the hunting grounds."

The crown prince nodded, adding, "Because the royal hunt occurs annually, there should be a limit on how many such beasts would be present at any one time. However, we faced what felt like a whole ocean of them."

The king of the realm opined gravely, "My belief is that someone deliberately brought a large group of second- and third-, and perhaps even fourth-level beasts, into the hunting grounds."

The gathered princes couldn't help but think back to their second brother's ploys before his death.

The king of the realm shouted, "Clan Head Qian!"

The Qian clan head emerged from among the gathered officials. "Yes, your majesty!"

This was the first time Zhang Lie saw the Qian clan head, which was an unforgettable sight. He was as corpulent as a meatball, and although he dressed in court attire, his robes were embroidered with gold and shot through with golden threads. His swollen, sausage-like fingers were full of rings, and he gave off the impression of being a mobile treasury.

Did he really value showing off his wealth so much that he would sacrifice his personal comfort for it?

The Qian clan head bowed toward the king of the realm, folds of fat jiggling beneath his clothes.

The king of the realm asked, "Know you your crimes?"

The Qian clan head scratched his head. "Your majesty, I don't understand what you mean."

"Wasn't it your clan who sent these beasts into the hunting grounds?"

Everyone present was shocked by the king of the realm's accusations. They had thought that the Jinghun were the masterminds behind this entire affair—but there was actually another party who was responsible!

The person in attendance who was most shocked by the king of the realm's accusation was undoubtedly the fifth prince, whose backer was the Qian clan. However, he didn't dare say anything, afraid that he would be embroiled in the fiasco as a result.

The Qian clan head jumped up in shock. His legs turned to jelly as he flung himself toward the ground. "Your majesty, I would never do anything of the sort! We of the Qian clan are merchants and businessmen. I would never dare participate in a rebellion!"

The king of the realm narrowed his eyes. "I don't think I've ever specified what the Jinghun were trying to accomplish, have I?"

The Qian clan head kowtowed again and again. "Your majesty, I can explain! Wanting to know more about what had happened within the hunting grounds, I bribed the guards that had been present and learned about what had happened from them."

The king of the realm chuckled coldly. "Who but the richest clan in the kingdom would have the ability to catch so many beasts and the network with which to transport them to the royal hunting grounds?"

The Qian clan head shook his head again and again. "Your majesty, I really don't know anything!"

"In that case, how do you explain this evidence?" the king of the realm retorted. "Guards! Set the evidence in front of the Qian clan head so that he might have a closer look."

Following the king's commands, the guards placed a pile of documents on a tray, which they proffered to the Qian clan head.

As the Qian clan head perused these documents, his face turned dark. He had expected that the king of the realm would need some time to look through the evidence, but the king had done so remarkably quickly.

The king of the realm continued, "There's evidence that you caught beasts from all over the kingdom, then sent them into the hunting grounds. Do you deny these allegations?"

The Qian clan head bowed deeply like a quivering slug. "Your majesty, I plead ignorance to these claims! Could someone in the clan have done so without my knowledge?"

The king of the realm's resulting laugh was harsh and cold. "Indeed? Do you think they could have managed operations on this scale without you hearing about it? Three whole years of sending beasts into the hunting grounds—without your knowledge? Do you think me a fool?!"

The fifth prince's face was a rictus of shock. "Clan Head Qian, how could you do this to me?! How could you sponsor a rebellion behind my back?"

The fifth prince's face had turned dark. His backer had betrayed him and the rest of the realm!

The king of the realm snorted. "Very good, Clan Head Qian, very good! I received reports that you even told the guards patrolling the hunting grounds that it was the second prince who wanted to send these beasts within in order to increase the difficulty of the hunt."

The Qian clan head bowed again, so deeply his entire face was plastered against the floor. "I've made a mistake, your majesty, fifth prince! I shouldn't have listened to the second prince and sent the beasts into the hunting grounds!"

"I had no idea what the second prince was up to; I only heard that he wanted to increase the difficulty of the hunt, because otherwise he wouldn't have the opportunity to become the victor—I

never thought the second prince would be trying to rebel against the kingdom with the support of an alien race!"

The king of the realm asked, "Clan Head Qian, who's the current emperor?"

"Your majesty, of course!"

The king of the realm continued, "Whose kingdom is this?"

"Yours, your majesty!"

The king of the realm slowly stood up. "In that case, whom should your loyalty be to?"

"You, your majesty!"

The king of the realm exclaimed, "In that case, why did you not report this affair to me? Why did you go along with the second prince's wishes?"

The Qian clan head was sweating profusely. The officials watching him winced; they understood his reasoning very well. That was how they had felt themselves not too long ago, though none of them took it to such an extreme.

The king of the realm had spent a long time pretending to be ill and sickly, but no one realized that it was all an act.

The officials of court had all already decided on which princes they would support to succeed the throne, but the Qian clan had taken it too far and would now suffer the consequences.

The king of the realm would use him as a scapegoat to maintain his own strength, to inform the members of his court by his own actions that he, the king of the realm, was not yet dead.

The king of the realm continued, "I gave the Qian clan money and land to develop, to establish a storefront in every city of this kingdom. I gave the Qian clan all that—and you use it to betray me?!"

The Qian clan head continued kowtowing, smashing his head so hard against the floor that his forehead was bruised and bleeding.

"This kingdom has no need for traitors. Guards! Drag Clan Head Qian outside and behead him. Seize his clan's assets and properties. Expel his direct relatives from the kingdom; demote the members of his clan's branch families to commoners. Never will they be merchants or officials of the court."

The king of the realm's pronouncement almost made the Qian clan head faint.

"Your majesty, your majesty, I recognize my mistake! Please, forgive me!"

He crawled over to the fifth prince and tugged on the hem of his robes. "Your highness, please save me! Please—for the sake of my daughter!"

The fifth prince's eyes were icy-cold. "You were in cahoots with the second prince; you might as well join him in death."

The fifth prince could hardly speak up for the Qian clan head.

This was no small misdemeanor; it was treason against the king. Assaulting the capital and breaking into the royal treasury, conspiring with an alien race—each of these crimes would have been enough to sentence the Qian clan head to death...

Chapter 683: Prizes and Punishment

Even if the fifth prince did speak up for the Qian clan head, nothing would change. The fact that the Qian clan was in cahoots with the second prince meant that his name would be tarnished if he tried to defend the Qian clan head now.

The king of the realm might not punish him, but nothing good would come out of such a confrontation.

By that time, the Qian clan head had become petrified with fear. The guards stepped forward and dragged him out bodily.

The officials of court felt somewhat sympathetic to the Qian clan head's plight. The king of the realm was making an example out of him, certainly, but wasn't this a rather extreme example? The entire Qian clan would perish overnight!

None of them had expected that the Qian clan would receive such severe punishment.

After all, they weren't a small clan. They were one of the three ancient clans of this world, one of the three pillars of the kingdom. Destroying the Qian clan in this fashion would immediately and gravely impact the kingdom's finances—but the king of the realm had done so anyway, without giving them any quarter.

The officials couldn't help but tremble in fear. If the king of the realm learned of their actions while they thought he was ill and sickly... They were far weaker than the Qian clan; if even the Qian clan suffered such a dire punishment, wouldn't they have it worse?

The clan heads of the other two large clans stood upright, but their heads were downcast and their legs were trembling underneath their robes. The Wang clan head had gone particularly pale.

The king of the realm was trying to shake out any other troublemakers by passing such a heavy sentence on the Qian clan, and the Wang clan head was naturally worried. He had done as much in support for his candidate as the Qian clan head, and he had even sponsored assassinating a prince.

If the king of the realm were to set his sights on him, the Wang clan head surely wouldn't fare any better than the Qian clan head. He was very worried that the king of the realm would clear out his clan, but, to be frank, there wasn't much of a chance of that happening.

If nothing else, the three clans were critical to the day-to-day functioning of the kingdom.

Now that the king of the realm had excised one of their number completely, dealing with another of the major clans would cripple the kingdom's economy and recovery, especially after such a harrowing disaster.

It had been many long years since the king of the realm controlled the kingdom with an iron fist. The officials who had been alive throughout his long tenure were thrown back into the past, when he had first claimed his throne for himself.

They were sorry for the Qian clan, of course, but what could they do? At least the Wang clan head was relieved: the Wang clan was likely safe from the brunt of the punishment.

When the prime minister noticed the officials' behavior, he ventured, "Your majesty, might your punishment be a bit too harsh? It's the Qian clan we're considering, after all..."

The king of the realm glared at him, his gaze as sharp as daggers. "Do you doubt me?"

"No, your majesty!" The prime minister didn't dare rebuke the king of the realm.

The king of the realm snorted. "How many warriors and guards died because of the Qian clan, and how many citizens of the capital fell? For their greed, for their desire to retain their power—how many lives did we have to sacrifice? And you ask that I keep a man like the Qian clan head, a clan like the Qian clan, in power?!"

The prime minister lowered his head. "I understand, your majesty."

The king of the realm continued, "Regardless of the motive behind his actions, he and his clan must pay the price for their consequences. With so many valiant guards and citizens' lives lost, his clan can hardly go unpunished."

"Yes, your majesty!"

"I hope I have no cause for handing out such a punishment ever again." The king of the realm glared at the Wang clan head, who nodded fervently, his face pale.

The Wang clan head was extremely relieved that he hadn't been implicated in this affair, because the king of the realm was truly incensed now.

The fifth prince's face turned dark, but the third prince had to cover his mouth to hide a smile.

In this incident, the second prince had suffered the most—he had lost his life.

The next-biggest loser was the third prince. Meanwhile, the biggest winner was the ninth prince. The fifth prince had looked like the second-biggest winner, but now that the Qian clan had been implicated in the second prince's treason, the fifth prince had lost his advantage.

The third prince might have lost his backer, but he wasn't out of the running just yet—he had built up a sizable base of power after all these years independent of his relationship with the Wang clan.

The king of the realm continued, "Now that appropriate punishment has been doled out, it's time to discuss rewards. During this year's royal hunt, there were two princes who outshone the others and whom I have declared to be the victors of the hunt: the crown and ninth princes.

"They rushed back to assist me when the beast stampede started, and I would hardly have delayed the prize ceremony so long if not for the unusual and extenuating circumstances thereafter. I hope that the princes will understand."

"Of course, your majesty!" the crown and ninth princes replied earnestly.

Many of the less-informed court officials, who didn't know precisely what had happened during the royal hunt, were shocked. It naturally made sense that the crown prince was one of the victors; he won the royal hunt every year. But what about the ninth prince?

None of the court officials paid the ninth prince any mind; he was the youngest prince and the one with the least impressive pedigree, with no backer to speak of. He was useless and ostracized within the palace, and not even the king of the realm paid him any mind.

However, in this year's royal hunt, the ninth prince had somehow beaten all the other princes and emerged the victor.

The court officials who had once ignored him now paid him their fullest attention, causing the ninth prince to stand straight up with his head erect. This was the outcome and response he desired.

The king of the realm asked, "What rewards do you want?"

The crown prince replied, "Your majesty, I have only received the very best from you. I need no other reward."

The ninth prince bowed and echoed, "You've already given me the best reward I could dream of, your majesty."

"You don't want anything more?"

The ninth prince smiled. "If anything, I'd like more praise from you, your majesty."

"Oh? You did very well during the royal hunt. You showed outstanding bravery against the beast stampede, and although I've overlooked you in the past, you're a prince befitting your station, one who doesn't lose out even to your brothers."

The ninth prince was so delighted that his face flushed red, and the other princes all shot him jealous glances, particularly the eighth prince.

The king of the realm continued, "Praise is necessary, but I insist that both of you also receive a reward for what you've overcome. This was a promise I made, and a promise I shall keep. Since the crown prince is the victor every hunt, let's start with you, ninth prince."

The ninth prince requested, as he had discussed with Zhang Lie, "Your majesty, I would like land to call my own."

"Land?" Everyone looked at the ninth prince in surprise, but when they considered his decision more carefully, they found it wise. Although he was now making a name for himself in the battle for succession, it was too late for him compared to the other princes, who had already built up significant power.

Better to ask for a plot of land and leave the capital rather than duke it out with the other seven princes.

This choice left quite a few of the more astute officials nodding—they believed that this was the wisest choice as well.

The king of the realm looked toward Zhang Lie, then back at the ninth prince. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, your majesty!"

The king of the realm nodded. "Very well. Send for a map!"

Chapter 684: Theft of the Jade Seal

Two guards unfolded a gigantic map before the king of the realm, who sent a brush flying toward where the ninth prince stood.

"Circle whatever patch of land you want." The king of the realm had no qualms about the ninth prince's decision; in some sense, this meant that he approved of the fact that the ninth prince was seemingly declaring his intent to drop out of the battle for succession.

The king of the realm declared, "Except for the capital and its surroundings, you can have any piece of land you want."

The ninth prince lifted the brush and circled a patch of land without any hesitation. Again, this was something he had planned with Zhang Lie in advance. The land was exactly where the wormhole that led to the alcohol tribe's world was.

With access and control over a wormhole, the ninth prince would be able to grow his wealth with commerce.

To others, the spatial rends within the wormhole would be problematic, but Zhang Lie was able to control large quantities of peak-grade lifeforms to be used as manual labor for transporting goods. With valuable alcohol from the alcohol tribe, along with access to the peoples of the other world, it would be trivial to develop the ninth prince's land.

No matter who eventually ascended to the throne, the ninth prince and Zhang Lie would be able to marshal an army strong enough to contest him.

The king of the realm made no comment regarding the ninth prince's choice. He nodded and said, "The deed to the land will be sent to you within a day."

"Thank you, your majesty!"

The king of the realm turned to Zhang Lie. "And what of you, Master Hong?"

Zhang Lie stood still, as if he hadn't heard the king.

"Master Hong?"

When Zhang Lie failed to respond, the king of the realm shouted, "Master Hong Tianqi!"

Zhang Lie jolted in shock. The king of the realm was referring to him!

"Yes, your majesty!" In a moment of thoughtlessness, Zhang Lie had failed to recognize his assumed disguise.

The king of the realm smiled. "Master Hong, for protecting me and rescuing the second prince, I am obligated to reward you. Although the imperial treasury was ultimately burgled, this disaster would surely have gone far worse if not for your presence, and we may not even have caught the Jindao."

"In that case, your majesty, I'd like to request the fifth-level beast's inner core!"

Zhang Lie's audacity shocked the gathered officials.

"What? Don't you know how many years it takes for a fifth-level beast to appear? If not for his majesty, who could have killed such a beast—and you're demanding its core?"

"You're far too greedy! On what grounds do you make this request?!"

"Even if you did save his majesty, you're asking far too much!"

In the light of this outrage, the king of the realm's response shocked them all. "Very well."

The king of the realm was more reasonable about the request—fifth-level beasts were rare, but not so rare as to be non-existent.

The king of the realm had killed one such beast many years ago. Although their beast cores were rare, to alien races, these cores were nothing more than a convenient battery for energy, nothing more.

Finally, and most importantly, Zhang Lie had to take partial credit for killing the fifth-level beast. If Zhang Lie hadn't been around, he might have been able to kill the beast himself, but he would have suffered greatly as a consequence.

As a result, the king didn't mind giving up the fifth-level beast core.

The king of the realm continued, "Just a fifth-level beast core isn't a sufficient reward. How about becoming one of my bodyguards?"

The court officials were again shocked by the king of the realm's words. A fifth-level beast core alone wasn't a sufficient reward? Just what had Zhang Lie done to deserve such an honor? Not only that, the king of the realm had offered to make him a bodyguard!

This was an indubitable honor—although it didn't confer much in terms of status, Zhang Lie's new role would be of immense importance when it came to protecting the king.

Moreover, ever since the last king of the realm's bodyguards died, that position had remained vacant—the king of the realm was strong enough that, if there were an opponent he couldn't handle, neither would any bodyguards he could appoint.

How strong did Zhang Lie have to be for the king of the realm to offer him such a position himself? Surely he wasn't joking?

In this world, the king of the realm was an indomitable existence.

"I apologize, your majesty, but I'm not interested."

"Are there any positions that would interest you?"

All the officials were glancing curiously at Zhang Lie now. He wasn't a prince who had somehow ended up as a commoner, was he? None of them had ever been offered such a choice!

Zhang Lie's response, however, again shocked them all. "I'm not interested in a position as an official!"

Didn't Zhang Lie care about giving offense to the king of the realm? After all, the king of the realm had just had the Qin clan head dragged off to be beheaded...

The officials were waiting for another show, but the king of the realm's response was unexpectedly bland. His face lined with regret, he announced, "What a pity. In that case, all I can do is officially confer upon you the title of sage. You shall be responsible for tutoring the ninth prince."

Was the king going to give up so easily? How differently he was treating Zhang Lie compared to the Qian clan head!

None of the officials understood his intentions. After all, most of them hadn't participated in the royal hunt, and they had no understanding of Zhang Lie's strength. If they did, they would know why the king of the realm was treating him so cordially.

"Very well." Zhang Lie, who was the first king of the kingdom of Limit, certainly had no interest in a court appointment in a middle-sized world.

Upon seeing how quickly Zhang Lie rejected his offer, the king of the realm didn't press any further. He returned to discussing the incident at the imperial treasury. "Next, an announcement: the Jindao staged a revolt in the capital during the beast stampede, and they burgled the imperial treasury. Three treasures were lost, and we must reclaim them immediately. I've already made use of my authority to lock down the wormholes leading to and from this world."

One of the officials asked, "Your majesty, which three treasures were taken?"

"The primordial starflower, a piece of a mysterious map, and half a jade seal."

"What? The jade seal has gone missing?!" The court officials all suddenly seemed to panic.

Zhang Lie knew of only one seal that would cause such a disturbance. The proof of kingship...

The successor to the king of the realm needed this seal to authenticate his identity. The seal was granted by none other than the will of the world, and it provided a direct link of communication with it. Without the seal, the king's successor wouldn't be recognized by the will of the world.

The king of the realm continued, "I split the seal up into two pieces, one of which I carry with me, and one of which I leave in the imperial treasury, as a precaution against theft."

Upon learning about this, the court officials and princes all became even more flustered. If they were unable to reclaim the seal, the succession of the throne would forevermore be lost.

The crown prince stepped forward. "Your majesty, please permit me to reclaim this seal!"

The court officials' eyes widened again. If the crown prince were to succeed, he was all but guaranteed to become the king of the realm's successor.

The king of the realm's eyes flashed with appreciation. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, your majesty! This seal is an emblem of royalty, and we can't allow it to fall into an outsider's hands!"

Chapter 685: Abrupt Refusal

The king of the realm nodded. "Very well. If you've made up your mind, I certainly won't stop you. I have half the jade seal here, and it can allow you to sense the other half automatically. Remember that alien races often have strange and unusual powers. Be cautious, and take whatever manpower you need."

The crown prince announced, "Your majesty, I would like Master Hong's support!"

The king of the realm frowned. "Master Hong isn't one of my court officials, so you'll have to ask his opinion. Master Hong, what say you?"

The king of the realm would be able to command anyone else in court but Zhang Lie—to the king of the realm, Zhang Lie was immensely strong, so strong that even he didn't have a good sense of Zhang Lie's full capabilities. In fact, he even felt a small prick of danger when he focused his attention on Zhang Lie.

The crown prince turned to Zhang Lie and politely requested, "Master Hong, would you do me the honor of hunting down the jade seal with me?"

"I apologize, but I refuse," Zhang Lie replied instantly, again startling the court officials.

To be frank, if Zhang Lie were willing to dedicate all his resources to the task, the Jinghun wouldn't survive for any more than a few days, but the problem was that he didn't support the crown prince. If the crown prince were indeed able to recover the jade seal, the king of the realm would likely make him his successor immediately.

If Zhang Lie were to help the crown prince do so, the crown prince would certainly be indebted to him when he became king, but Zhang Lie simply didn't care. Compared to supporting the crown prince,

Zhang Lie would much rather support the ninth prince, because that was what he had promised.

When the officials who had thrown their lot in with the crown prince heard Zhang Lie's abrupt refusal, they were all quite upset. Was Zhang Lie looking down on the crown prince?

"Who are you to reject the crown prince's offer? You should be grateful that he's extending you an offer himself!"

"You're just an alien—do you really think that we need your help?"

None of the officials who spoke up were present during the royal hunt, because those who were present would surely not have dared speak up. After the royal hunt, even the king of the realm was courteous toward Zhang Lie.

The crown prince, seething with anger, turned and glared at the officials who had spoken to make them shut up. Subsequently, he bowed to Zhang Lie. "Master Hong, thank you for considering my request."

"Are you unwilling to lend your assistance against the wretched Jinghun clan, Master Hong?" the king of the realm asked. He was quite worried about what might happen if the crown prince were to set off alone; if Zhang Lie were accompanying him, he didn't have to worry about anything—it would be the Jinghun's problem then.

Zhang Lie replied, "I'm certainly interested in participating, but I believe that the crown prince is acting too rashly."

...he certainly couldn't reveal his true thoughts, that he didn't want to go because he didn't want to see the crown prince become the king of the realm.

Despite the crown prince's earlier warning glare, one of the court officials supporting him retorted, "What exactly do you mean? Bringing back the jade seal is the responsibility of royalty—our responsibility! How dare you claim that your cowardice is the crown prince's rashness!"

"The crown prince has always thought deeply about his actions, and he's never rash when he proposes such plans."

"Refusing an invitation is disrespectful enough, but you're besmirching his highness's reputation outright!"

Zhang Lie smiled wryly. "Don't you think that the Jinghun are anticipating such a chase?"

The ninth prince nodded. "Master's words are very reasonable. By now, the Jinghun should have realized that they only possess half the jade seal, and that his majesty can track them with the other half."

Zhang Lie concluded, "It's only to be expected that the Jinghun would have a trap waiting for anyone chasing after them."

The king of the realm and the crown prince were both silent.

Finally, the crown prince replied, "In that case, should we allow the thief to leave uncontested, leaving the succession of the throne broken forevermore?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "No, certainly not—but we don't have to rush. Leave the wormholes sealed. The Jinghun only have half the seal, and they'll surely want to claim the other half as well. All we need to do is wait—they'll certainly find their way back here themselves."

"For how long?" the crown prince asked.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "That's difficult to say. At most one or two decades, perhaps?"

The king of the realm called out, "I'm afraid we cannot leave the jade seal, the emblem of royalty, in the hands of outsiders for so long. Master Hong, state your conditions! What will it take for you to accompany the crown prince on this mission?"

Zhang Lie smiled wryly. "Your majesty, it's not that I'm unwilling to go, but rather that I'm unable to."

The king of the realm frowned. Was he refusing even to negotiate?

"If you don't mind my bluntness, your majesty, I'm afraid to die!"

The court officials all began to laugh, but the princes and those who had participated in the royal hunt did not. They knew of Zhang Lie's abilities—how could he, a man whom even the king of the realm respected, be afraid of death?

The king of the realm sighed. "Fearing death is a natural instinct, and I can hardly compel you to accompany the crown prince."

He understood very well that Zhang Lie's 'fear of death' was simply a euphemism—Zhang Lie believed that the crown prince would end up falling into the Jinghun's trap, killing himself and losing his remaining half of the jade seal.

Zhang Lie bowed. "Your majesty, please allow me to speak bluntly. The piece of the jade seal that remains is your biggest advantage, and you shouldn't give it up so readily."

"I will take your analysis into account," the king of the realm replied coolly.

"Do you have any suggestions besides waiting?" the crown prince asked Zhang Lie.

"I can help you interrogate the Jindao, your highness."

"Interrogate the Jindao?"

"Indeed—I am certain I can make them speak up!"

The official responsible for the interrogation harrumphed. "Despite all our efforts, we've not been able to get the Jindao to crack. What do you think you can do that we can't?"

Zhang Lie didn't reveal the extent of his abilities. "I can give it a try, but I can't guarantee success. All I'll reveal is that I have special abilities."

Zhang Lie was certain that his disaster-grade mistmeld clam soulshard was superior to any technique the aliens had.

The king of the realm nodded. "Very well. Let Master Hong give it a try!"

Subsequently, the court session was overtaken by quite a few uninteresting affairs regarding the reconstruction of the palace and restoration of the capital, followed by countless trifling affairs related to the beast stampede in the capital. Zhang Lie found himself almost falling asleep as he listened to the officials recounting their problems.

After an interminable period of time, when the skies were finally turning dark, did the king of the realm finally dismiss the court.

Zhang Lie vanished immediately, leaving just an afterimage behind.

The king of the realm shook his head with a sigh. "Ninth prince, please stay behind. I have some things that I need to discuss with you."

By the time the ninth prince returned to the palace, Zhang Lie was already asleep. Even so, he woke Zhang Lie up by shaking the bed. "Master, I have a question for you..."

Zhang Lie yawned lazily. "Ask me tomorrow. I'm far too tired after that dreary session at court."

"Can't you go to sleep later, Master?"

"No..."

Chapter 686: To the Interrogation Chambers

To be frank, Zhang Lie would be fine even if he didn't sleep at all. As a disaster-grade lifeform, Zhang Lie didn't need to eat or sleep. Eating just allowed him to maintain bodily function, but given his gene fragments, he would be fine even if he didn't consume anything for decades, let alone sleep.

Whether or not Zhang Lie wanted to sleep depended on his mood; he wanted to preserve a shred of humanity, after all.

After how boring court was today, all he wanted to do was sleep that boredom away—not because he was tired, but because he wanted to do so.

The ninth prince eventually gave up shaking Zhang Lie's bed, and he only woke up deep into the night. By then, the ninth prince had already fallen asleep, and he had left a plateful of food for Zhang Lie on the table.

Zhang Lie had a few bites before thinking back to what had happened that day in court, along with the conversation between the king of the realm and the crown prince.

A moment's thought was all that it took for him to be certain that a calamity would descend on the world.

The next morning, when the ninth prince woke up, Zhang Lie was glancing at him.

"Did you have something to ask me?"

The ninth prince nodded blearily. "I have a few questions for you once I wash up, Master!" Once the ninth prince had done so, he sat down by Zhang Lie's table.

"Master, I'd like to know why Father wanted to get rid of the Qian clan."

"Didn't you see at court?"

The ninth prince replied seriously, "Because he was so angry at my second brother's death—or his own safety—that he couldn't control his rage? But surely he wouldn't get rid of the three major clans of the capital so simply!"

"That's part of it, certainly, but your father isn't the type to let his emotions cloud his judgment. He truly is incensed, but the Qian clan has a network throughout the entire kingdom. At worst, he should have punished the Qian clan gravely, but this is too extreme."

The ninth prince mulled over Zhang Lie's words. "Do you mean that there's something I'm missing, Master?"

"Indeed, the most important reason for the king of the realm's actions: he's running out of time."

The ninth prince was startled.

"It's not unusual that you missed it—most people wouldn't have noticed."

"What? How could that be! We all saw in court today that the king's strength had returned to around its peak level! I couldn't even bear to look at him directly. Won't he live for at least two or three more decades?"

Zhang Lie began to laugh. "Hah! Given your father's health, even a few more months might be difficult. It's precisely because he's running out of time that he doesn't need to conserve his strength any longer."

The ninth prince frowned. "Master, you mean that Father's just feigning strength?"

"That's right. I think he must have been injured after fighting the disaster-grade lifeform. This sort of acting is very common, and you know your father's capable of it—just like how he pretended to be weak for a few decades despite having quite a fair bit of strength left. Now, it's the opposite."

The reason he had pretended to be weak was to draw out his opponents, and the reason he was now pretending to be strong was to terrify anyone who had been planning to make a move. The king of the realm was truly a skilled actor.

"Your father knows that he won't be able remain king for long, so he has to push the crown prince to become king right now. He has to clear out all the obstacles that might hurt the crown prince's

succession, so he's using the Qian clan as an example to prevent the other powers from making a move."

The ninth prince thought back to what happened at court. "No wonder—Father looked to be exasperated and impatient, and I thought that was because the capital had been attacked and he had lost face as a result."

"In some sense, the Jinghun have helped us. If the complete jade seal were in the king of the realm's hands, we would have witnessed the crown prince's coronation within the next few weeks.

"Now that half the jade seal is missing, if the crown prince is unable to reclaim it in time, the coronation won't be able to proceed. This delay is particularly beneficial to us, because it allows you to grow as a candidate."

The ninth prince nodded. "So that's why! I was wondering why you didn't go with the crown prince to seek out the Jinghun, Master."

"Do you have any other questions?"

"None related to court—but I'd like to know when we're setting out."

"Have you received the deed of land?"

"No."

"In that case, what's the rush?"

The ninth prince scratched his head in embarrassment.

"Join me at the interrogation chambers—we'll speak with the Jindao together."

The ninth prince scrambled to get ready. "Master, what are your plans for developing the land?"

"We'll do it by eye."

With the ninth prince leading the way, Zhang Lie quickly arrived at the interrogation chambers, but the officials responsible for the interrogation were rather unwelcoming. It was only reasonable: Zhang Lie was an outsider with no credentials to his name. If they, trained professionals, were unable to deal with the Jindao, what did this outsider think he could accomplish?

"Don't make trouble for us, do you hear?"

"Don't waste my time. Let's get going!"

The two men stared coldly at each other before the official led Zhang Lie into the building, past a set of thick, steel doors. Five Jindao were imprisoned in a cell, wounds striping and scarring their bodies, their skin dyed red with blood. They had clearly been under torture.

The official commanded a few servants to upend buckets of water over the prisoners, forcing them awake.

As the Jindao blearily opened their eyes, they began to laugh. "You're here again? Well, keep it up—come on!"

The official folded his arms with a smirk. "Go on."

Zhang Lie smiled confidently. "Brute force isn't always the solution, you realize."

"Oh?" the official retorted. "You don't think we've tried to turn them on each other, to bribe them to talk, to dangle freedom before them?"

It was precisely because none of these methods had worked that the interrogation was going so poorly.

"Of course not—but I have a superior method." Zhang Lie's eyes glowed with rainbow light as he activated his disaster-grade mistmeld clam soulshard.

The Jindao's eyes took on a rainbow sheen.

Zhang Lie commanded, "Reveal all you know about the Jinghun clan!"

Chapter 687: Complete Hypnosis

The Jindao were completely hypnotized by Zhang Lie's mistmeld clam soulshard.

Like a marionette, he began, "The Jinghun are an intelligent race from the Milky Way, and are considered among the hundred strongest races there—"

Zhang Lie broke him off. "I know all that. What I want to know is whether or not you encountered any of the Jinghun after entering this world."

The court official in charge of interrogation was shocked—even their best efforts hadn't produced any results with the Jindao, but Zhang Lie had gotten them to talk with nothing but words alone.

"Yes," the Jindao replied.

"When?"

"Before the plan was enacted, we met with the Jinghun."

"What did you discuss?"

"The specifics of the plan."

"Do you know where in this world the Jinghun are hiding?"

"Within the capital. It's very likely that they're in the palace."

The official's eyes opened wide, as did the ninth prince's. The palace? The king of the realm was right here! How could he not have sensed their presence?

The official interrupted, "Where in the capital are the Jinghun located? Where in the palace?"

It would certainly be dangerous for an enemy to be hiding right by the king of the realm. No one but Zhang Lie had considered this possibility; they had underestimated the audacity of the Jinghun clan.

When the Jindao remained silent, the official began to panic. He shook the Jindao violently. "Where are the Jinghun hiding? Tell us!"

On the other hand, Zhang Lie wasn't surprised. He had listened carefully to the second prince's words before the second prince died.

"It looks like the reason the Jinghun are able to safely ensconce themselves in the capital is because they're being protected by some stronger force. If I had to guess—probably a crown prince?"

The official turned, alarmed by Zhang Lie's seditious remarks. "Do you mean that the Jinghun are supported by one of the princes?"

"That's the most likely possibility."

The Jindao nodded. "You're correct. The Jinghun are supporting one of the princes."

"Which one?"

"We don't know either," the Jindao replied.

The official gritted his teeth. "Are you planning on hiding information even at this critical juncture?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "They can't lie to me at the moment. Presumably, the Jinghun never revealed this information to the Jindao."

The Jindao replied, "It was Warlord Jin Yu's hypothesis that the Jinghun were supporting a prince."

Zhang Lie rubbed his jaw. "It looks like the warlord knows something we don't, doesn't he?"

It wasn't likely that these grunts would be privy to more sensitive information, after all—which made it more of a pity that Zhang Lie had killed this warlord already.

The official turned around. "I'll report this to his majesty immediately!"

Zhang Lie motioned for him to stay. "There's no rush. Let's finish the interrogation first."

Turning back to the Jindao, he asked, "What other forces do the Jindao have on this world?"

"There are none. The others all left before the betrayal."

The ninth prince sighed. "They've thought of everything, haven't they?"

"Give me more specifics about your plan."

"Our goal for helping the second prince was to obtain the primordial starflower, but we found that it would be quite difficult for him to beat the crown prince. Then, the Jinghun suddenly approached us."

The official summoned the guards standing watch to fetch brush and parchment.

The Jindao continued, "The Jinghun revealed that they had a plan and wanted the cooperation of the second prince. Initially, the second prince refused, but he was ultimately unable to resist the Jinghun's temptation."

One of the other Jindao added, "If I recall correctly, the Jinghun said something along the lines of, 'Would you really be satisfied with being a prince, rather than the king, your entire life? Can you really stand the notion of the crown prince stealing your fame and glory? You're half a step from the throne—won't you regret walking away now? You're no worse than the crown prince!'

"Naturally, after these words, the second prince couldn't refuse the Jinghun's offer.

"Using the Qian clan's network, the Jinghun were able to implant their shards on quite a few lifeforms, which they then transported to the hunting grounds. Thanks to the second prince's authority, nobody doubted or reported their actions to the king of the realm.

"Right before the plan was about to be enacted, the Jinghun found us and suggested that we prepare a safeguard."

"Is this when you worked out the idea of burgling the imperial treasury?"

The Jindao nodded. "Both we and the Jinghun clan suspected that the king of the realm wasn't as weak as he appeared. If he truly were that weak, there would be no way to promote the rate of growth of beasts within the hunting grounds."

"So you made use of the second prince?"

The ninth prince smiled wryly as he listened to Zhang Lie's questions. In the end, the second prince, who thought himself a man of wit and cunning, was nothing more than a plaything in the aliens' eyes.

The Jindao nodded. "The Jinghun also seemed to want something from within the imperial treasury, so our goals were aligned. If the second prince were to succeed, we wouldn't have to do anything; if he were to fail, we would burgle the imperial treasury."

Zhang Lie summarized calmly, "The Jinghun were responsible were creating the beast stampede targeting the capital, while the Jindao started a revolt within the palace."

The Jindao nodded. "That's right. The second prince was essentially a backup plan."

In the end, neither of the alien races had looked favorably on the second prince's chances.

There were so many princes that, even if the second prince successfully killed the crown prince, he was unlikely to take down the others as well. The second prince's plan was, in truth, no more than a delusion on his part.

The ninth prince frowned. "But you began to act even before matters at the royal hunt concluded."

Zhang Lie shrugged. "They were likely signaled by the Jinghun."

"Our plan was perfect. The king of the realm would be weakened trying to curb the stampede at the royal hunting grounds. It would take him all his strength to rescue the crown prince, subdue the second prince, and finally quell the threat of the disaster-grade lifeform.

Of course, the best-case scenario would be if the crown prince was killed in the attack, which would have been so heavy a blow to the king of the realm that our chances would have risen dramatically."

Unfortunately for the Jindao, they hadn't planned for Zhang Lie's appearance. The king of the realm was able to focus on the disaster-grade lifeform while Zhang Lie handled the second prince's treachery.

Zhang Lie whistled. "Giving up on a warlord for your plan—well, you certainly took quite the gamble."

"Sacrifice is necessary, because this matter affects our entire clan."

Zhang Lie's interest was immediately roused. "The primordial starflower can save your entire clan?"

Indeed, the Jindao had dedicated two warlords for this mission alone...

"Right, because it might be able to get us a higher-grade limit-breaking potion!"

Upon hearing the words 'limit-breaking potion', Zhang Lie's eyebrows rose all the way to his scalp.

Chapter 688: Independent Research

He was the inventor of these limit-breaking potions in this life. At this period in time, he was certain he possessed the most knowledge of these potions out of anyone in the entire galaxy—so he was even more astounded to hear about this from the Jindao.

The Jindao continued, "In order to develop potions suitable for the Jindao, corresponding to the mutated-grade limit fragments provided by Potion #2, any sacrifice is worth it."

The ninth prince asked Zhang Lie, "Master, what are these limit-breaking potions?"

There was no one better the ninth prince could have asked.

The strongest limit-breaking potions in the Milky Way were developed by Zhang Lie alone. He was their inventor and their foremost researcher, and he controlled over eighty percent of the limit-breaking potions available in the Milky Way, as well as over ninety percent of the ingredients and spiritual herbs required for the potions. The remaining ten percent were largely general-use herbs that were available in large quantities.

And yet, despite all his knowledge and his stranglehold on these limit-breaking potions, he had never expected to hear about them from the Jindao in the third realm. He didn't intend to reveal all this to the ninth prince, however; it would be meaningless.

Even though Zhang Lie himself didn't respond, the hypnotized Jindao did it for him. He shouted passionately, "A hero whose intelligence and courage has overcome the very heavens! In the second realm, he overthrew the sura and founded a kingdom of his own, pulling humanity out of the weeds of the weak. He is the champion of mankind and the discoverer of these limit fragments, Zhang Lie!"

...Zhang Lie? Champion of mankind, who founded a kingdom in the second realm...? The ninth prince peered at his master, his lips twitching.

Zhang Lie hadn't wanted to expose his identity too early on, but now...

The Jindao explained, "Limit-breaking potions allow you to increase the number of gene fragments you can absorb, raising the upper limit for the entire race as a whole. At present, only the humans have access to three different limit-breaking potions, whereas the other races of the Milky Way are far behind. With the help of Zhang Lie, several races have begun making headway, but they've only developed one such potion so far."

Zhang Lie frowned. He murmured to himself, "With the help of the limit fragment research society, the one that Amurong had spearheaded? Surely not—if that society were behind all this, the world would have fallen long ago."

The strongest races of the Milky Way had pooled their assets to fund this society, and destroying a middle-sized world in the third realm was well within their capabilities.

The Jindao continued, "According to our investigation of these limit fragments, the primordial starflower will be a vital ingredient for our race's Potion #2."

Zhang Lie sighed in relief. "An internal investigation, then..."

He could hardly have known that the Jindao's rebellion was all for a limit-breaking potion, but it did make sense. Now that Zhang Lie had published the recipe for his limit-breaking potions, each race was competing to come up with variants suitable for their consumption.

"Our plan should have been flawless. The king of the realm would have rushed back to the capital to deal with the beast stampede along its borders, giving us an opportunity to sneak into the imperial treasury."

Zhang Lie asked, "What would you have done if the king of the realm had chosen to return to the capital to quell your uprising instead?"

"Given the king of the realm's weakness, Warlord Jin Yu would have been able to stall him for long enough for our plan to succeed. The Jinghun warlord also lay in ambush."

Zhang Lie recalled Jin Yu, whom he had fought. Given Jin Yu's defensive ability, he really might have withstood the king of the realm's assault for some time, and the Jinghun's own warlord would have provided critical support.

However, no one predicted Zhang Lie's involvement. If not for Zhang Lie, the Jindao and Jinghun's plans would have succeeded already.

Given Zhang Lie's understanding of the Jinghun, he believed that they had a third objective in mind: weakening the king of the realm.

This seemed like an intricate plan to Zhang Lie, but it was commonplace for the Jinghun; the second prince, and even the Jindao clan as a whole, were both just pieces on a gameboard for them. The Jinghun's unbelievable ability to scheme and manipulate was why they were so hated by one and all.

Zhang Lie asked the Jindao a few more questions, but was ultimately unable to obtain more information about the Jinghun. He called the interrogation off.

By now, the official in charge of the interrogation was simpering to him, his original arrogance gone. "Master Hong, I am truly grateful for your assistance. I must report this to his majesty at once—for the Jinghun to be lurking by a prince's side is far too dangerous a thought to behold."

"Hold it." Zhang Lie's eyes shone with a rainbow gleam, mirrored in the official's gaze.

The ninth prince frowned. "Master, what are you doing?"

"I'm simply removing some information from his head that I'd like to keep a secret."

For instance, Zhang Lie didn't want anyone else to know how his mismeld clam soulshard operated. The official had understood it as a form of hypnotism, but Zhang Lie had hidden that understanding away and replaced it by something inscrutable; all the official would be able to say was that Zhang Lie used some mysterious technique to get the Jindao to speak—just like how someone with no knowledge of Chinese might be able to recognize that certain logograms were Chinese characters, but with no idea of what they meant.

Zhang Lie had preserved his memories but obscured his understanding.

"We've gotten all that we came here for. Let's go!" Zhang Lie commanded.

The ninth prince asked, "Where to next, Master?"

"I'm tired. I'm going back to your quarters to sleep."

He had learned quite a wealth of information from the Jindao, but none of it was particularly actionable.

However, the king of the realm didn't give Zhang Lie the opportunity to sleep. The moment they returned to the palace, they received a summons from the king.

When Zhang Lie arrived at the king's quarters, the king praised, "To think that the Jinghun were in the palace! You've done very well, Master Hong."

"It was nothing, your majesty."

"Which prince do you think the Jinghun are working with?"

"To be frank, we haven't caught sight of any of the Jinghun to date—we don't even know how many of them are present in this world. I don't have a good guess."

"How many of the Jinghun would be required to control such a large group of beasts?"

"At least thirty. More, since they had to cause a havoc in both the hunting grounds and the capital simultaneously."

"I understand," the king replied, nodding. "Excellent work. I've just had the fifth-level beast core extracted, and it's a convenient time to gift it to you." The king of the realm clapped his palms and commanded that the beast core be presented to Zhang Lie.

Chapter 689: A Massive Improvement

The disaster-grade core was golden. It gave off light as bright as a radiant sun, with so much energy gathered near its surface that Zhang Lie felt his palms pricking with pain just by getting close to it.

Zhang Lie bowed. "Thank you, your majesty!"

"You've now done the kingdom another great service by getting the Jindao to talk. What other reward would you like?"

The official responsible for interrogation suggested, "Master Hong has a unique technique for dealing with such criminals and suspects. If Master Hong doesn't mind, how about obtaining a court position working with me?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "I'm too used to my freedom by now."

The official sighed. "It's a pity."

Despite having observed and overseen the entire interrogation, the official still couldn't make heads or tails of what Zhang Lie had done. He was surely very accomplished in the field, with an incredible talent for interrogation.

The king of the realm nodded. "If you don't have any ideas at the moment, I can wait. Let me know when you've decided what you want."

"Very well."

Zhang Lie left the king's quarters and returned to the ninth prince's quarters, where the ninth prince badgered him about what the king of the realm had wanted.

"Nothing much, just a few details about the Jindao. In the next few days, I'm going to be in closed cultivation. Unless something major happens, don't disturb me."

The ninth prince nodded.

When Zhang Lie returned to his room and retrieved the disaster-grade lifeform's golden core, the radiant brightness shone through even the walls of the estate.

Zhang Lie cut his palm with his sword, then dripped blood onto the core. The moment it touched the radiant golden core, the blood was quickly absorbed into its interior. It sucked up more and more of Zhang Lie's blood until it turned blood-red.

Zhang Lie had to reopen the wound a few times before the transformation was complete. Then, he closed his eyes and began pouring concentrated rainbow-colored genetic energy from his body into the core.

It took him an entire hour before he felt the core start to soften. After another ten minutes or so, the entire core had softened completely.

As Zhang Lie clutched the crystalline orb, he felt some unusual sense of kinship with it, as though it was already part of his body. Once he felt such a sensation, Zhang Lie couldn't resist his impulses any longer, and he swallowed the core whole.

As the core slid down his throat, Zhang Lie felt as though he were swallowing a flurry of metal shards which penetrated his throat and exploded in his genetic core.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but suck in a prolonged breath, his face turning pale. Subsequently, almost immediately, Zhang Lie took on the color of a boiled prawn. Disaster-grade energy swirled around his body, and his blood began to froth and steam.

Zhang Lie's blood boiled. Energy ran rampant throughout his body, causing blood to seep out of his pores and boil in the air. A haze of white steam surrounded him.

The pain was unimaginable, but Zhang Lie's pain tolerance had been rising sharply. After all, in the second realm alone, he had suffered such pain ten times before.

Closing his eyes, Zhang Lie began to circulate genetic energy through his body. As his blood boiled, his body began to glow. It gave off a radiant golden light, dyeing the entirety of the ninth prince's quarters gold.

The king of the realm frowned as he turned toward the source of the disturbance. "Have the ninth prince's quarters be sealed off."

Zhang Lie's body seemed to have as much energy as a supernova. A frightening current of energy seemed poised to tear Zhang Lie to shreds, then rebuild him from whatever remained. The disaster gene fragments reformed his body from the inside out.

Genetic energy circulated through his framework, faster and faster. As he assimilated the disaster gene fragments into his body, Zhang Lie gave off stronger and stronger beams of light.

Circulating genetic energy through his body now took just over half a minute, an incredible and previously unimaginable speed, and his evolution was spurred further and further onward by the energy of the disaster-grade core.

His body creaked and ached as it reached its breaking point, his bones breaking and regrowing time and again, his capillaries bursting before coming back thicker and thicker. Golden light burst out of his eyes, mouth, nose, and ears, singeing his eyeballs and tongue. He shone like a miniature sun. He felt as though a tremendous pressure weighed him down, like a mountain was balanced atop his head.

A golden pillar of light rose into the skies at the eve of his transformation, dyeing the entire capital a shade of gold. Some said that a deity from the heavens was paying the king of the realm a visit; others, that the king of the realm had made a breakthrough; and yet others, that this was the prelude to disaster.

Even when the beam of light dissipated, the discussion going on within the capital didn't cease.

By then, Zhang Lie had reined in the light and concluded his first third-realm disaster gene fragment absorption.

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, 10

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

Now that he finally had disaster gene fragments again, Zhang Lie's strength had increased by leaps and bounds.

As he stepped outside his chambers, the ninth prince bowed. "Congratulations on your success, Master."

Zhang Lie nodded. "I'm a little hungry. Can you prepare some food for me?"

"Yes, Master. The third prince is also requesting an audience."

Zhang Lie nodded again. "Have him come dine with us, then."

The three of them sat together at a table, the third prince staring angrily at Zhang Lie.

"You're leaving the capital?" The third prince was here to discuss the ninth prince's choice of reward from the king of the realm.

"There's no reason to stay in the capital—why not leave beforehand?"

The third prince pressed, "What happened to cooperating with me?"

"We can do so from beyond the capital."

"It seems like I've erred in my judgment. You don't have any ambition at all, do you?" The third prince slapped a palm on the table, then whirled around and left.

Zhang Lie continued sipping leisurely at his tea, as though the third prince had never appeared.

Chapter 690: Packing Up

The ninth prince asked, "What's going on?"

Zhang Lie explained, "The third prince needs a partner to take down the crown prince together. From the looks of things, the crown prince will successfully ascend to the throne if he can manage to recover the jade seal, so he wanted to see whether we had any ideas to stop him. However, when you requested land, you basically signaled your intention to leave the capital and to remove yourself from the battle of succession."

The ninth prince ahhed in understanding. "The third prince was trying to make use of us, Master? But you didn't give him what he wanted, so he left in disappointment."

The ninth prince himself was calm. Working together with the third prince was a route to success, but hardly the only one. Victory and defeat would rest with the crown prince and the Jinghun.

Zhang Lie said, "As I've told you, the Jinghun have basically given us the time we need to prepare. You still have a chance at victory."

The mountain that lay to the back of the Wang clan's land was known as Jianzu. [1]

Only a few members of the Wang clan were permitted into this restricted area. All those who retired from the Wang clan would reside in Jianzu and take on the surname Jian, instead. Few of the clan lived in Jianzu, but everyone who did had surpassing talent and strength.

The Wang clan head himself entered Jianzu, stopping at an idyllic patch of land halfway up the mountain, where an old man was farming the fields.

He seemed not at all special. His hair and beard were white, and his skin bronzed from long exposure to the sun. He was just like an ordinary farmer—but an ordinary farmer on Jianzu was surely extraordinary.

This was sacred territory for the Wang clan; no one who lived on Jianzu was anything less than exceptional, and the more ordinary he seemed, the stronger he had to be.

The old farmer's actions were precise and perfect in every respect, and he almost seemed like a robot as he mechanically went about his tasks. His body was perfectly in tune with nature. If the Wang clan head weren't paying attention, he might have overlooked the man completely.

He strode to the side of the field and stood silently until the old man finished with his tasks. Only when he had finished everything did the old man wipe his face with the kerchief hanging by his neck.

He turned to face the Wang clan head. "Ah, child! Why have you come over all of a sudden? Surely it's not to observe my farming techniques?"

The Wang clan head smiled. "Elder, it looks like you've passed yet another threshold of strength."

The old farmer waved a hand. "Not an elder, no—I'm just a plain farmer."

The Wang clan head smiled. "Elder, please don't be modest. When the Wang clan suffered trial and tribulation, barely hanging on to our last lifeline, you were there. If not for your assistance, our clan would have been wiped away."

Before the king of the realm ascended to his throne, the Wang clan, who supported the king, made an enemy as strong as ten of the Feng clans. When the Wang clan was about to be destroyed by that enemy, an arc of sword energy pierced the heavens and defeated the enemy from afar.

"I was still nothing more than a child back then. Being able to witness such a divine skill was a tremendous honor."

Only when he became the Wang clan head did he learn about the truth behind Jianzu and its inhabitants.

The elder wasn't a genius in his youth, unlike Jian Mo. In fact, his swordwork was only ordinary, and his talent was average. At the time, the Wang clan was being threatened by an enemy clan. Its geniuses fell in battle; its swordsmen were whittled down. Even the bladeswielder of the elder's generation had perished.

When the elder was sent to the battlefield, his performance was middling at best. He barely eked out a victory each time—or barely escaped, narrowly avoiding death. It was because of this lack of talent that he survived two whole centuries in the clan, until a new generation of Wangs revived its strength.

When the elder retired, he gave up on his sword and retreated to Jianzu, where he farmed and lived off the land, entirely forgotten by the rest of the clan. Even when older members of the clan retired to Jianzu, they were surprised to see a farmer farming there.

If not for the elder's sole strike on the eve of the Wang clan's defeat, no one would have realized that such an undefeatable existence lived on Jianzu.

The farmer drank from a huge bowl of tea like a cow gulping down water, then sighed in comfort. "There's no need to go around in circles. If you've come to find me, you must have encountered a problem of some sort."

The Wang clan head nodded. "Indeed."

The old farmer sat down on the earth, then picked up a pipe from nearby. "What's the problem?"

"The reputation of the Wang clan."

"I'm not interested."

The Wang clan head frowned. "Elder—"

The old farmer broke him off. "The Wang clan should maintain its own reputation—why bother me? One of the reasons everyone who retires to Jianzu changes their name is to sever our relationship with the Wangs: in hopes that we don't need to control you and rein you in, and that you kids can learn to develop and thrive outside of our influence."

"Jian Mo's dead!"

The old farmer blinked.

The Wang clan head added, "He was killed by an alien."

"Oh, that young fellow?" The old farmer took a pinch of tobacco and lit it with what seemed like a flash of energy with a swipe of his fingernails. He sighed in satisfaction. As he breathed out a smoke ring, his eyes seemed to grow unfocused. "Who killed him?"

The old farmer had quite an impression of Jian Mo, a talented young fellow who was unfortunately too enamored with killing. He hadn't expected that the next time he heard news of him would be about his death.

"An alien..." the old farmer murmured to himself. "Are aliens this strong nowadays?"

The Wang clan head reported, "The man who killed Jian Mo was called Hong Tianqi, and he's going to be leaving the capital in a few days."

The old farmer sighed. "It's been a long time since I left Jianzu. I wonder what the world's like these days? I think I'll have a stroll outside."

The Wang clan head bowed deeply in gratitude.

The ninth prince happily ran back to his quarters with golden parchment in his hands. "The imperial edict is here—and the deed to the land, Master!"

Zhang Lie nodded approvingly. "Let's pack up and set off, then."

In truth, there wasn't much to clean up. The ninth prince was poor to begin with, and all of Zhang Lie's possessions were in his extra-dimensional storage. The two of them left the palace carrying nothing. Zhang Lie asked, "Is there anyone you need to say farewell to?"

The ninth prince rolled his eyes. "Master, you know how I'm treated within the palace."

"In that case, let's set off."

Half a month ago, they had rushed back to the palace; half a month hence, they were leaving without a care. Too much had happened in those two weeks, and the ninth prince's life had changed irrevocably. A decade and a half of being a prince had hardly aged him as much.

The last time he was forced to turn away from the palace, he had been caught in one of his brothers' plans. This time, he was turning away from the palace of his own accord, chasing an elusive victory.

The ninth prince of the present and the ninth prince of the past were hardly comparable...