

U. Warlord 691

Chapter 691: An Old Farmer

White and Whiter were kept just outside the ninth prince's palace, alongside Red Comet.

The food made with the peak- and superior-grade lifeform meat that Zhang Lie and the ninth prince couldn't finish all went to the three lifeforms. The food had been specially prepared by imperial chefs and was fit for a prince; White and Whiter had both grown fat.

After consuming so much high-quality meat, the three lifeforms had all grown tremendously. Their bodies boasted far more strength than before, though they had yet to fully absorb and convert that energy to strength.

Zhang Lie patted White on the stomach. "White, you've grown fat! As though you were five months pregnant."

The ninth prince sighed as he poked at Whiter. "Whiter, if you grow any fatter, you might not be able to move."

The two black leopards had gorged themselves without exercise until their bodies had swollen to the size of Persian cats.

"If you keep growing fatter, you'll become like Garfield," Zhang Lie warned.

The ninth prince asked, "What's Garfield?"

"A very fat cat."

White howled in dissatisfaction, either because Zhang Lie had called it fat or because it was announcing that it was a cat.

Zhang Lie patted him on the head. "Alright, alright. It's time to get going now."

Zhang Lie rode on White, and the ninth prince on Whiter. The two leopards howled and leapt forward. Red Comet's wings whirred as he kept pace with them.

At the same time, in the imperial palace, the crown prince was getting ready to set off.

"Are you leaving now?" the king of the realm asked, seated on the throne.

The crown prince nodded. "My preparations are ready, and it's time to leave."

The king of the realm sighed. "It's a pity that Master Hong was unwilling to accompany you. With his help, you would be sure to recover the seal."

The crown prince seemed a little shocked. "Not even you can command him, Father?"

"I'm getting old," the king of the realm sighed.

The crown prince truly was startled. His father had all but admitted that his strength was inferior to Zhang Lie's. Perhaps in his prime, he might have been able to coerce Zhang Lie into going on the expedition, but no longer.

The king of the realm tossed a chest on a table to the crown prince. He caught it, opened it a slit, and saw radiant, multicolored light so bright he was dazzled. He hurriedly shut the chest again.

The crown prince promised, "I'll recover the jade seal in its entirety!"

The king of the realm waved him away. "Go."

After he left, the king of the realm's gaze turned icy cold. "It's well past time to find these Jinghun for myself."

By then, Zhang Lie and the ninth prince had already departed from the capital.

Zhang Lie and the ninth prince encountered no trouble on their way to the land the king of the realm had bequeathed them. As they passed by a city and recalled the day they met Wang Jian, the ninth prince's eyes lost focus for a moment. He asked, "Master, do you remember this road?"

"A little, I think."

"You killed the Wang clan's bladewielder right here." The ninth prince pointed before them, only to find a farmer standing where Wang Jian had once stood. He was seated on a stool and leisurely smoking a pipe.

Zhang Lie and the ninth prince immediately tried to steer clear to prevent a collision, but the old farmer halted them with a wave of his arm, sending a streak of sword energy forward and barring their path. Zhang Lie deflected the blow with water-attuned genetic energy at his fingertips.

The old farmer asked, "The ninth prince and Master Hong, correct?"

Zhang Lie frowned. "Who sent you here?"

The old farmer raised his head and looked at the sky, as though he couldn't hear Zhang Lie's question. "It's been a few decades since I left the mountain. This time, I realized that the world has truly changed. The king of the realm has grown old, and the capital was actually attacked! Quite a few alien forces have gathered within—I can't imagine it. In my time, there was only ever the Yinlian."

Zhang Lie frowned. The farmer before him had no aura whatsoever, and he seemed to be perfectly ordinary. His hair and beard were white, and his skin bronzed. He seemed to be the quintessential image of a farmer.

However, he seemed perfectly attuned to nature, with flashes of sword energy occasionally visible from his aura.

"You're truly strong," Zhang Lie remarked. He hadn't expected to see such a master of the sword around. "Are you from the Wang clan?"

He had made many enemies in this world, but only one clan stood out for its prowess with the sword.

"I'm from the Jian clan," the old farmer clarified.

Zhang Lie contemplated his words. "Because of Jian Mo, or because of the third prince?"

Those were the only two incidents he could think of that would prompt such a response.

"It's been a long time since I participated in worldly affairs. Jian Mo died because his skills weren't up to par; it's a pity, but it was well deserved. However, as a senior member of the Jian clan, I can't simply let his death go so easily. That's why I'm here today.

"I've been on a mountain for decades, and I'm quite curious as to the world's strength at large. If you can defend against one of my blows, I'll annul whatever grudge lies between my clan and you."

Zhang Lie smirked. "Sounds like a bargain for me."

"Will you give it a try?"

"I will. I'm quite curious about your strength."

A bamboo pole appeared in the farmer's hands. It was a perfectly ordinary pole, but the moment the farmer picked it up, his aura changed. He transformed from an old farmer into a swordsman of yore. No sword energy billowed from him; all of it had already seeped into heaven and earth.

The breeze that blew by was a blade; the water vapor in the air was a blade. A leaf spun around by the wind was a blade. The earth in the ground was a blade; the cloud passing through the sky was a blade. With the old farmer at its center, a world of blades shot toward Zhang Lie.

As the blades split the air, the trees around Zhang Lie fell one by one.

Zhang Lie didn't move. He stood still, and the sword energy dissipated all around him. Zhang Lie seemed like a tall mountain, a vast sea, a starry sky, an impenetrable galaxy. Just his aura alone was able to suppress the sword energy emanating from the old farmer.

"Very interesting. It's been too long since I met an opponent of this caliber. Jian Mo didn't die in vain," the old farmer remarked.

Killing intent surrounded the old farmer, pouring into the bamboo pole he was using as a sword. The pole exploded, and the killing intent manifested in the form of a black blade.

With just one glance, Zhang Lie identified that the old farmer's sword style was exactly the same as Jian Mo's, though there was a marked difference between the old farmer's technique and Jian Mo's, or even Wang Jian's.

When facing the latter two swordsmen, Zhang Lie found it difficult to identify whether it was the man controlling the sword, or the sword controlling the man. Killing intent had corrupted their mind and soul; Jian Mo's corruption, in particular, had been absolute.

However, the old farmer had mastered the technique with the wisdom of age and experience. His blade killed not for the sake of slaughter, nor for the sake of worldly affairs, but by whim and whimsy alone...

Chapter 692: The King's Death

In other words, the old farmer's understanding of the blade had reached a level that neither Jian Mo nor Wang Jian could ever hope to replicate. He manifested a blade with his own aura as support, then spurred it forward with killing intent.

Zhang Lie leisurely stretched out two fingers.

The ninth prince grew alarmed. Even he felt that Zhang Lie was taking the farmer's attack too lightly. He knew how strong Zhang Lie was, and he was certainly very confident in Zhang Lie, but could he really survive this blow with just two fingers?

Even he, hardly a swordsman at all, could sense the burgeoning power behind the blow.

The old farmer's swordsmanship was extraordinary. It wouldn't be a problem for Zhang Lie to defend against the blow, but doing so with just two fingers was the height of arrogance.

The blade struck Zhang Lie's fingers with a clink. The ninth prince watched the confrontation warily—was Zhang Lie really going to succeed?

With two fingers, he was pinching the black blade. Genetic energy erupted from his body and was transferred to his fingers. He gave off the impression of a mountain so tall it touched the heavens, a sea so vast it was without end.

The waves of the sea battered the black blade until a crack marred its surface.

The old farmer's eyebrows rose. Ever since he had attuned himself with nature, none had been able to block his blows.

However, Zhang Lie succeeded in doing so where all others had failed.

"Two fingers are enough," Zhang Lie stated, his tone calm, as though he had done nothing more strenuous than pluck a flower from the roadside.

The old farmer's will seemed immense, but the sword—the bamboo pole—was perfectly ordinary. As long as Zhang Lie could block all that sword energy, he had nothing to fear. Of course, overwhelming the farmer's will was hardly easy; only Zhang Lie could do it so readily.

The old farmer nodded to himself. "You're indeed very strong. As promised, the feud ends here."

"Hm? I don't think I said you could leave, did I?" Zhang Lie's voice remained calm even as he threw a punch at the old farmer. "[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!"

Ripples of air formed around Zhang Lie's arm, growing more and more intense as Zhang Lie combined spatial force with his water-attuned genetic energy.

Wind blew all around the two combatants. The trees that hadn't fallen from the farmer's blow were now uprooted whole. Even the ninth prince was unable to remain standing. Luckily, Whiter moved quickly and bit him by the hem of his clothes, anchoring him to the ground.

White, Whiter, and Red Comet all hunkered down as they retreated.

The attack seemed to have drawn the attention of even the will of the world. As Zhang Lie infused more energy into his arm, the entire world seemed to shake.

Zhang Lie's aura rose rapidly. The water-attuned genetic energy swirling around him condensed around his arm, kneading space as though it were nothing more than paper.

The old farmer frowned, his heart pumping. Had he underestimated this opponent?

Zhang Lie continued charging up his punch, packing what seemed to be an entire sea of energy in one blow.

"I defended against your blade; now, you'll defend against my fist."

The sea devoured everything in sight.

The old farmer struck with a thrust, trying to split the torrent of water coming his way into two. However, he hadn't realized just how frightening and dense the attack was. This sort of attack wasn't something a person could defend against; it was a blow that could spell doom to the entire world.

Against the torrent of compressed water, the farmer's attack was meaningless.

The old farmer struck forward with a dozen slashes, each of which would have felled a premier fighter of the era—but even a dozen, then six dozen, then over a hundred such slashes could hardly mitigate the force of Zhang Lie's attack.

As the flood was on the brink of swallowing up the old farmer, black sword energy burst forth from him, shattering everything around him.

By sacrificing his strength, the old farmer forcibly stopped the attack short—but Zhang Lie's attack was more sophisticated than that.

Zhang Lie emerged from the torrent of water, his fist still clenched tightly shut.

The sky began to crack as the accumulated energy in Zhang Lie's fist reached a critical threshold. As he punched forward, the old farmer flew out into the distance, blood pouring out from his mouth and tracing an arc in mid-air. He fell to the ground limply, spasming a few times before turning still.

Zhang Lie snorted. "Do you really think that I, Zhang Lie, would be so easy to subdue? You should have been prepared to suffer the consequences of defeat!"

Zhang Lie grabbed the old farmer by the neck. Before he could shut his eyes for the last time, Zhang Lie's eyes glowed with rainbow light as he activated his mistmeld clam soulshard.

Very quickly, the old man's gaze took on a rainbow sheen. Zhang Lie subsequently tossed the old man back down and threw him a vial of Yeluo restorative.

When the old farmer drank the potion, his wounds recovered quickly.

Zhang Lie asked, "What's your name?"

"I have many names, most lost to time. Two centuries ago, I was known as a bladewielder, then subsequently as an elder and a farmer. Now, they all call me Jian Zu, and I've forgotten my original name."

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "Very well. From today onwards, you'll be known as Jian Nong." [1]

The old farmer bowed. "Thank you for granting me a name, Master."

After subduing Jian Nong, Zhang Lie motioned for White and Whiter to come over. Neither leopard dared resist, though they were still skeptical about the old farmer.

The ninth prince, stupefied by what he had witnessed, immediately asked Zhang Lie, "What happened to him?"

"Nothing. From today onwards, Jian Nong here will be your bodyguard," Zhang Lie replied.

"Jian Nong?! Alright..." The ninth prince didn't think it was wise to continue questioning Zhang Lie, lest he reveal something too shocking for the ninth prince to comprehend.

After Jian Nong, no one else barred Zhang Lie's path. He and the ninth prince headed to the city closest to the land they had just acquired. As they drew close to the city, the ninth prince couldn't help but ask, "Master, how are we going to develop the land?"

"There's no rush. Let's see what the nearby cities are like first."

The party wandered around the border of their land through the neighboring cities and villages. Zhang Lie spread his rainbow mist wherever they went.

All sorts of accomplished craftsmen and masters of their trade left in pursuit of Zhang Lie, their entire families in tow, toward the ninth prince's new territory.

"What are your plans, Master?" the ninth prince pressed again.

"The most important issue we have to deal with right now is manpower and talent. Trying to acquire these through regular means would take far too long, and extraordinary circumstances demand extraordinary action."

Zhang Lie had hypnotized a large number of the indigenous citizens of the kingdom to help the ninth prince construct a city.

"I have plans for the city's layout and structure. With so much manpower, it should be finished in no time at all."

Just as the citizens were laying out the foundations for what would eventually be the ninth prince's city, however, the skies turned blood-red. Mourning cries echoed over the horizon, as though the entire world were grieving a loss. The ninth prince stood stock-still, disbelief radiating through his features.

Zhang Lie frowned. "What's going on?"

"Master, my father is dead!"

Chapter 693: Preparing for a Counterattack

Let time rewind until the third day since the crown prince left the capital.

The king of the realm, as usual, was dealing with paperwork in his study. He rubbed his brows and murmured to himself, "I truly am getting old, aren't I..."

He had heard nothing from the crown prince over the last three days, and he couldn't help but be a little worried. However, there was nothing he could do but await the news of his return.

Just what were the Jinghun doing? Were they really in the capital? According to the half of the jade seal he had remaining, there were no Jinghun in the capital at all.

No one knew that the crown prince's half of the jade seal was fake. The king of the realm didn't dare trust the crown prince with such a precious object; in other words, the crown prince was just bait for the Jinghun.

The king of the realm was mulling over what to do next when a servant came by bearing a bowl of soup. "Your majesty, the imperial chefs have prepared a thousand-year-old lotus soup for you."

The king of the realm frowned. "I don't believe I ordered them to prepare it."

The servant replied, "We servants requested it upon seeing how tirelessly you were working, your majesty."

"Is that so?"

The king slowly reached out to the soup—but he dropped his hand immediately upon seeing a flash of malice in the old servant's eyes.

"Leave it be. I don't have the habit of drinking soup at night."

The servant seemed to turn anxious. "Yes, your majesty! I'll pour it away immediately!"

"It would be a pity, wouldn't it? Too wasteful to just discard it—why don't you drink it instead?"

The king of the realm grabbed his servant's neck and poured the soup down his throat.

The servant clutched his neck in pain as he keened. His face gradually turned black, and his body withered.

The king of the realm sighed. "Two whole decades—and you betrayed me at the last."

"Save me, your majesty..." The servant reached out weakly with a hand before slumping to the ground.

Claps resounded throughout the palace as a man slowly made his way inside. "Impressive, very impressive! To think that the king of the realm would remain so wary even in his advanced age! I must say, we've underestimated you."

If he was nervous, the king of the realm didn't display it. He narrowed his eyes at the unwelcome intruder, whose body was composed entirely of white, translucent, crystalline matter. Within the crystal were arcs of light which darted back and forth throughout its interior.

The king of the realm asked, "Are you a Jinghun, then?"

The man introduced himself. "I am Ren Kunjing, 56th warlord on the rankings, and I'd like to have that half of the jade seal that remains in your possession."

The king of the realm shook his head. "Unfortunately, I don't have that half of the jade seal with me."

"You might be able to fool others, but not this." Ren Kunjing took out the half of the jade seal that he possessed. It was a huge block of jade, the size of his fist, with half a soaring dragon carved on it—its other half was on that part of the jade seal that the king of the realm possessed.

Upon seeing the other half of the jade seal, the king of the realm's eyes brightened. "Excellent! I hadn't expected that the Jinghun would hand the jade seal back so easily. I suppose I have to accept this gift, don't I? Though I am curious as to why I had been unable to sense the seal until now."

"That's simple, isn't it? The jade seal wasn't in this world until moments ago, and not even the king of the realm would be able to sense it."

"So you brought the jade seal to another world... well, none of that is important. Now that both halves of the jade seal are present, the proof of kingship is once again complete."

"Indeed?"

A flash of blinding light disoriented the king of the realm. Subsequently, before he could do anything, the aging king found his head dismembered from his body.

Zhang Lie and the ninth prince heard about the news from the badly wounded crown prince. They were astounded to see him so badly injured, and even more so once he had relayed the news of the king's passing.

The crown prince then summarized to them what had happened.

The Jinghun, having successfully acquired the jade seal in its entirety, hoisted the eighth prince to the throne. By the time the crown prince found out about the incident, it was already too late. He had no choice but to rush back overnight with the troops defending the border.

Simultaneously, the other princes, the two indigenous clans, and the Heijie and Yinlian, all attacked—but none of them could defeat the Jinghun, and they were slaughtered almost to the last.

The ninth prince asked, "What about Father? What happened to him?"

The crown prince replied, "You saw the heavenly phenomena, didn't you?"

The skies had turned blood-red, the will of the world itself cried out in sorrow...

The ninth prince sank to the ground. "In that case, Father has really passed away..."

Zhang Lie asked, "What of the other princes?"

The crown prince shook his head, and Zhang Lie frowned. "What does that mean?"

"The eighth prince sentenced them all to death!"

The ninth prince's eyes widened. "What happened to our eighth brother?"

"He's not our brother anymore—just a puppet of the Jinghun."

The ninth prince didn't understand. "Why did the Jinghun make the eighth—him be the king?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "He's the easiest to control, undoubtedly."

The crown prince added, "Before Father died, he made a change to the rules of succession as a safeguard: only those who were related to him by blood could become the king of the realm."

For this amendment to dissolve on its own after his death would take anywhere between a hundred to a thousand years, and the Jinghun can't afford to wait that long.

Furthermore, the Zijing turned out to be a subordinate race to the Jinghun!" [1]

Zhang Lie hummed. "Interesting that they would make a move right after I left..."

The crown prince sighed. "Master Hong, if you had been present, you might have been able to prevent this tragedy!"

The ninth prince asked, "Master, what should we do now?"

"Kill our way back, of course!" Zhang Lie replied immediately.

The crown prince said, "As part of the ceremony for the eighth prince to inherit the throne, the Jinghun will host a lavish celebration in the capital, and that's our best opportunity to strike. It's

slated for four days' time, and if we rush back now, we'll just barely make it. However, there's one big problem—"

The ninth prince turned to Zhang Lie. "Master, how confident are you in your abilities?"

The crown prince added, "The strongest forces of our world were unable to take down the Jinghun. Can you succeed?"

Zhang Lie coolly replied, "With the king of the realm dead, no one in this world can stop me."

His eyes radiated a rainbow gleam.

Jian Nong suddenly interrupted, "What happened to the Wang clan?"

The crown prince frowned. "You're, you're—the famed forefather of the Jian clan?!"

Jian Nong asked, "Oh? You recognize me?"

The crown prince bowed to him. "How could I forget you, Elder?"

Jian Nong shook his head. "I'm no elder. I used to be a farmer, and now I take care of cats." Jian Nong had spent his days in captivity looking after White and Whiter.

The crown prince couldn't help but stare at Zhang Lie in shock. Was this an elaborate joke? The man in front of him was clearly the esteemed elder of the Wang clan, he who was the strongest blademaker of this generation! How could he be a cat caretaker?!

Chapter 694: Storming the City by Force

The crown prince's voice was tinged with excitement. "With your help, Elder, I'm sure we'll have a good chance at success."

Jian Nong's expression remained calm. "You haven't yet responded to my question. How is the Wang clan now?"

"Elder, the Wang clan worked together with us to resist the Jinghun, but we were ultimately all defeated. I don't know what happened in the end, but with Jianzu protecting the Wang clan, I suspect the clan territory is still safe."

Zhang Lie instructed, "We set off immediately. We'll deal with all this mess before the eighth prince is crowned."

It took them only two days to return to the capital, but by then, the Jinghun had already taken control over it all.

As they glanced toward the city walls from afar, the crown prince asked, "What should we do next —"

Before the crown prince could finish his question, Zhang Lie was already taking action.

Ripples of air formed around Zhang Lie's arm, growing more and more intense as Zhang Lie combined spatial force with his water-attuned genetic energy. The streams of water revolved more and more quickly around his wrist, augmented by the two streams of energy, summoning what seemed to be a massive whirlwind. The crown prince stepped forward and shouted, "Hold on!"

However, he was too late.

As Zhang Lie punched forward, that energy erupted in a flood, arcing through the air and swamping the entire capital like a giant tsunami.

When the guards on the city walls saw what was happening, their faces turned alarmed. "An enemy attack!"

However, their voices were drowned out by the flood of water, which crashed against the tall, sturdy walls of the capital and broke a gigantic gap through it.

The crown and ninth princes stood frozen in shock. The capital, which had survived all manner of assault for millennia, had just been broken through by Zhang Lie. How many enemies had the wall stopped? How much invaders' blood had the wall absorbed? And yet, despite all that, the wall crumbled with just one punch.

The walls were hardly shoddy; Zhang Lie was just too strong.

The entire capital shook in the aftermath of the punch. After the flood of water, the water-attuned genetic energy exploded through the air, sending pulses of energy that covered the entire capital. It seemed almost as if a disaster-grade lifeform had gone on a rampage within the capital, sending wind and rain so strong that some of the guards were blown straight off the walls.

Zhang Lie's genetic energy shot through the gap in the walls and annihilated whatever it touched.

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 became unstable.

The crown and ninth princes continued watching the aftermath of the attack in shock.

Behind the walls stood nothing but rubble. None of the guards who were patrolling the walls were anywhere to be found; they had either been blown away or had fallen to the ground as the walls did.

The crown prince's lips twitched. "Master Hong, we came here in order to prevent the Jinghun's dastardly plans, not to destroy the capital."

"I know!"

The crown prince felt as though he were about to pull out his hair. You know? And yet you still punched down the city walls? Don't you know how much damage that would cause to the city's foundations?

Zhang Lie knew what the crown prince was thinking, but he was unperturbed. "I simply want to resolve this problem as quickly as possible."

The crown prince retorted, "Your attack would have drawn the attention of all our enemies! You—hold on, was that your intent?"

The crown prince realized that Zhang Lie really was trying to deal with everything with brute force alone—and indeed as quickly as he promised.

Quite a few members of the Zijing and some of the scaldemen rushed over to check out the problem.

Neither of the two princes were surprised to see some of the scaldemen working with the eighth prince. Despite the fact that the eighth prince was in cahoots with the Jinghun, he was still a prince in his own right, and he held the jade seal that was proof of kingship.

The Zijing were formed out of purple crystals. They and the accompanying scaldemen rode out to the site of the incident on superior- and peak-grade mounts. There were three hundred or so Zijing and a few tens of thousands of scaldemen, but they were less frightening than the mounts that they rode.

Likely, over half the superior- and peak-grade lifeforms in the entire world were gathered in the capital of this kingdom.

The Jinghun had prepared for this takeover for years, decades even, and they wouldn't allow for anyone to get in their way. The stampede that had occurred at the royal hunt was nothing compared to what came at Zhang Lie and the others now.

One of the Zijing leaders rode up to them. "Hah! To think you would come running back here—we were wondering how to chase you down."

One of the scaldemen shook his head. "All your guards who gave up their lives for you to escape, crown prince, and here you are again! They've wasted their sacrifice!"

The crown prince shouted, "Where's the eighth prince?"

"His majesty is preparing for his coronation with Warlord Ren Kunjing."

"Let that bastard come out here!"

The Zijing leader smiled. "Why don't you and the ninth prince come into the city instead? Come witness the eighth prince's coronation."

The ninth prince frowned. "This is improper—the king of the realm hasn't received a proper burial, and you're already trying to hold a coronation?"

"The kingdom can't go without a king for too long, after all."

The crown prince frowned. "Having no prince on the throne would be better than having the eighth prince there."

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "Why bother trying to reason with them? We'll fight our way in."

The Zijing leader grew noticeably displeased. "Do you think you can get through me? I'm the 99th warlord on the leaderbo—"

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Quake]!" Zhang Lie punched forward, shattering space and causing a massive explosion that struck at the very will of the world. Another boom of energy rippled through the capital, and the 99th warlord disappeared from the face of the world.

"This trash is fit to be a warlord?"

Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea] was more destructive than a hurricane. Even before the superior- and peak-grade lifeforms could do anything, they were blown away along with the Zijing and scaldemen mounted on them. The Zijing's bodies disintegrated in midair, as did the scaldemen who had sided with the Jinghun.

The will of the world's voice continuously rang out in Zhang Lie's head as he received notifications for his kills, but Zhang Lie ignored them all...

Chapter 695: Destruction in the Capital

Only then did the turncoat scaldmen guards regret siding with aliens and the eighth prince. They had received no advantage to doing so. They were sent out as cannon fodder against Zhang Lie, where they were quickly annihilated.

The effect of Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea] set off explosions through the streets, as though he had launched a cannon rather than punched with his fist. Even then, not all the energy from the attack had dissipated. As the attack spread through the capital, the ground began to cave in.

The entire capital seemed to have sunk by a few dozen centimeters, and the area directly in front of Zhang Lie and the two princes had turned into a huge, abyssal pit whose bottom couldn't be seen.

It seemed to stretch endlessly, and neither prince could make out any of the flesh or blood that had surely fallen in. Their foreheads began to bead with sweat. The crown prince, in particular, hadn't seen the extent of Zhang Lie's strength.

The only blow of Zhang Lie he had witnessed was within the hunting grounds. He knew that Zhang Lie was strong, but not this ridiculously strong. Was Zhang Lie truly still a biological lifeform? He was a monster! Just one punch had decimated thousands of superior- and peak-grade lifeforms, along with countless scaldmen and the warlord of the Zijing.

The crown prince was certain that Zhang Lie had been hiding his strength during the royal hunt—what he was displaying now was his true strength.

If the crown prince were to learn that Zhang Lie hadn't been hiding his strength during the royal hunt, and had instead grown this much between the royal hunt and the present, he would be even more shocked.

By now, Zhang Lie had maxed out his superior and peak gene fragments—and not just the standard 100 fragments, either, but also the 50 limit fragments for each type. All that, combined with his ten disaster gene fragments, meant that he was at a completely different level of strength in comparison to his previous self.

Indeed, trying to compare Zhang Lie to his past self was an insult; they were simply incomparable in terms of strength.

Would anyone compare a regular-grade lifeform to a disaster-grade one, or an ant to a dragon? If Zhang Lie were to encounter Warlord Jin Yu again, he would be able to crush him before the warlord could activate his defensive abilities.

Even the ninth prince, who had remained by Zhang Lie's side all along, was surprised by the strength he could marshal. Jian Nong himself was sweating. He was very glad Zhang Lie hadn't fought him seriously, or he wouldn't have been able to survive.

Just as the crowd stood stupefied by Zhang Lie's attack, a beam of light pierced the skies from the center of the capital. The formless will of the world descended from the heavens.

The crown prince grew alarmed. "The ceremony's about to begin!"

The eighth prince and the Jinghun's actions were faster than predicted. Zhang Lie and the others had rushed over at their fastest speed in order to stop them before the ceremony could begin, but the eighth prince and the Jinghun had sped up as well to prevent such an occurrence.

Inheriting the position of the king of the realm required the will of the world's agreement. The eighth prince would have had to let the will of the world familiarize itself with him by communicating with it through the jade seal, and this was a process that would normally have taken three days or so. The eighth prince and Jinghun had, however, worked so quickly that their preparations were all complete.

"Regardless, I got here in time!" Zhang Lie leapt off the ground straight for the heart of the capital, followed by White and Whiter.

As they grew closer to the pillar of light, they saw a gigantic altar—an elevated stage—around which the Jinghun and large numbers of court officials were gathered. Atop the stage, the eighth prince held the jade seal high over his head with both hands. A beam of light emanated from the seal and struck the skies, sending feathers of light floating down and dancing around the eighth prince, a sign of the will of the world's attention.

Ren Kunjing turned to the unwelcome intruders and jeered, "Crown prince, you were too late!"

The eighth prince's body slowly rose into the skies. The crown prince gritted his teeth and yelled out, "Damn it, the link to the realm is starting!"

The eighth prince roared in laughter. "Eldest brother, I was nothing to you before. No one thought well of me, and everyone thought well of you. Even so, I'm the victor today!"

"You, who killed your brothers and your father—no bastard like you will ever call yourself my brother!"

The eighth prince shouted back, "When I take on the authority of the king of the realm, I'll sentence you all to death!"

"Aren't you ashamed? Joining hands with aliens to kill your own father—how can you stand to face us at all?"

"You think you're so great after doing well in the royal hunt, ninth brother? You're nothing compared to me, nothing!"

The ninth prince grew so angry his eyes were almost bulging. "Wake up, eighth brother! The Jinghun are just treating you like a puppet—they're making use of you!"

The eighth prince grinned disdainfully. "Look how jealous you are! Scram—since you're so weak, I won't mind sparing your life.

Otherwise, just you wait until I become the king of the realm. I'll destroy both of you together if you continue opposing me!"

Zhang Lie said not a word. He lifted his arm and punched forward. Genetic energy transformed into a frightening dragon, one which rushed toward the eighth prince with domineering authority. It broke through the sound barrier, sending peals of thunder around the capital.

Ren Kunjing leapt into the air and moved to defend against Zhang Lie's attack, but he couldn't stop Zhang Lie's genetic energy from exploding in mid-air, spreading out around him like a hurricane of water. Howling gales and a maelstrom of water terrorized the capital, sending buildings flying through the air. The altar splintered and cracked, and the eighth prince barely maintained his footing.

Ren Kunjing tried his best to disrupt the flood. However, despite being pushed back by Zhang Lie's dragon, he ultimately sent the dragon, who had been heading straight to the altar, flying up into the air, whereupon it exploded in a sharp burst of light.

The crown and ninth princes were incredibly shocked to see Ren Kunjing deal with one of Zhang Lie's punches seemingly unharmed, but no one could see that Ren Kunjing's hands were still trembling, that there were cracks spiderwebbing through the crystalline substance that made up his body.

Furthermore, he had hardly countered or neutralized the attack, just diverted it.

He frowned and asked coldly, "Who are you?"

Zhang Lie didn't respond to his question. Instead, he looked him up and down and asked, "Are you a Jinghun?"

Ren Kunjing snorted. "With this level of skill, you certainly can't be nameless. I've met all the warlords ranked above mine, but I've never heard of the likes of you."

The eighth prince continued floating in mid-air. Wisps of formless energy cradled him as the jade seal radiated with light. A multicolored heart manifested, releasing dazzling rays of rainbow light with every thump.

The heart slowly descended into the eighth prince's chest, trailing rainbow skeins of light.

This was the heart of the world! It granted its bearer the authority and might of the king of the realm, and it was currently assimilating with the eighth prince's body. Once the assimilation was complete, he would become the true king of the realm...

Chapter 696: Kneel!

"Haha, I can feel it already—an immense, boundless power! I'm merging together with the very world itself... is this the power of the king of the realm?"

The eighth prince roared in laughter, causing the crown prince to become more and more agitated.

The ninth prince didn't know how to stop the eighth prince by this point, either.

Ren Kunjing narrowed his eyes. "No matter who you are, once the eighth prince is crowned, we'll have won."

One of the Jinghun shouted, "Wouldn't it have been better for you to hide out in who-knows-where? And yet you came right back here to die! I really don't understand how some people think. We've made more preparations for the success of our plan than you could ever hope to overcome."

Just as the Jinghun thought that they had grasped victory, the eighth prince's body suddenly began to expand.

"What's going on? What's happening to me?" The eighth prince's body ballooned, as though massive tumors had begun growing out of his body.

Even the Jinghun around the stage had no idea what was happening.

"Hold on, hold on! I don't want to become the king of the realm anymore!" The eighth prince began to shriek in an attempt to stop the ceremony, but it was already too late.

Now that the ceremony was in progress, there was no stopping it.

The eighth prince's body grew larger and larger, like a squirming meatball, as the rainbow heart continued pouring energy into his body.

Finally, as the eighth prince's body grew past a critical threshold, it exploded, scattering bits of blood and flesh all over, as though he were a rotten watermelon.

The jade seal fell to the ground.

Everyone stared at the stage with shock and horror. The jade seal, dyed red with blood, gave off an eerie, otherworldly light, as though it had been cursed.

Zhang Lie sighed. "As expected."

When Ren Kunjing came to his senses, he gasped, "A trap left behind by the king of the realm!"

The crown prince, who seemed to have thought of something, suddenly raised his head to the skies and laughed.

Ren Kunjing frowned, dissatisfaction evident on his face. "What are you laughing at?"

The crown prince laughed again. "At your stupidity."

"What do you know?"

The crown prince countered, "Do you know why princes must learn to cultivate?"

One of the Jinghuns hedged, "Isn't it to allow the princes to protect themselves better?"

"It's to be able to handle the strength afforded the king of the realm," the ninth prince murmured in realization, surprising both Ren Kunjing and the crown prince.

The crown prince nodded. "Father told me about this once. The king of the realm is peerless, but assimilating this strength into your body requires that you be strong in your own right as well."

Ren Kunjing's face turned pale. He knew where the Jinghun had gone wrong now—and, given the faces the Jinghun were making, so did the rest of them.

The crown prince laughed even more wildly. "What a joke, what a joke! You Jinghun allowed the eighth prince to do whatever he wanted in order to make him easier to control, but you also caused him to give up on his cultivation.

"Weren't you all confident in your plan? That you would succeed even if the eighth prince was so weak he couldn't even kill a chicken? But none of you realized that a weak piece of trash like him wouldn't be able to absorb the realm's power, did you? Haha!"

Ren Kunjing's abashed expression quickly dissipated. "So what if we've lost the eighth prince? He was nothing but a piece of trash—and we have two other princes right here!"

His words jolted the other Jinghun out of their reverie. "Indeed, the eighth prince was a piece of trash! We laid down all the groundwork for this lad to take the throne, but he couldn't accomplish even that much."

Ren Kunjing immediately changed his target to the two remaining princes. "Crown prince, ninth prince, are either of you interested in becoming the king of the realm? All you need to do is step up onto the stage and pick up the jade seal. There's no need for any more fighting—everything's right here for you."

The crown prince's eyes widened. He hesitated.

The ninth prince sneered. "You killed our father and destroyed our world. Even if we wanted to become the king of the realm, we wouldn't sully ourselves with what you've done."

Ren Kunjing shook his head. "Ninth prince, you're nothing more than a child—of course there are principles you wouldn't understand. Crown prince, you, on the other hand..."

The ninth prince turned to his eldest brother. "Brother, we can't be tempted by these demons! Could you really be satisfied to be one of the Jinghun's mindless puppets?"

Rainbow light, tinted blood-red, continued to emanate from the jade seal lying in the center of the stage.

The crown prince stepped forward unconsciously, as if compelled by an otherworldly force.

However, just as the crown prince stepped forward, Zhang Lie firmly placed one hand on his shoulder and met his gaze. His eyes shone with a rainbow gleam.

Now that the king of the realm was dead, the protection that the king had placed on the princes had dissipated, and they were no longer immune to Zhang Lie's hypnotism.

As the crown prince's eyes glowed rainbow, he snorted and called out, "You surely jest. I, the crown prince of the scapemen, will serve no puppetmasters like you!"

Ren Kunjing sighed. "What a pity. I didn't want to go to any extra trouble, but now it seems like I'll have to use force. Which prince should I target, I wonder?"

Ren Kunjing glanced at the two princes as though they were two comparable appliances he wanted to purchase.

Finally, his eyes landed on the ninth prince. "As irresolute as the crown prince might be, he's an adult, and he'll be harder to control once he becomes king. You, on the other hand, ninth prince—your age is just right. And if we corrupt him too much by accident, well, there'll still be the crown prince left."

Formless energy emanated from Ren Kunjing, making the ninth prince feel as though a black storm were approaching him. Ren Kunjing's eyes looked like a black viper that was wrapping itself around his body. The ninth prince trembled, but he didn't take a step back.

Zhang Lie strode forward and shielded the ninth prince, breaking Ren Kunjing's display of force in an instant.

Ren Kunjing frowned. "There's nothing to gain from going against us Jinghun, fighter."

"Is that so? You, street rats who have to hide from the public eye, think you're strong enough to command me? All of you, kneel!"

With a shout, Zhang Lie's body swirled with rainbow fog.

The eyes of the Jinghun who were staring at Zhang Lie all glowed rainbow. Following his command, they knelt.

Ren Kunjing's mind froze for a moment, but he broke the compulsion by sheer force of will. As he glanced around and saw his companions succumbing to Zhang Lie, he cried out, "What have you done?!"

Chapter 697: Aura of Dominance

The Jinghun shouted, "From today onwards, we serve Master Hong!"

Ren Kunjing glanced at his companions in shock. "Are you all crazy?!"

The Jinghun shook their heads. "No, we've just finally awoken to the truth. How foolish we used to be! We didn't know how magnificent Master Hong was. Only after we met him did we come to understand the reason why we were born."

Even the scalemen who had sided with the eighth prince were kneeling with one knee on the ground.

Ren Kunjing shouted, "Just what did you bastard do to my kin?!"

Zhang Lie countered, "Just what you've done to everyone else, of course."

Ren Kunjing glanced around him at his companions. Their mannerisms had changed all of a sudden, as though they had turned into controlled beasts all of a sudden—no, it was worse! The beasts that the Jinghun controlled would turn into what were essentially robots, but these Jinghun seemed to retain the ability to think. Only their thoughts had been corrupted.

Ren Kunjing could hardly believe this.

The Jinghun boasted particularly strong reserves of mental energy; how else would they be able to control peak-grade lifeforms? Their high mental resilience meant that it was unthinkable for them to be subject to mental compulsion.

Nevertheless, his companions had all begun to kneel down, and it was evident they were being controlled. Just how strong did Zhang Lie's reserves of mental energy have to be to control even the Jinghun?

The more he thought, the more Ren Kunjing's head began to hurt. Suddenly, he felt a strong compulsion to bow down toward Zhang Lie, to prostrate himself on the ground and to lick his feet. As his consciousness eroded away, Ren Kunjing yelled out madly, condensed a small purple crystal in his hand, and stuck it into his brain.

He laughed out loud. "Haha! If I do this, you won't be able to control me."

Zhang Lie was impressed by Ren Kunjing's resolve. In order to avoid being controlled, he was using his own techniques against himself. "But will it be effective, I wonder?"

Ren Kunjing's companions pounced on him from behind and held him down. Ren Kunjing's consciousness flickered as rainbow light trickled out of his eyelids.

The Jinghun housed their mental energy in those crystal shards and used them to power their mental compulsions, but other Jinghun were able to subvert that energy and use it for their own purposes, as though they were hacking into someone else's mind.

"As long as your companions disrupt your hold over yourself, your resistance will be meaningless."

Ren Kunjing roared in outrage, broke free of his companions' holds, and tried to flee, but Zhang Lie stopped him before he could get away. He pounded Ren Kunjing into the ground.

Ren Kunjing's eyes continued to flash rainbow on and off until, with a muted groan of pain, he finally submitted. When he opened his eyes again, they shone with a rainbow gleam.

"I serve only you, Master Hong!" Ren Kunjing declared.

Thus ended the fight against the Jinghun. The calamitous plan the Jinghun had come up with never came to fruition; Zhang Lie controlled them all before it could.

The ninth prince picked up the jade seal on the stage, but Zhang Lie called out, "I don't advise you to try to proceed with the ceremony unless you want to die!"

The ninth prince fretted, "But the world's in turmoil! After the Jinghun made a mess of the capital, we need a capable leader..."

Zhang Lie asked, "Do you want to die?"

The ninth prince might be stronger than the eighth prince, but not by much."

"Master, do you want me to hand the throne to my eldest brother, then?"

"If you want to take control of the throne from behind the scenes, I won't stop you."

"No, I want to inherit the throne. Despite all that has happened, my will hasn't changed."

"In that case, I have an idea."

After the Jinghun were finally subdued, the crown and ninth princes worked together to clean up the mess. When the Jinghun and the eighth prince took control, the Feng and Wang clans were almost destroyed to the last.

The swordmasters of Jianzu rushed down from their mountain to protect the capital, but the Jinghun boasted significant manpower of their own, as well. None of these swordmasters were able to overcome Ren Kunjing, and all they could do was retreat with the rest of the Wang clan, along with the third prince.

The ninth prince sighed in relief. At the very least, not all the princes had perished. The third prince was still alive, as was the seventh.

The Heijie had a particularly strong life-preserving instinct, and they fled from the capital with the seventh prince as soon as they noticed that something was wrong. By the time they returned, however, they noticed that the disturbance had been quelled.

Both the third and seventh princes were shocked.

Zhang Lie had taken down the Jinghun with his disaster-grade mistmeld clam soulshard, and no such terror could strike the capital again.

Meanwhile, the crown and ninth princes successfully handled the restoration efforts together.

After a short discussion, they decided to prioritize the funeral of the king of the realm and of their brothers who had fallen.

In less than a month, the capital was once again in mourning—this time, for the king of the realm and the three fallen princes. A funeral for four members of the royalty, including the king of the realm himself, would be without compare.

The capital was dyed in a holy, sacrosanct 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.

Rows of coffins filled the plaza at the heart of the capital, leading all the way out through the gates of the capital. The major streets were all filled with coffins, a rather sinister sight.

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

The coffin, ornately decorated with gold and jade, was gilded with gold leaf in floral patterns. The third prince stood at the very front, tossing paper money in front of him, while the seventh prince stood with a portrait of the king of the realm. Behind them were three coffins for the fourth, fifth, and sixth princes. Because the princes were so short-handed, they were unable to carry all the coffins at once.

They had no choice but to have the crown and ninth princes carrying the king of the realm's coffin, while the third and seventh princes observed the funeral rites.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth princes' coffins should have been carried by their relatives, but the Jinghun had killed them all. The crown prince's wife and the queen had been ravaged by the guards in the eighth prince's employ.

The former eighth prince, whose actions were unforgivable, was stricken from the register of royalty. Never would history know of the eighth prince's existence, of the betrayal of the Jinghun, or the assassination of the king of the realm.

The king, it would be written, had perished of natural causes as he was handling the affairs of the realm. He had departed in peace, swiftly followed by four of the princes, devastated by the loss of their father and mentor, over the next few months.

History was written by the victors; few knew how much cruelty and evil these lies covered up...

Chapter 698: Another Funeral

With their immediate family lost, the three princes' coffins were carried by their distant relatives.

Paper money fell like snowflakes from the sky.

Behind the princes were an honor guard playing the bugle in a funerary dirge. An oppressive air of solemnity overcame the onlookers.

Zhang Lie had attended such a funeral before; he knew that he was about to experience a rollercoaster of emotions.

As he glanced at the funeral procession, he couldn't help but recall the boy band that the eight princes had once formed. Now, that boy band had dissolved, never to resurface again. Three of the eight princes were resting in those very coffins, and one had been buried who-knew-where.

The eighth prince's body had burst apart as he died, and no piece of him survived intact. All that was left were pieces of mincemeat, and he would only have a cenotaph at best.

On this very street, the seven princes had broken out into song and dance as they carried the second prince's coffin with them. They were all gathered here again, but three princes who had been standing were now lying flat—they who had once carried their brother's coffin were now being carried themselves.

How cruel were the whims of fate!

Zhang Lie's thoughts drifted into errant thoughts of reincarnation and the cyclic nature of life as the funeral procession proceeded slowly onwards.

Paper money floated above the princes' heads, tossed toward them by the onlookers and honor guard. Amidst a flurry of paper money, the four princes began a dirge for the dead. Moving in practiced synchrony, they danced and soared and jumped, the coffin rattling as they moved.

Those relatives from branch families were far less skilled at the ceremony than the princes were—they were nothing more than the princes' accompaniment.

The princes' moves grew wilder and wilder, as though they were breakdancing. Zhang Lie very much wanted to laugh, but he resisted the temptation.

After all, he had known the king of the realm and the dead princes, and it would be far too disrespectful to them to do so. To be frank, Zhang Lie didn't want to attend such a funeral again, but he couldn't help but be drawn to the spectacle.

This performance—no, this funeral—deviated from the last. The last time, the princes only had to lift the second prince's coffin. This time, however, there was one huge gilded coffin and three smaller ones, along with a whole row of coffins to the side.

It was clearly quite difficult for the crown prince and the ninth prince to handle their father's coffin alone. It was designed to be ornamental and was far too large and unwieldy, five times the size of any of the other coffins around. With just two people, it proved extremely burdensome to lift and carry around while dancing, but neither prince balked at the difficulty.

They danced with grace and style, sending the coffin careening through the air and catching it at the very last moment.

If either of the two princes were to make a misstep and send the coffin flying—Zhang Lie couldn't help but shudder at the thought.

The four coffins rolled in the air as the four princes danced. As the remaining citizens of the capital walked on, the crown prince began a song whose dissonance struck Zhang Lie with full force.

"He lay there, as though he were—a fallen leaf, floating in the wind—to his soul we pay our respects, our tears!"

Fortunately, the crown prince was a gifted warrior, and he was able to handle much of the burden of even his father's unwieldy coffin.

The crown and ninth princes sang and danced, keeping the king of the realm's coffin persistently in the air. The thought of the aged king's corpse rolling around in his coffin was too much for Zhang Lie to bear, and he couldn't help but want to laugh again.

In the end, he had no choice but to cover his lips with his hand and clench down tightly. The hardest part about watching the funeral was to avoid laughing—usually, in funerals on Earth, it was precisely the opposite.

The ninth prince took over. "With my mournful voice—I sing out my sorrow, in order that—you can be at ease."

Zhang Lie could never be at ease with such a ceremony.

The third prince stepped forward and continued, "As though you had—dreamt a marvelous dream—never to wake up again—but our love will remain here, here where you spilled blood—in passion and glory!"

The four princes stepped forward together, singing in a chorus, "Please, depart with ease—leave your earthly roots behind!"

The citizens of the capital, their eyes brimming with tears, sang along, "To live is to hurt—there's far too much in life that's unfortunate—! Stand back up, stand back up out of the ruins of our collapse—calm our hearts and breathe in the miracle of life!"

As their voices echoed in the air, the princes continued, "A river of tears we might swallow—but tomorrow will be, it will be, a better day! Strive—strive to persevere, to live without giving up! And when our love and hope face the sun—our tears of yesterday shall evaporate."

The princes, leading the procession, gradually drew closer to the capital. They had clearly conveyed their emotions in their song and dance. All four princes began to cry, touched by the intensity of the moment.

"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!"

The crowd in the plaza split into two, leaving room for the princes to maneuver. The princes placed the king of the realm's coffin right in the middle of the plaza, as though they were giving him the seat of honor, and the three princes' coffins by his side.

"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 princes stood around the coffins like a campfire, clapping their hands as they spun, sang, and jumped.

Their voices, rich and deep, carried through the air...

Chapter 699: Alcohol Transfusion

After the song and dance, the princes gathered in remembrance of the dead.

The crown prince was the first to walk on stage.

"This very day marks the departure of the man I most respected in this world. A virtuous, far-seeing leader—noble and mighty, the ruler of this realm! He bestowed us with warmth and peace, riches and freedom—our greatest leader! Calamity befell him all too soon, and he left before any of us were parped for it."

The crown prince's voice was deeply sorrowful, and it struck the gathered crowd's hearts like a mallet. Everyone could sense the visceral sorrow and pain that filled the crown prince.

"To everyone here, he was a worthy king, the embodiment of a perfect ruler. To me, he was a father, an excellent father who nurtured and encouraged me to become who I am today."

More scaldemen attended this funeral than the last. Everyone had at least a few flowers in their hands—some had a full bouquet or two.

Those with just a few flowers were here to attend the funeral of the king of the realm and the fallen princes, while those with bouquets were here to attend those funerals in addition to those of their loved ones.

Zhang Lie even saw an alien with ten bouquets in his hands, signifying that ten close friends or relatives had perished in the coup.

The crown prince continued orating, "Before the king of the realm left us all, the last time I saw him, he entrusted me with his hopes and expectations. He wished that I would inherit his strength, courage, and intelligence—but in truth, I did not succeed. Compared to him who was almost perfect, I was far too immature."

Some of the aliens began to cry upon hearing the crown prince's speech, as though they too had been caught up in his emotions.

The crown prince's feelings resonated with them and magnified their own.

"As I lifted my father's coffin and recalled the roads we traveled together, the memories we developed—my heart dripped with blood. How I regret not having accompanied him more, how I regret not having seen him before his death!"

The crown prince bowed to a captive audience as everyone clapped and cried, to be followed by the ninth prince. This was the ninth prince's first public speech, but he wasn't nervous. Rather, he was so dedicated to the speech that he had forgotten how to be nervous.

"Those soldiers, guards, and fighters who lie dead, their souls drifting on the wind—for these noble souls, I pay my respects. They may leave no trace in the heavens, but they remain forever in our hearts."

The crown prince's speech commemorated the king of the realm and the princes, whereas the ninth prince's would commemorate those who had been casualties during the coup.

"All our hearts have been ripped apart by loss; 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 ninth prince, in the name of this world, we commemorate the dead who have given their lives that we may live."

The ninth prince observed a moment of silence for the fallen, and the crowd mourned.

"Rest in peace. May your souls head toward a happier future, free of loss and burden."

"Sleep forevermore, brethren."

"You may have departed from your home, but you'll live on in our hearts!"

Everyone in the plaza wiped at their tears. Such was the nature of calamity—it could never be planned for. Some of the more unfortunate had memorialized their fathers just half a month prior; now, they stood and mourned their husbands, their wives, their children.

Such was the cruelty of war.

"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."

The two princes' speeches finally reminded Zhang Lie of a human funeral.

"Friends and family, comrades-in-arms, we hope you will find peace. 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 ninth prince bowed deeply as the crowd applauded.

They dispersed and offered flowers to the dead, starting with the king and princes before moving to their friends, relatives, and loved ones. Flowers were heaped atop the royal coffins, a sign of respect from the masses.

The king of the realm, who had brokered a long-lasting peace for the world with his ascension, was worthy of respect.

The princes gathered once more. They, the guards of the plaza, and the dead's friends and family, lifted up their loved ones' coffins. With the crown prince taking the lead, the princes began to sing and dance as they led the procession out of the plaza.

Only when the king of the realm and princes had been safely buried in the royal mausoleum did the ceremony truly come to an end.

Afterwards, the ninth prince asked Zhang Lie for the method he had spoken of that would allow the ninth prince to ascend to the throne. When he saw what was required for that method, however, he was shocked stiff.

"Master, this is..."

Before the ninth prince lay nothing other than alcohol, huge vats of it.

"You're not looking down on this alcohol, are you? I specially procured it from another world—it'll dramatically increase your body's constitution once you drink it, and allow you to become truly strong."

The ninth prince peered at his master in doubt. "Are you certain, Master?"

Zhang Lie scowled. "Of course! Otherwise, if not for my promise, I wouldn't be sharing this with you!"

The ninth prince unsealed a vat of alcohol and could immediately smell its concentrated aroma.

Zhang Lie continued, "This alcohol is particularly precious—it has to age for over a century to reach full effect."

When the ninth prince swallowed a big cup, his face flushed red. His stomach felt as though it were burning up from the inside, and his body turned the color and consistency of a cooked prawn. Simultaneously, a mysterious strength seemed to flood through him.

"Come, drink some more, drink some more!" Zhang Lie poured more and more alcohol for the ninth prince...

Chapter 700: Eve of Departure

A month later, the ninth prince stood atop a dais, holding up a jade seal with both hands.

As the proof of kingship linked with the will of the world, it descended on the dais, and a pillar of light from the heavens enveloped the ninth prince.

The ninth prince floated in mid-air. Wisps of formless energy cradled him as the jade seal radiated with light. A multicolored heart appeared in the air, releasing dazzling rays of rainbow light with every thump. It slowly descended into the ninth prince's chest, trailing rainbow skeins of light.

This was the heart of the world, which granted its bearer the authority and might of the king of the realm.

The three remaining princes stood quietly beneath the stage, not trying to prevent the ceremony.

Their eyes were ringed with a rainbow gleam; with Zhang Lie's mistmeld clam soulshard at work, they had lost all interest in becoming king.

After consuming large quantities of the alcohol tribe's alcohol, the ninth prince's body was able to merge completely with the heart of the world, unlike the eighth prince.

As the ninth prince inclined his head and roared into the air, the entire world shook. The skies were dyed a vibrant gold. The golden radiance heralded, to all the lifeforms of the world, that a new king of the realm had been born.

The ninth prince felt as though his body were full of energy, as though he could easily control the entire world. He fell to the stage and appeared before Zhang Lie, whereupon he bowed deeply. "Master."

The ninth prince knew very well that his accomplishments were all thanks to Zhang Lie. Without Zhang Lie's presence, he would have died to the pack of superior-grade lifeforms chasing after him.

Without Zhang Lie's presence, he wouldn't even have managed to return to the capital safely.

Without Zhang Lie's presence, he wouldn't have managed such impressive feats during the royal hunt.

Without Zhang Lie's presence, he would have remained the powerless ninth prince.

Without Zhang Lie's presence, he wouldn't have acquired the king of the realm's jade seal.

Without Zhang Lie's presence, he couldn't have become the king of the realm, no matter what.

As a result, even after becoming the king of the realm, he remained wholly respectful of Zhang Lie—no, more so.

Zhang Lie had finally fulfilled his promise to the ninth prince. He nodded in satisfaction. "Very good. You might be the new king of the realm, but you were ultimately aided by external factors. Remember that your strength is all you can count on for certain, so don't fall behind on your cultivation. Otherwise, you won't be able to maintain your position stably."

Subsequently, the ninth prince convened his first session of court.

He sat on the throne where his father used to sit as he watched the hundred officials of court kneel and bow to him.

Zhang Lie glanced at the ninth prince, smiling at him as though the ninth prince were his son.

Upon seeing Zhang Lie's smile, the ninth prince's first commandment was, "Grant my master a seat!"

Very quickly, the guards rushed over with an ornate seat, which was placed before any of the officials. Zhang Lie sat down with a smile.

The ninth prince—no, now the king of the realm—proclaimed, "From today onwards, my master need bow to no person, not even me!"

The ninth prince didn't grow infatuated with his newfound power. It was precisely because he had become the king of the realm that he was now aware of Zhang Lie's limitless strength, which was able to upend the entire world.

As for Zhang Lie, the reason he had favored the ninth prince was largely because he understood the ninth prince's character. Otherwise, he would hardly have spent so much effort on him.

One of the more senior officials, envious of Zhang Lie's treatment, advised, "Your majesty, this sort of thing..."

Even he, an elder who had served two kings of the realm from almost the very beginning, hadn't received such preferential treatment—but now Zhang Lie, a newcomer to court, didn't have to show anyone else respect?

The king of the realm replied, "Were it not for my master's assistance, our world would have fallen to the Jinghun. If not for the fact that my master has expressed a desire to leave, I would even go as far as to instate him as premier to the court. Anyone who raises an objection shall be sentenced to death! Furthermore, I grant my master the title of duke, the Duke Yongheng!" [1]

The officials were all astounded. The previous king of the realm had never conferred the status of nobility to anyone, let alone as high-ranking a position as duke. The king had ruled alone for what seemed like an eternity.

In principle, dukes had to answer to the king of the realm, but in practice, their dukedoms would be like independent countries.

As a duke, Zhang Lie wouldn't need to obey the king of the realm's commands, and he would be able to collect his own taxes, field his own troops, and even raise a standing army. In other words, he would have a personal kingdom of his own.

The previous king of the realm hadn't abolished the notion of nobility, but the fact that the king of the realm had refused to use that power over the course of his long tenure spoke to his dissatisfaction with it.

The court officials were all in a hubbub because of the king's latest pronouncement, but before they could refute the king's judgment, a wave of rainbow fog passed over them all.

The king of the realm waved a hand and dispelled the protection of the realm from court. As a result, the officials were struck by the full force of the fog. They knelt as one and shouted earnestly, "The king is wise! Long live the king!"

After becoming the king of the realm, the ninth prince learned that his power could, to some extent, suppress the ridiculous power of hypnotism that his master possessed.

He also learned that Zhang Lie had never used that hypnotism on him, leaving him relieved and even more respectful of Zhang Lie. "Master, if you don't mind, I'll grant you the land that I received from the previous king."

The land was in the process of being developed when the incident with the eighth prince and the Jinghun happened, and it was quite a pity.

"Thank you, your majesty," Zhang Lie replied.

The ninth prince continued, "Master, how do you plan to deal with the Jinghun?"

"They have quite useful abilities, so I think I'll keep them with me."

The king of the realm sighed. "Unfortunately, I don't know what they've done with the primordial starflower. I apologize, Master, but I can't fulfill the promise I made to you initially. As compensation, please, take anything you want from the imperial treasury."

"Very well."

"What will you do next, Master? Do you have any plans for the future?"

Zhang Lie asked, "Are there any more disaster-grade lifeforms around here? The fifth-level beasts you speak of."

The king of the realm leaned back in contemplation as he accessed his powers. After a few moments, he smiled. "None that have fully formed, but there are two that are about to evolve."

"Oh? Not bad. I'll wait for them to evolve into disaster-grade lifeforms before killing them. I intend to use this world as a base while I conquer other worlds to find disaster-grade lifeforms within."

"Do you need any support? Some troops, perhaps?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "There's no need. You just became the king of the realm, and it won't look good if you start dispatching troops to conquer other worlds. There's no need to worry about my business. Restore the capital and stabilize your position first."

"Yes, Master!"

Zhang Lie turned and called out, "Jian Nong, while I'm not around, you'll guard him for me!"

In principle, after becoming the king of the realm, the ninth prince should have been the strongest existence in this world apart from Zhang Lie, and even if he somehow encountered an opponent he couldn't face, he would be able to escape using the authority innate to his position.

However, Zhang Lie knew that there were no absolutes in the universe. The king of the realm wasn't impossible to kill; the death of the old king was a cautionary tale.

This period, during which the king of the realm was still acclimating to his skills and authority, would be when he was the weakest. Furthermore, the king had obtained his strength from Zhang Lie's alcohol, rather than from proper training, and it would take him time to consolidate that power.

Jian Nong wasn't all that strong, but he would do in a pinch. With him around, it was unlikely that the new king would suddenly fall.

Jian Nong didn't dare refuse Zhang Lie's command. He immediately nodded. "Yes, sir!"