

Starlit Path 108

Chapter 108: The Capital's Reckoning and the Rise of Dragons

Hooves splashed through blood, scattering it three feet. Jiang Li's face was grave, while the nine envoys bearing the emperor's decree paled. The scene before them was a living hell. In the distance, Nie Changqing wiped blood from his butcher knife, Ning Zhao glided forward, and Yi Yue coiled her whip. Luo Cheng and the five hundred Beiluo cavalry turned at the sound of hooves.

Jiang Li remained composed. The envoys, however, quaked; one, caught by Ning Zhao's glance, fell from his horse, blood staining him. "I am Jiang Li of Drunken Dragon City," he said, bowing from horseback.

Nie Changqing nodded, Ning Zhao smiled, and Yi Yue studied him curiously. Luo Cheng and the cavalry buzzed with excitement—Jiang Li, Great Zhou's war god, was a legend they'd heard of but never seen. Without further words, Ning Zhao and Yi Yue boarded the carriage. Nie Changqing, knife in hand, took the driver's seat. "It's done. Back to Beiluo," Ning Zhao's voice came from behind the curtain.

Nie Changqing grinned, turned the carriage, and drove through crimson blood, glowing like fire in the sunset. Luo Cheng bowed to Jiang Li, leading the cavalry to flank the carriage as they left the capital. "Beiluo's White Jade Pavilion, the world's foremost cultivation force..." Jiang Li murmured, picturing a mysterious youth in white, seated in a wheelchair. "They say Lu Ping'an is petty, and it's true. The capital's nobles spread that proclamation, and without a word, he sent five hundred cavalry and three cultivators to bathe the city in their blood. Utterly unreasonable."

Shocked by White Jade Pavilion's ruthlessness, he scanned the corpse-strewn street, exhaled, and rode toward the palace. Zhao Kuo's rebellion signaled a seismic shift. Ignoring the envoys, Jiang Li entered the palace unhindered. The city guards clashed among themselves, blood coating the palace's white jade steps. The stench of death choked the capital.

Jiang Li, face stern, fought through, rallying loyal guards. Though summoned as a disgraced minister, he was still Great Zhou's servant. His name carried weight, restoring the guards' resolve to drive back Zhao Kuo's rebels. Without drawing his sword, he wielded a spear, its flourishes pinning a rebel leader. He pressed on to the palace gardens.

There, he halted his troops. On a stone bridge, Yuwen Xiu stood in a blood-soaked dragon robe, a black dragon with coral-like scales and four claws coiled around him. Its scales glinted in the sunset as it eyed Jiang Li, scales flaring like an enraged lion. Yuwen Xiu held a dripping sword, Zhao Kuo's headless corpse at his feet, two grandmasters dead nearby. The old eunuch knelt, silent.

Hearing hooves, the dragon slipped into the pool, blood from Yuwen Xiu's sword rippling the water. He turned, meeting Jiang Li's gaze. Jiang Li, expecting to save his lord, was stunned. Dropping his spear, he dismounted and knelt. "This disgraced minister arrived late to save Your Majesty."

Yuwen Xiu's eyes flickered. "No matter, Jiang. You've returned just in time. Henceforth, whoever calls you disloyal, I'll kill."

One hundred thirty miles from Yuanchi City, in the Northern County army's camp, a pigeon landed, shedding white feathers. Tantai Xuan unrolled the message, his face shifting. "As the master predicted, Zhao Kuo rebelled," he said.

Mo Ju, fanning himself, nodded. "That wolf's ambition was clear—he aimed to control the emperor as regent."

Mo Beike, hunched, rasped, "Beiluo's five hundred cavalry entered the capital, Kong Xiu secluded himself, and Zhao Kuo seized the chaos to grasp power. This is our chance. With the capital in turmoil and Jiang Li recalled, we can crush Great Zhou's cavalry and march in."

Tantai Xuan shook his head, his expression odd. "Zhao Kuo died the moment he rebelled."

Mo Ju and Mo Beike froze, stunned. "Details are unclear, but Yuwen Xiu beheaded him, and his body was torn apart. Jiang Li, under imperial orders, quelled Zhao Kuo's rebels, forming a sizable force. Good news, though—Zhao Kuo's eight thousand were decimated by Beiluo's cavalry, weakening Jiang Li's army."

Mo Ju's fan trembled. "Five hundred cavalry did that?"

"No, the cavalry were incidental. White Jade Pavilion's cultivators did it," Tantai Xuan said, staring at the report. Three cultivators repelled eight thousand elites. Mo Beike's weathered face twitched. "Beyond mortal," he sighed.

In Drunken Dragon City, under moonlight, a carriage waited before a farmhouse. Chi Lian pushed open the gate, but Bai Qingniao lingered, reluctant, clutching her chick, Little Phoenix One. Its head poked out, eyes darting. "To Beiluo, as ordered," Chi Lian said.

Bai Qingniao, basket of fluffy chicks in hand, hesitated. "Will Uncle Jiang really go to Beiluo?" she asked, shaken by recent events.

“He will,” Chi Lian said solemnly.

Reluctantly, Bai Qingniao boarded the carriage, which rolled through the night toward Beiluo.

On Lakeheart Island, a breeze swayed ten spiritual chrysanthemums. Ni Yu, in a white dress, pushed the Young Lord’s wheelchair, its wooden wheels creaking. Lü Dongxuan, gold chain gleaming, followed. The Young Lord, hand propping his chin, gazed at the calm lake, hair fluttering.

Lü Mu sat cross-legged, cane in hand. On the stone steps, Mingyue unwrapped her pipa, her fingers strumming, notes cascading like pearls under the cold moonlight. Jing Yue, under a chrysanthemum, felt the spiritual energy, licking a sugar-coated Qi Gathering Pill before carefully storing it.

“The Tianji School transcends mortal schemes; no need to toy with fate,” Lü Dongxuan said, grinning.

The Young Lord glanced at him, then turned to the island. “The world holds eight Dragon-Rearing Grounds. The imperial palace is one, Beiluo Lake another.”

He stopped the wheelchair, facing the misty island, and raised a hand. Boom! The lake churned, and a golden-yellow dragonling surged forth, flipping in the air. Unlike the four-legged, lion-scaled black dragon, this one had small, rapidly beating wings. The Young Lord smiled. “A dragon’s roar shakes the heavens; in the wilds, it becomes a yellow dragon.”

“What is it?” Lü Dongxuan gaped.

“A dragon seed,” the Young Lord replied.

The dragonling nuzzled him, wings buzzing like a bee’s. It danced across the island, absorbing spiritual energy like a bottomless abyss. Ni Yu, curious, dangled a Qi Gathering Pill. The dragonling sucked it into its mouth, eyes brightening, and demanded more. Ni Yu clutched her pouch, but it tore, pills flying into the dragonling’s maw. She wailed, devastated. The dragonling licked her consolingly. Jing Yue, nearby, discreetly hid his half-licked pill.