

Starlit Path 137

Chapter 137: Three Philosophical Masters Journey to North Luo

South County, South Jin City

Nestled at South County's edge, near the Southern Barbarians' border, South Jin City was perpetually shrouded in misty rain, its poetic scenery ideal for scholars with oil-paper umbrellas strolling arched bridges. Sima Qingshan, however, despised the weather—wet ink smudged his paintings, ruining their marketability. A poor painter, he lived by his art.

He awoke in panic, surrounded by curious children's eyes. "Brother Qingshan, you caught a chill. Dad caught a fat fish and made soup for you," said a girl with patched clothes and braids, smiling. The other kids chattered, overwhelming him. Teaching these poor children to read and paint for free, he hoped they'd rise above their fates. "Go home, don't worry your parents. Study tomorrow," he said, shooing them playfully. They scampered off.

Closing his leaky door, Sima exhaled. An orphan raised in South Jin, he scraped by alone. "Immortal... preaching?" he muttered, rubbing his brow. After taking medicine for his cold, he'd fallen into a strange dream. "Immortals don't exist," he scoffed, sipping hot fish soup from the table. Its warmth banished the rain's chill, a heat surging in his abdomen.

In his makeshift study—a converted shed—he lit an oil lamp, ground ink, and spread paper. His brush danced, crafting a lady's portrait with fluid strokes. Suddenly, he froze. "When did I get this good?" He stepped back, trembling at the vivid painting, fear gripping him. A grand vision unfurled in his mind, like an immortal's voice. Heat from his abdomen wove into his brush, and as it touched the paper, the painted lady seemed to come alive.

Imperial Capital

Tang Xiansheng, in fresh robes, entered Zijin Palace with Tang Yimo. His calm demeanor belied the recent assassination attempt. Jiang Li led them but stopped Tang Yimo outside. "His Majesty sees the governor alone," he said. Tang Xiansheng patted Tang Yimo's shoulder and stepped inside, the gilded doors closing.

Jiang Li, helmet off, studied Tang Yimo. "A cultivator?" he asked, impressed by his street display. Tang Yimo nodded slightly. "You're Tang Xiansheng's confidence for entering the capital. Strong, though not as strong as some I've seen," Jiang Li said.

Tang Yimo glanced at him, nodding silently. "Don't you want to know who surpasses you?" Jiang Li pressed. Tang Yimo shook his head. "I cultivate to protect my mother and sister. Others' strength doesn't matter unless they threaten them." Jiang Li raised an eyebrow—intriguing resolve.

Inside, Tang Xiansheng bowed deeply. "Your humble servant, Tang Xiansheng, greets Your Majesty." Yuwen Xiu, on the dim throne, laughed, descending to lift him. "Governor Tang, your long journey honors us," he said warmly. They spoke at length as rain pounded outside. When the doors reopened, Tang Xiansheng emerged.

"General Jiang, Governor Tang was attacked upon arrival, causing him distress. Protect him and scour the capital for the assassins to ease his fears," Yuwen Xiu commanded. Jiang Li frowned but bowed. "Yes." Tang Xiansheng smiled warmly, leaving with Tang Yimo.

Jiang Li glanced at the palace, recognizing the lead assassin as the immortal-fated eunuch from the Dragon Gate, the others Black Dragon Guards. The familiarity clicked. "Tang Xiansheng, a smiling tiger.

Aligning with him is a curse, not a blessing,” he sighed. Yuwen Xiu’s move destabilized the fragile balance, signaling an alliance with South County that would provoke North and West Counties.

South County, Zhongnan Mountain

Xie Yunling, in Daoist robes, descended Tianshang Mountain, bought a horse in South Jin City, and rode to Zhongnan Mountain. Less rugged than Tianshang, it was familiar to him. Climbing stone steps, he entered a lavish pavilion, guided by a sword page through aged corridors and a wooden bridge to the mountain’s rear. There, a wooden house sat by a stream.

Before he reached it, a sharp laugh rang out. “What day is it for so many old relics to visit?” Two figures emerged: a hunched man in metal arm guards and coarse cloth—Gongshu Yu, Mechanism School master—and a white-haired man in fine robes. “Gongshu Yu, why aren’t you with Mo Beike?” Xie Yunling asked.

Gongshu’s raspy voice grated. “Xiang Shaoyun’s West County army broke Mechanism City. We suffered heavy losses; the Mo School fared worse. The Overlord’s immortal fate makes him unstoppable—mechanisms work on martial artists, not cultivators.”

Xie nodded. “Fair.” The robed man, Sword Saint Hua Dongliu of Zhongnan Sword School, laughed. “Why bicker, old friends? We rarely meet.” He was Xie’s target.

“Old Hua, Daoist and Sword Schools coexist peacefully in South County. You know what my sect faced,” Xie said. Hua chuckled. “Your sect couldn’t stop a five-year exile.” Unfazed, Xie replied, “Skill lost to

skill—normal. But White Jade Capital’s ambitions are vast. They’ve subdued Tianji House, now Tianji Pavilion, and aim to rule all philosophical schools. My Daoists couldn’t resist; can your Sword School? Your Seven Heroes lost many in North Luo.”

Gongshu glanced at Hua. “Old Xie, what’s your point?” Hua asked. Xie smiled, a wisp of spiritual energy in his palm. “I’m going to North Luo to meet Lu Ping’an. Join me to see this peerless Young Master? We old bones will turn to dust if we don’t act. The era of philosophical schools is fading—are you content?”

Hua fell silent, stunned by Xie’s bold plan. Gongshu rasped, “I’m in.” Hua laughed. “Then I, Sword Saint Hua Dongliu, will visit North Luo to test Lu Ping’an’s strength.” He raised a hand, and a sword shot from the house, embedding before him, reflecting the three masters’ figures, poised to shake the world.