

Starlit Path 149

Chapter 149: Why Is It Always Me Who Gets Hurt?

In the Imperial Capital, dark clouds shrouded the sky, fine rain falling like delicate threads, adding a touch of dampness to the air. Supported by a maid, Tang Xiansheng climbed into his carriage. The driver, waiting patiently, cracked the whip, setting the wheels in motion. The carriage rolled out of the imperial city, speeding along the wet official road as patrols of armored guards marched through the capital's streets. An armored general halted the carriage, inspecting it briefly before waving it through.

Inside, Tang Xiansheng, clad in a brocade robe, dozed lightly. The carriage left the capital, racing toward Beiluo City. Shortly after, Jiang Li, sipping hot tea, listened to a subordinate's report. His expression remained unchanged, unsurprised. "Tang Xiansheng has finally gone to Beiluo," he said, setting down his cup and popping a peanut into his mouth. "That old fox has his eyes on Beiluo, but Lu Ping'an won't be swayed by his silver tongue."

In the Purple Gold Palace's royal gardens, before the Dragon Gate, Yuwen Xiu stood in his dragon robe, hands clasped behind his back, letting the fine rain fall on him without an umbrella. He gazed at the coiling black dragon in the pool, its strength growing daily. The more terracotta soldiers were destroyed, the stronger it became—a secret someone had uncovered and shared with him. So this was the true purpose of the dragon-rearing ground.

Rolling up his sleeves, he tossed chunks of raw meat from a bucket into the pool. The black dragon surged, stirring the water with a low roar, its fanged maw snapping up the meat. An old eunuch approached, whisking his dust brush. "Your Majesty, Tang Xiansheng has left the capital for Beiluo," he whispered.

"Beiluo? Trying to win over Lu Ping'an?" Yuwen Xiu scoffed. "That old schemer's up to his tricks. No need to mind him. If Lu Ping'an could be persuaded so easily, he wouldn't be Lu Ping'an. He'll slink back soon enough." But as he gripped another piece of meat, his eyes narrowed. Baiyujing's prestige was unmatched, its fame soaring after four great scholars failed to challenge Lu Ping'an, signaling the end of the Hundred Schools era and the rise of Baiyujing's.

Though Lu Ping'an showed no ambition, Yuwen Xiu felt unease. He recalled that dark, windy night when the black dragon wailed, and the trembling eunuch reported Lu's presence in the capital—elusive, uncontrollable. It left Yuwen Xiu feeling that even in the palace's depths, his life wasn't his own. He squeezed the meat tightly, then exhaled and tossed it into the pool. The Dragon Gate Secret Realm was his only hope, the Great Zhou Dynasty's chance to turn the tide against prying factions. Baiyujing was mighty, but its numbers were few. Lu Ping'an was human, not immortal. If Yuwen Xiu could train a thousand, ten thousand, or a hundred thousand cultivators, he might challenge Baiyujing's dominance.

In South Command's Nanjiang City, the bustling streets sang of江南's extravagance. In a tavern, the aroma of fine food and wine wafted through the air. By the river, flower boats drifted, vendors' calls echoing. A figure cloaked in a hooded black robe leaned by a window, listening to the chatter of diners, gathering information. Cold dishes sat untouched on the table.

"Beiluo, Baiyujing..." a sharp voice murmured from beneath the hood. "The strongest force in this chaotic, low-martial world of warring lords?" The figure chuckled softly. "Perfect timing—the fall of one era, the rise of another. To control this world, one must control its strongest power." Standing, the figure moved downstairs. The tavern boy rushed over, but a flick of the figure's orchid-like fingers froze him in place. Only later did he snap out of it, realizing the guest had vanished—without paying.

The black-robed figure moved leisurely, yet each step covered great distance, as if shrinking the earth itself. In a flash, they vanished from Nanjiang City, heading north.

Ning Zhao, Nie Changqing, Li Sansi, and the Overlord raced through the central palace, their speed blurring. The palace doors slammed shut, the boom echoing within. Oddly, the hall remained brightly lit, unlike Wolong Ridge's dim, candlelit crypt. "Stay sharp," Li Sansi warned. Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao glanced at him, pressing deeper. The Overlord trailed behind, his expression complex. Once, he'd always led the charge, but now he lagged behind.

They moved down a corridor, its walls carved with murals depicting an ancient war—battle and death etched in stone. "Notice anything?" Li Sansi said, studying the carvings. "It's tied to Wolong Ridge's murals, both depicting that ancient war. The emperor fought rebels in the wild, both sides wielding cultivators. Phoenixes rained fire, sorcerers summoned torrents. The ancient era must have been a golden age of cultivation, now lost. But with spiritual energy reviving, cultivators are rising again. This palace's master is likely an ancient Body Treasury cultivator."

Ning Zhao and Nie Changqing nodded. The oppressive aura confirmed a Body Treasury presence. "Keep moving," the Overlord said. "Reach the heart of the palace, face the master. The eight Dragon Gates connect here. Defeat it, and we might gain Body Treasury cultivation methods."

They proceeded cautiously, but before reaching the end, an eerie melody drifted from the dark corridor—an ancient orchestral sound, chilling their spines, heralding some ancient entity. "It's coming," Nie Changqing said. His butcher's knife trembled, floating upward. Ning Zhao gripped her Cicada Wing Sword, her aura steady, a spiritual vortex above her head marking her Body Treasury status. Li Sansi held his wooden sword before his chest, eyes focused. The Overlord raised his axe and shield, tense. The one who'd beaten him eleven times was about to appear.

"I am Di Chao, who quelled rebels with the emperor. The rebels fell, and the emperor sealed thousands of their Body Treasury qi refiners' souls in the eight Dragon Gates. I was tasked to guard them, preserving the emperor's eternal glory." A cold voice echoed.

Li Sansi and the others frowned. The words felt familiar, echoing the qi refiner from Wolong Ridge. Was their "emperor" the same? Exchanging glances, they sensed they'd stumbled upon a profound ancient

secret. How grand and shattering was that ancient war, where hundreds of Body Treasury cultivators perished?

The music faded, replaced by the sound of chains dragging across the floor. Light poured down, revealing a towering figure, as tall as the Overlord, clad in ancient, gleaming armor. Like the Wolong Ridge cultivator, its face was gaunt, almost demonic, skin shriveled, eyes pitch-black. Chains bound its limbs.

The sight alone suffocated them. “So strong!” Nie Changqing’s knife shook violently. “Not a novice Body Treasury. It’s likely tempered one or even all five organs!” The spiritual pressure was overwhelming. Nie Changqing knew he’d lose in a one-on-one fight. “No wonder the Young Master suggested we team up,” Ning Zhao said, her sword raised, her demeanor grave.

The chained figure stepped forward, halted by its bonds. A beastly roar erupted, and spiritual energy coalesced into a black shadow. The Overlord’s eyes widened—it was the shadow that had beaten him senseless. It bypassed the others, charging him. His shield buckled under the impact, his body sent crashing into the wall. “Why is it always me?!” he roared inwardly.

Ning Zhao’s sword flashed like starlight, blocking the shadow. Li Sansi’s wooden sword, infused with energy, struck at it. Nie Changqing seized the moment, his butcher’s knife slashing with condensed spiritual energy. The blow, once strong enough to shatter the Daoist Sect’s gate, struck the ancient warrior’s head, only to clang like metal, leaving a faint mark.

Outside Beiluo City, a carriage approached under a blood-red sunset, its shadow stretching long. The driver showed a token, and the gates opened. Inside, Tang Xiansheng lifted the curtain, gazing at

Beiluo—a city unlike the capital, exuding strength beyond his expectations. As one of the Great Zhou’s six guardian cities, Beiluo had grown beyond the dynasty’s control.

The carriage sped toward Beiluo Lake but stopped at the dock, blocked by a bloody scene. Tang Xiansheng peered out. Wails and pleas for mercy filled the air. Blood stained the lakeside stones, glowing under the crimson sunlight. Luo Yue stood, saber at his side, unfazed by the stench of blood.

He stared, astonished, at the figure leaning on a sword. Luo had doubted Jing Yue could win, especially as his spiritual energy waned. Yet the man’s resolve—abandoning his instinct to flee—had carried him through. The battle was over. Jing Yue, his white robe bloodied, his pearwood sword case shattered, sat at the dock’s edge, smiling as the lake breeze eased his pain. Gazing at the island, he realized strength meant he could live without running.

Luo ordered his guards to detain the martial artists, checking for blood on their hands. Those guilty would be jailed; the innocent, sent away. Tang Xiansheng, in his brocade robe, admired Jing Yue’s back. Luo, puzzled, checked the driver’s token and bowed. “Governor Tang of South Command, I’m Luo Yue, Beiluo’s guard commander. Forgive my lack of welcome.”

Tang waved it off, smiling. “Beiluo’s reputation precedes it, but seeing it firsthand is humbling. No wonder it birthed a transcendent force like Baiyujing.” He bowed. “Commander Luo, your presence is as commanding as any general. I’ve come from South Command to meet Young Master Lu. Could you arrange an introduction?”

Jing Yue, rising, glanced at Tang. He recognized him—a guest once welcomed by Sword Saint Hua Dongliu at the Sword Sect. Unenthused, Jing Yue was eager to return to the island and claim his fifteen Gathering Qi Pills from Ni Yu. He boarded his boat, his bloodied robe fluttering.

Tang’s eyes lit up. “Master Jing, wait! May I join you to the island?”

Jing Yue paused, startled as Lu's voice echoed in his mind. He turned to Tang. "The Young Master won't see you. Leave."