

## Starlit Path 154

### Chapter 154: My Son Has a Leg Ailment and a Lonely Heart in Need of Companionship

Tang Xiansheng knelt, and the Purple Gold Palace fell so silent that a pin could be heard dropping. The officials stared, dumbfounded, at the South Command governor prostrating himself before Lu Changkong. On the dragon throne, Yuwen Xiu was stunned. He hadn't expected Tang to have prepared such a move. The feigned drowsiness, the apparent indifference—it was all an act. Tang knew he couldn't escape this blame and had planned this gesture.

The Great Zhou Dynasty held a firm stance against the Five Barbarians. As South Command's governor, tasked with guarding against the southern barbarians, Tang bore responsibility for this breach. A barbarian slipping through was bad enough, but one infiltrating Beiluo to attempt an assassination on Lu Ping'an made it unforgivable. Many would suspect Tang's involvement, given the barbarians' sorcery. Thus, he chose to kneel and beg forgiveness.

Behind him, Tang Yimo watched his father, once the untouchable lord of South Command, kneel. It was a stark contrast to the Tang Yimo remembered. South Command's wealth and power weren't just due to its resources—Tang Xiansheng's cunning had built an empire. Yimo's clenched fists relaxed, a flicker of admiration stirring.

Luo Yue stood awkwardly, unsure how to react. Lu Changkong frowned at Tang, hands pressed to his thighs, and found himself speechless. "I bear the fault," Tang said hoarsely, his voice echoing. "But I did not order the attack on Young Master Lu. This kneel is for failing to prevent a barbarian's incursion into Great Zhou."

Some sins he could admit, but others he had to clarify. Lu Changkong met Tang's turbid gaze. After a long pause, he helped Tang up. "Governor Tang, no need for this. I was consumed by anger over my son's attack."

Tang rose shakily, smiling as he patted Lu Changkong's hand. "I understand. We're both fathers. If my son were attacked, I'd be just as furious." The hall's tension eased, officials exhaling in relief, fearing Lu Changkong might unleash Beiluo's infamous cavalry on the palace.

Yuwen Xiu laughed from the throne. "City Lord Lu, don't be angry. Governor Tang was in the capital; he can't be blamed for South Command's negligence. And send someone to kill Ping'an? Tang's a man of virtue. Great Zhou and the Five Barbarians share a blood feud—such treachery is unthinkable!" His words rang with conviction.

Tang smiled brightly, Lu Changkong nodded, bowing to Yuwen Xiu. "Your Majesty, I acted rashly in my anger. Please forgive my offense."

"No offense taken," Yuwen Xiu said gravely. "Your love for your son is understandable. I, too, am concerned for Ping'an's safety. In your place, I'd be enraged." Tang retreated quietly, keeping a low profile. Lu Changkong signaled Luo Yue to remove the barbarian's corpse.

"City Lord Lu, since you're here, I have a request," Yuwen Xiu said. Lu Changkong bowed. "Your Majesty, speak freely."

"Governor Tang's ten thousand South Command troops are marching north under General Jiang Li's command to attack Tantai Xuan. With Jiang gone, the capital lacks its defensive pillar. I ask you to lead the capital's guard and protect it." Yuwen Xiu's tone was earnest.

The hall buzzed. Tang's eyes narrowed subtly, and officials whispered. Entrusting the capital's defense to Lu Changkong, father of Baiyujing's master, was bold. Offending Lu Ping'an could be disastrous. The atmosphere grew heavy.

Lu Changkong bowed. "I thank Your Majesty for your trust. However, my son Ping'an suffers from a leg ailment and a lonely heart, needing constant companionship. As his father, I must stay by his side to guide him. I must decline your trust."

The hall shifted again, officials eyeing Lu Changkong warily. Yuwen Xiu's face darkened, fingers tapping the throne. Leg ailment? Lonely heart? What nonsense. Lu Ping'an was anything but lonely. Still, Yuwen Xiu forced a smile. "If that's the case, I won't keep you. May Ping'an recover soon."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Lu Changkong said, bowing. He turned and left, Luo Yue following with his saber. Outside, the three hundred Beiluo cavalry saluted, armor clanging. "Mount up. Back to Beiluo," Lu Changkong ordered. His visit was to make a statement: an attack on his son, whether Tang's doing or not, demanded accountability. Next time, it wouldn't be just questions.

The palace's mood grew eerie. Tang stood silently, hands in sleeves. Yuwen Xiu slammed the throne, cracking its dragon armrest with spiritual energy. "Well played, Lu Changkong," he muttered, seething. "Riding his son's power!" Glancing at the cowering officials and Tang's feigned drowsiness, his anger deepened. The barbarian incident wasn't simple, and Tang was hiding something. "Court dismissed!" he snapped, storming off.

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In the serene study pavilion, banana leaves swayed, and sandalwood incense wafted. The Imperial Preceptor, aged and frail, rocked in his chair, facing Kong Nanfei and Mo Tianyu. "Teacher, why didn't you mediate when Lu Changkong stormed the capital with the barbarian's corpse to confront Tang Xiansheng?" Kong asked.

“Mediate? No need. Tang can handle it,” the Preceptor said. “Lu’s purpose was twofold: to demand answers openly and probe the emperor’s stance covertly. With Baiyujing ascendant, Lu needed to gauge His Majesty’s position.”

Kong and Mo exchanged shocked glances as the Preceptor continued. “Tang Xiansheng is no ordinary man. His ability to bend and endure, rising from among South Command’s heirs to build an impregnable domain, speaks volumes. You don’t know his past—his mother was a courtesan. The hardships and humiliations he faced are beyond your imagination.”

Their faces paled. Tang’s mother, a courtesan? “His rise to governor was no small feat,” the Preceptor said. “Among West, North, and South Commands, Tang is the most formidable, not the Overlord or Tantai Xuan. South Command is a fortress, unlike the others’ clear weaknesses.” Kong and Mo were stunned. Tang, so feared by the Preceptor?

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On Lake Island, Lu held the golden light, studying it. The consciousness within was cautious, refusing to emerge. Lu noted its fragility compared to his own spiritual sense, likely strengthened by his chess games with Celestial Strategy. An unexpected benefit. “Like a turtle hiding in its shell,” he remarked. The light flickered but stayed silent.

“Fine, burn it,” Lu said, brushing the Phoenix Feather Sword. Its red glow flared, threatening to consume the light. The consciousness stirred, trembling. “A scam! This world is a scam!” it wailed, resentment thick. It had come for a low-martial world’s origin, only to face a golden core-like monster.

Lu’s eyes sharpened. Finally, it spoke. He had questions: How did this consciousness arrive in the Five Phoenixes? Was it the system’s doing? Did it know of the system? “What are you? How and why did you come to this world?” Lu asked calmly, propped on his wheelchair.

The Phoenix Feather Sword loomed closer, its heat pressing. The light shook, desperate to preserve itself. "This is my master's spiritual clone, drawn by this world's origin..." it said, voice magnetic yet alluring, stopping short. It dared not say more.

Lu raised a brow. World origin? He queried the system. "Low-martial worlds lack origins. Forming one marks a mid-martial world. Its strength determines the world's peak power, akin to a heavenly dao. Note: Host is exempt from this rule."

Lu's eyes gleamed. The light didn't know about the system—it was lured by the world's origin. His gaze turned playful, chilling the consciousness. "What now?" it trembled, sensing danger.

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In the capital, officials hurried from court. Tang Xiansheng walked calmly, hands in sleeves, but Tang Yimo sensed his father's inner turmoil. "Yimo," Tang called softly.

"Yes?" Yimo replied, puzzled.

"Conserve your strength. In a few days, my life will be in your hands," Tang said gravely. Yimo's eyes narrowed. "If we return to South Command, I'll name your sister a countess and give your mother status," Tang added, his voice sincere.

Yimo froze, moved by the unexpected promise. A breeze stirred the capital's dust, fluttering Tang's robe and Yimo's hair. After a long pause, Yimo's low voice answered, "Good."