

Starlit Path 157

Chapter 157: Shattering the World's Balance

The moonlight cast a cold glow. Lu sat in his Thousand-Blade Chair, its intricate design shimmering like a masterpiece. An oppressive aura filled the pavilion's second floor, weighing on Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao. Had the black shadows they unleashed in the central palace angered the Young Master, prompting his personal intervention? Those shadows were clearly no good.

Lu turned his wheelchair to face them, flicking his sleeve. Two bronze cups of warm plum wine floated to them. "Drink to calm your nerves," he said. "You saw the ancient cultivators' battle against the 'extraterrestrial demons,' didn't you?"

Xie Yunling, studying arrays, snapped his eyes open at "extraterrestrial demons," a term now deeply sensitive to him. Ning Zhao nodded, lips tight. Nie drained his cup, still shaken by the corridor's vision—Body Treasury cultivators dying in droves, stronger beings falling from the sky.

Lu tapped his wheelchair. "Young Master, after we killed the ancient Body Treasury cultivator, countless intangible shadows fled the palace..." Ning Zhao said, breathless.

"I destroyed most, but some escaped," Lu replied calmly. "You'll handle those."

"What are they?" Nie asked.

"Souls corrupted by extraterrestrial demons, sealed by an ancient emperor's array. The cultivator's death broke it, letting them scatter. I eradicated most," Lu explained. Xie, eyes narrowing, recounted his possession to clarify the demons' nature, having nearly been corrupted himself.

“These evil souls will attach to beasts, plants, or fish, influencing their evolution into what we call demons,” Lu said, tapping his chair. “Since you released them, you’ll deal with them. How you handle these demons is up to you.”

He spoke no more. Nie and Ning bowed and left, seeking Xie to learn more about the demons. Pointing to the moonlit lake, Xie revealed a demon was sealed beneath. They were stunned.

On the pavilion, Lu set up his spiritual pressure chessboard, playing a storm game to restore his soul and refine qi. The “corrupted souls” were his creation, meant to spur the world’s growth. A true cultivation world needed diverse, sentient creatures. Natural evolution would take too long, so Lu gave it a push. Demons would pressure and stimulate the world.

The mid-martial lord’s words indicated that in three months, “wanderers”—failed lords of conquered low-martial worlds—would arrive, their strength at foundation building, not exceeding golden core. To Lu, Body Treasury-level threats held no challenge. A golden core foe might stir him to rise, but these? Uninteresting. The night wind chilled, and his chess moves echoed, startling the island’s crows.

In North Command’s camp, Tantai Xuan sat high, the moonlight casting frost outside. Torches crackled. Mo Beike sipped tea, Mo Ju pondered, fanning himself. A black-robed figure left the camp, riding far before removing his hood, revealing Tang Baiyun, Tang Xiansheng’s heir. He glanced back, then galloped into the night.

Tantai Xuan shook his head. “Mo Ju was right. Tang Xiansheng targets Jiang Li, aiming to join us to eliminate him. Without Jiang Li, Great Zhou loses its spear, teetering on collapse.” Tang’s boldness was striking—sending his heir to negotiate risked South Command’s leverage, but he’d calculated Tantai wouldn’t detain Tang Baiyun.

“Master, is Tang’s plan viable?” Tantai asked Mo Beike respectfully.

Mo Beike smiled, blowing steam from his tea. “Mo Ju, your thoughts?”

Tantai and Mo Ju froze. Mo Beike kept deferring to Mo Ju, hinting at grooming him as the Mohist’s future leader. Tantai’s face lit up—Mo Ju, his long-time aide, as Mohist Master would bolster his power. Despite the Mohists’ decline, their influence lingered.

“Jiang Li, a hero inheriting the Military School’s essence, demands caution,” Mo Ju said, fanning. “Tang might be luring us to join Jiang against North Command. And... killing such a figure feels wasteful.”

Mo Beike paused mid-sip, Tantai frowning. Mo Ju’s caution surprised them. “Laughable,” Mo Beike said, silencing the tent. “Pitying Jiang Li? In this fight for the world, anyone can die. No one should be spared for pity. I’ve rivaled Kong Xiu for decades, but on the battlefield, would either of us hesitate to kill the other? Pity abounds—wilted petals, hooked fish—but can you pity everything? A strategist mustn’t be merciful; leniency to enemies is cruelty to oneself.”

His stern lecture was for Mo Ju’s growth. Tantai listened quietly. Mo Ju bowed, thanking him. Mo Beike turned to Tantai. “The eight Dragon Gates create a delicate balance, disadvantageous to us. South Command, West Command, and the capital have long studied Dragon Gates, nurturing cultivators, while we lag. Can you secure Wentian Peak’s Dragon Gate after Buzhou Peak’s lesson? Tang seeks to break this balance, using Jiang Li as the pivot. Without him, Great Zhou weakens, leaving only Kong Xiu. If Jiang falls, Kong won’t last.”

Silence fell, broken by insects outside. Mo Beike and Mo Ju awaited Tantai's decision. As the leader, he bore the burden. After long thought, Tantai's eyes sharpened. He summoned a general, issuing a command that stirred the camp to life.

Mo Ju stepped outside, gazing at the moon, his fan still. Tantai followed, patting his shoulder. "Don't take it to heart. The Master's strict because he sees your potential. I trust you most." Mo Ju bowed. "I won't fail you." Tantai laughed, leaving. Moonlight stretched Mo Ju's bowing shadow long.

In West Command's Dongyan River camp, the Overlord, bruised from the palace, returned frustrated, still not reaching Body Treasury. Luo Mingsang, in a light dress, applied salve to his wounds, soothing his furrowed brow. "Don't push too hard," she said softly. Playing her zither, she lulled him into calm, his head on her lap, a rare smile forming. A soldier's shout broke the peace.

Reading a secret letter, the Overlord squinted. "Tang Xiansheng's ten thousand, led by Jiang Li, march on Tantai Xuan." Lacking strategists like Mo Beike, he analyzed alone. "That old fox... using Jiang Li to crush North Command and then West Liang?" Jiang, heir to the Military School, was a formidable commander. With Great Zhou's troops, the force was daunting. Yet, instinct told him Tang planned something bigger. He ordered a return to West Liang City, leaving five thousand to guard the Dragon Gate. The world stirred with undercurrents.

Jiang Li merged his ten thousand capital troops with South Command's army, a sprawling camp stretching miles. In silver armor, he rode through, noting South Command's superior weapons—proof of their wealth. Their soldiers, though less fierce than West or North Command's, were equally formidable with such gear. South Command's generals respected him, and all orders were obeyed seamlessly, too perfectly for a newly taken army.

His years of command made him uneasy. After days of marching north, the lack of resistance deepened his suspicion.

In the capital's Purple Gold Palace gardens, Yuwen Xiu fed raw meat to the Black Dragon, now larger, its scales cold under his touch. The old eunuch emerged from the Dragon Gate, still radiating its aura. Jiang Li's absence hadn't destabilized the capital, thanks to Kong Nanfei's control and the disciplined Black Dragon Guard.

On the nine-fold bridge, the eunuch reported, "Tang Xiansheng claims severe illness, requesting leave from court." Yuwen Xiu paused, meat in hand. "Sick? True or not, that old fox is up to something. Send Black Dragon Guards to watch him." The eunuch nodded but hesitated. Yuwen Xiu frowned. "No, you lead them personally. I feel uneasy."