

Starlit Path 159

Chapter 159: The Army of Cultivators

Capital, Rainy Night

Iron hooves splashed through the rain, water rising two feet, echoing like a zither across the capital's streets. The clash of armor, unsheathed blades, and shouts of battle filled the ancient city. On the ramparts, disciplined soldiers trained by Jiang Li drew their bows, thumbs pressing arrow fletchings until their fingers turned pale. Rain shattered on the arrows, a killing intent permeating the air.

Below, horses neighed. Tang Yimo, in a straw hat and raincoat, drove a carriage. Thunder flashed through the clouds, rain pounding the streets, flowing through the capital's channels. From the carriage, Tang Xiansheng's coughs echoed, the only sound in the stillness.

The old eunuch, umbrella in one hand, whisk in the other, shed his usual deference, his eyes gleaming with ferocity. "Tang Xiansheng, His Majesty demands your presence! Refuse, and you'll go headless!" His shrill voice shattered the rain's quiet, reverberating through the alleys.

On rooftops, Black Dragon Guards in dark armor stirred, their spiritual energy slowing the rain's fall. Stronger and more disciplined than the street guards, they were Jiang Li's elite, the backbone of Yuwen Xiu's confidence. Even Tang acknowledged their prowess, surpassing his South Command Army, trained not as cultivators but as a disciplined military force of spiritual warriors. This was why Tang sought Jiang Li's elimination.

"Cough... I'm gravely ill with a cold, unable to move. Please inform His Majesty I cannot comply," Tang's weak voice came from the carriage. The eunuch's face darkened, spotting South Command cultivators—straw hats, sword cases on their backs—guarding the carriage, Tang's prepared escort.

“You schemed against General Jiang, you traitor! You’ll face His Majesty’s judgment!” the eunuch roared. “This isn’t Beiluo, where Lu rules. You think you can come and go as you please? Three hundred Black Dragon Guards, kill without mercy! You won’t escape!”

His scream pierced the clouds. Bowstrings snapped as arrows rained from the ramparts, their tips glinting, shattering raindrops. Tang Yimo’s eyes narrowed. “This is a life-or-death gamble,” he said hoarsely to the carriage.

“Consider it a trade,” Tang replied through the curtain. “I don’t want to die. If I do, my sister and mother will suffer. I must live.”

Tang Yimo stood, rain streaming from his hat. “You must live to see my sister marry. You and Mother expect me to care for you in old age,” Tang said. “This fight secures their lifelong prosperity.”

Thunder roared, the capital’s tension explosive. Tang Yimo untied his raincoat. “This is the last time.”

Silence, then Tang’s raspy, “Good.”

Arrows descended, one looming before Tang Yimo’s eyes. His raincoat exploded outward, spiritual energy scattering the arrows. South Command cultivators drew their blades, spiritual-infused slashes cutting through the wet ground. “Kill!” Tang Yimo bellowed. “Yes!” his men roared, trained by him using a simplified Eight Meridians Escaping Armor Demonic Art, effective despite his lack of military expertise.

The eunuch, tossing his umbrella, swung his whisk and charged, his spiritual strength surging. Black Dragon Guards leapt from rooftops, drawing their Jiang Li-crafted Li Knives—heavy, tipless blades requiring superhuman strength. The clash of South Command and Black Dragon Guards marked the first battle of cultivator armies.

Blades flashed, spiritual energy drowning out thunder, illuminating the night.

Beiluo, Lake Island, Baiyujing Pavilion

Lu returned to the pavilion's second floor, his eyes tracing lines as he observed the distant capital's rainy battle. The clash of cultivator armies—Black Dragon Guards versus South Command Army—intrigued him. Jiang Li's disciplined, special-forces-like training contrasted with Tang Yimo's loose, cultivator-inspired approach, yet both carried military traits.

Initially uninterested in Tang's escape, Lu found this battle a pleasant surprise. "Interesting," he mused, sipping plum wine. "Though only first or second-stage Qi Core, their military cohesion creates a spiritual-pressure-like momentum, impacting the mind."

He analyzed: "A ninth-stage Qi Core cultivator needs eight to ten thousand regular soldiers to kill. South Command's army could do it with twenty or thirty. Black Dragon Guards, with their Li Knives' decapitating power, need even fewer. Dragon Gates have shifted the world's dynamics. These armies are daggers against regular forces."

Lu speculated Jiang Li relied on Black Dragon Guards to survive the ambush. "If he escapes, it's their doing."

North Command, Unnamed Valley

Tang Baiyun, in silver armor on a white horse, eyed the dark valley where Jiang Li and his five thousand remnants hid. "Jiang Li's Black Dragon Guards, a cultivator army, hold the valley's choke point. We can't break through," a general reported.

Tang Baiyun squinted. "The valley's other end is blocked by North Command. Jiang Li's trapped. But Tantai Xuan's cautious, waiting for us to weaken each other. Or he fears Jiang's a bait?"

He scoffed, suspecting Mo Beike's influence. "Use South Command's army?" a general asked.

"No, that's our trump card for Tantai," Tang Baiyun said. "Jiang's doomed. We can't reveal our tactics." He marveled, "Cultivators create miracles. Without Black Dragon Guards, Jiang couldn't hold that pass."

"We can't linger, lest Tantai probes the Dragon Gate. Send someone to ask his intentions. If he attacks from the other end, Jiang's done. Why's he stalling?" A general rushed up. "Young Master, the Chilian tribe's barbarian priest seeks an audience."

Tang Baiyun frowned, waving dismissal, then paused. “Let him come. The valley’s thick with obstacles—barbarians thrive there. They might flush Jiang out.” The general hesitated but obeyed.

North Command Camp

Tantai Xuan stood on a boulder, flags flapping in the night wind. “Jiang Li’s Black Dragon Guards break war’s rules. One can hold a thousand,” he said. Mo Ju, fanning, agreed: “Jiang has Black Dragon Guards, Tang Baiyun has South Command’s army, also cultivators. They’ve held back, hiding their tactics, saving them for us. Jiang’s doomed, so they keep their cards.”

Tantai nodded. “South Command has its army, Jiang his guards, West Command’s Overlord surely has one. What do we have? North Command needs a cultivator army to compete.”

A scout galloped up. “South Command sent another force into the valley.” Tantai’s robe billowed. “South Command’s army?” The scout shook his head, unsure. Tantai frowned. Not them—then what? “What else could it be?”