

Starlit Path 167

Chapter 167: The Overlord's Unease

The upheaval among the Five Barbarians had yet to significantly impact the Great Zhou Dynasty. However, as the three-month truce expired, the entire dynasty buzzed with activity. In the North County, armies were mustered, their formations clad in gleaming armor, conducting drills along the border with earth-shaking battle cries that exuded a steely resolve.

Inside the North County's main tent, Dantai Xuan sat enthroned in his armor, the weight of the moment pressing upon him as the truce ended. The atmosphere grew heavier with each passing day. Below him, Mo Ju gently fanned himself with a feather fan, while Mo Beike, wrapped tightly in a thick woolen cloak, exhaled clouds of breath into the cold air.

"The three-month deadline has passed," Dantai Xuan declared from his seat. "The world is stirring. Every county's governor is raising armies, and the situation grows ever more tense."

The past three months had been exhausting for him. Though no battles were fought, the constant tension kept everyone on edge. He had led efforts to develop the dragon gate, training an army of practitioners to catch up with the West and South Counties, which were far ahead in cultivating such forces. Dantai Xuan had poured immense effort into this endeavor. Fortunately, his rapport with the Azure Dragon ensured it caused no trouble, allowing North County practitioners to enter the dragon gate unhindered. Through relentless training, Dantai Xuan had shattered several soldier statues, finally condensing a wisp of spiritual energy into a Qi Core—a moment that moved him deeply.

"Since the annihilation of its hundred-thousand-strong army, South County has lost its edge," Mo Ju analyzed, his fan swaying gently. "Tang Xiansheng is gravely ill and no longer fit to vie for supremacy. Soon, he may pass his position to his third son, Tang Yimo."

Mo Ju continued, “Tang Xiansheng’s life has been tragic—losing two sons and disfavoring his third because of their shared humble origins. Yet, in a twist of fate, it’s this very son who will inherit his legacy. Unlike you, my lord, Tang Yimo seems to care little for worldly dominion. His ambitions are even smaller than yours, focused solely on personal cultivation.”

Mo Ju’s voice echoed through the tent as he offered his counsel. “My lord, I suggest the North County hold its forces for now and observe the actions of West County and the Great Zhou Dynasty.”

Mo Beike, bundled tightly, nodded in approval of Mo Ju’s analysis. “Well said. The truce has just ended, and White Jade Capital’s decree has been lifted. If we rush into war, it’s as good as spitting in their face. Given Lu Ping’an’s temper, if we disrespect him, he won’t show us any courtesy either. For now, we should refrain from action and send more troops to reinforce Tianhan Pass. Winter has come, and those Xirong pests are stirring trouble at our borders again.”

Dantai Xuan agreed, though his tone turned gruff with curses as he spoke of the Xirong. After dismissing the meeting, he grabbed a jug of strong liquor and headed to another tent where Jiang Li, his captive, was held. Though Jiang Li refused to pledge loyalty, Dantai Xuan wasn’t angered. Instead, he made a habit of drinking with him daily, often ending up drunk himself but enjoying the ritual nonetheless.

In West County, the Dongyan River roared ceaselessly. In the biting winter cold, the Overlord stood by its banks, clad in cold iron armor, gazing at the rushing waters. Rubbing his brow, he exhaled a puff of warm breath. “Three months, and I still haven’t broken through to the Body Zang Realm. Why is it so difficult?”

His cloak fluttered behind him as he stared at the dragon gate within the river. During the three-month truce, he had never slackened, tirelessly sending Xiliang warriors into the dragon gate to train, shatter

soldier statues, and awaken as practitioners. The Xiang Family Army had grown significantly, its strength soaring. Two prodigies had even emerged, capable of crossing the iron chain bridge, though they nearly perished to the Purple Mist couple if not for the Overlord's intervention.

The winter sun burned like fire, casting a red glow across the sky like flowing silk. The Overlord's gaze turned westward, his brow furrowing. A faint unease stirred within him, though he couldn't pinpoint its source. The Guifang tribes to the west—could those savages truly unsettle him? Clenching his fist, he crushed the stone beneath his foot and leaped into the dragon gate.

In South County, the three-month truce coincided with Tang Xiansheng's three months of bedridden illness. The death of Tang Baiyun and the destruction of South County's army had shattered him. Coupled with his escape from the Imperial Capital in a downpour, the elderly Tang Xiansheng succumbed to a grave illness. During these months, his ambition for conquest faded, and he sensed his days were numbered. He began grooming Tang Yimo to lead the Nanfu Army and manage South County's affairs.

Tang Yimo, perceptive of his father's intentions, accepted the role without much resistance. He understood that only by assuming power could he ensure a better life for his mother and sister. Alongside his cultivation, he studied governance under Tang Xiansheng's guidance and the tutelage of several Confucian scholars.

Tang Xiansheng's room was serene, a quiet he cherished. Occasionally, his daughter, Tang Guo, a precocious girl hardened by hardship, would support him for walks in the garden, bringing him rare moments of joy. One day, as laughter drifted from their conversation, Tang Yimo approached in his armor, his expression stern. Tang Xiansheng greeted him with a warm nod, but Tang Yimo responded coolly, softening only when he ruffled Tang Guo's hair.

“Since the Nanman barbarians were repelled from Nanjin City a month ago, they’ve been quieter,” Tang Yimo reported. “But recent scout reports suggest they’re stirring again. Your past alliance with them was foolish—they’re ambitious beasts.”

Tang Xiansheng, leaning weakly against a wooden chair, replied, “I know. It was never true cooperation, only mutual exploitation. I had plans to ensure they wouldn’t return.”

Tang Yimo said nothing more, letting the past rest. “You mentioned their recent movements. What kind?” Tang Xiansheng asked, his voice faint and drowsy.

“Our scouts hidden in the forests have gone silent, likely eliminated by the Nanman,” Tang Yimo said. “The wandering tribal barbarians outside the city have vanished.”

Tang Xiansheng’s cloudy eyes opened, his brow creasing. “That’s unusual. The Nanman tribes are scattered and disorganized, only uniting for major assaults under their shamans’ call. Our scouts’ positions are well-hidden—how could they be rooted out?”

He continued, his voice hoarse, “Nanjin City is a key defensive stronghold. Send more troops there, and dispatch a Nanfu Army unit to investigate. These movements unsettle me.”

Having dealt with the Nanman for a lifetime as South County’s governor, Tang Xiansheng’s instincts were sharper than Tang Yimo’s. The barbarians’ disunity was their norm; a unified front spelled trouble. Tang Yimo nodded silently, agreeing to act.

In the Imperial Capital, deep in the night, the Zijin Palace was dimly lit without candles. An old eunuch knelt before Yuwen Xiu, reporting, “Your Majesty, North County sends word again—Dantai Xuan still refuses to release him.”

Yuwen Xiu, seated high on his throne, gave a soft acknowledgment. For three months, he had tried every method to secure Jiang Li’s release, but Dantai Xuan held firm. Relenting, Yuwen Xiu said, “So be it. Let the matter of Jiang Li rest. Old one, accompany me to the garden.”

The eunuch trembled. “Your Majesty... the usual?”

Yuwen Xiu chuckled lightly. “Indeed. Haven’t we recently welcomed new young eunuchs to the palace?”

The eunuch, trembling but silent, followed as Yuwen Xiu, cloaked in gold, strolled to the garden. Behind him trailed two young eunuchs carrying buckets of raw meat, heads bowed. At the garden’s pond, the icy water erupted, and a fearsome black dragon emerged, its nose touching Yuwen Xiu’s forehead as dark mist swirled around them, eerie under the moonlight.

The old eunuch stood solemnly, while the young eunuchs quaked, the dragon’s excited gaze overwhelming them. Yuwen Xiu departed, instructing the old eunuch to handle matters. With a grave “Yes, Your Majesty,” the eunuch sent him off, then turned to the young eunuchs, his expression sorrowful. “Go, feed His Majesty’s black dragon well.”

The young eunuchs, trembling, spilled the meat and begged to be spared, but the old eunuch, with a flick of his whisk, turned away. A foul wind rose, and their cries ceased. When the eunuch looked back,

only scattered meat and buckets remained. His face twitched as he stared at the rippling pond, then bent to gather the meat, piece by piece.

On Lakeheart Island in Beiluo, Lü Dongxuan paced before the White Jade Capital pavilion, clutching his gold chain, his face etched with worry. Taking a deep breath, he moved to force his way inside, but a Cicada Wing Sword silently hovered before him.

“Lü Pavilion Master, do not trespass,” Ning Zhao warned.

“Ning Zhao, I have urgent matters for the young master,” Lü Dongxuan pleaded. “A great calamity looms over the world.”

“Perhaps the young master foresaw this calamity,” Ning Zhao replied calmly. “Why else would he decree a three-month truce? He’s likely preparing for it. Disturbing his seclusion would be a cost neither of us can bear.”

Lü Dongxuan hesitated, recognizing the truth in her words. The pressure from Ning Zhao’s presence grew stronger, and with a sigh, he turned and left.

Three days later, in West County, the first snow fell, nearly freezing the Dongyan River. The Overlord stood on its banks, catching snowflakes that melted in his palm. Luo Mingsang, wrapped in a fur robe, emerged from the tent. “Mingsang, these past few days, I’ve felt an unease. Is it my imagination?”

“Young Lord, perhaps the pressure is overwhelming you,” Luo Mingsang said, taking his hand. “Come inside. Let me play the qin to soothe your mind.”

The Overlord smiled, agreeing, but as he turned toward the tent, the sound of hooves shattered the snowy silence. Two riders galloped from the west—scouts from Hu Rao Pass. Donning his armor, the Overlord hurried to the main tent.

“Report! My lord, the Guifang tribes have amassed a great army outside Hu Rao Pass!”

“Report! My lord, the Peacock Kingdom’s forces approach from the southwest, with hundreds of bald warriors challenging us at the gate!”

The Overlord’s eyes narrowed. While other Xiliang generals roared in anger, he remained calm, sensing something deeper. Rising slowly, an oppressive aura emanated from him. Gazing northeast, he murmured, “Is this why White Jade Capital halted the war for three months?”