

Starlit Path 169

Chapter 169: This Guy's Pretty Tough

In South County, despite winter's arrival, the southern climate spared it from snow, instead bringing frequent rains. Outside Nanjin City, a deluge had soaked the ground for three days and nights, leaving corpses strewn across the muddy earth. From the dense rainforest, cold, greedy eyes glinted, fixated on the city's weathered walls.

After days of relentless assault and defense, Nanjin's garrison was exhausted. Atop the city's ramparts, Tang Yimo stood, his face etched with fatigue—both physical and mental. Three days of ceaseless combat had worn him down, even as a cultivator. The Nanman barbarians were not only numerous but harbored sinister figures among them. These eerie warriors, chanting from the rear, could summon spikes from the earth, piercing Nanjin's defenders. Only the Nanfu Army could counter them, but the battles had taken a heavy toll, leaving Tang Yimo's heart bleeding and his eyes red with grief. The Nanfu Army was his life's work, yet now his men lay dead beneath the city.

A horn blared, and the Nanman surged from the forest, clutching spears and shielding robed figures. Tang Yimo, standing tall, ordered another charge. The heavens echoed with cries of battle as rain fell endlessly.

In Nanjiang City, Tang Xiansheng reclined in a rocking chair, his daughter Tang Guo nibbling on a fruit beside him. He finished reading a letter, his pale face twitching slightly. "These aren't ordinary barbarians," he murmured. "I've dealt with the Nanman for decades—I know their tactics inside out. Something's changed."

Coughing weakly, he clutched his chest. White Jade Capital's three-month truce had puzzled him at first, but now its purpose dawned on him. "The truce was to give the Great Zhou time to prepare for this threat. Did White Jade Capital's master foresee this?"

Tang Guo stopped eating, patting his chest to ease his coughing. "Send for someone," Tang Xiansheng called, ruffling her hair. A Nanfu Army cultivator entered. "Draft a letter detailing Nanjin's situation and send it to the Imperial Capital," he instructed. "If I'm right, West County, North County, and Dongyang County face similar crises. The Five Barbarians are invading again. The young emperor must be informed. And... send a copy to White Jade Capital."

The cultivator bowed and departed, riding swiftly to the capital, switching horses at relay stations without pause. Ordinary warriors would have faltered, but a cultivator's stamina endured.

South County wasn't alone. Letters from West and North Counties arrived in the Imperial Capital simultaneously. In Zijin Palace, during morning court, Yuwen Xiu sat on the dragon throne, eyes narrowed as the old eunuch read the reports. A glint of intrigue flashed in his gaze. "The Five Barbarians dare to invade? Laughable. Xiang Shaoyun, Dantai Xuan, and Tang Xiansheng command cultivator armies as strong as my Black Dragon Guards. What threat do barbarians pose? In the era of the Hundred Schools, they were nothing. Now, with cultivator armies, defeat is impossible."

Below, Kong Nanfei stepped forward in his Confucian robes, bowing with a furrowed brow. "Your Majesty, the letters mention the barbarians wield strange powers, rivaling cultivators. West County faces a joint assault from the Guifang and Peacock Kingdom, putting Hu Rao Pass at risk. South County's Nanjin City teeters under the Nanman's onslaught. North County confronts the Xirong, led by their king himself. I believe these reports are not exaggerated."

His words sparked murmurs among the court. Yuwen Xiu leaned back, thoughtful. "Kong has a point, but I suspect the counties are holding back, trying to force our hand. The Great Zhou is weak, with only the Black Dragon Guards to rely on. Reply to North County: if they want our aid, they must release General Jiang Li. As for West and South Counties, ignore them."

Kong Nanfei's head snapped up, his gaze piercing. "Your Majesty, this is unwise! The barbarians threaten your Great Zhou!" His voice rang through the palace, tense and unyielding.

The court fell silent, ministers glancing nervously between Kong and the emperor. The old eunuch remained mute, knowing better than to speak. Yuwen Xiu leaned forward, meeting Kong's gaze. "I know this is my empire."

In Beiluo City, Lu Changkong, clad in armor, held three letters from South, West, and North Counties. He offered rest to the counties' messengers, but they declined, eager to return to their battles. Reading the letters, Lu Changkong exhaled heavily. "The Five Barbarians' invasion... was this why Fan decreed the three-month truce?"

He headed to Lakeheart Island, flanked by Luo Yue and Luo Cheng. "My lord," Luo Cheng said, "each county has cultivators. Can the barbarians really match them?"

Lu Changkong shook his head. "It's not that simple. The letters mention the barbarians wield powers rivaling cultivators. Fan's decree likely anticipated this."

On the island, a paradise of blooming peach and chrysanthemum blossoms, Lu remained in seclusion, guarded by Ning Zhao. Lu Changkong chose not to disturb him, trusting his son had a purpose. He sought Lü Dongxuan, who sat before a steaming teapot. "The world was free of calamity," Lü said, "but with the young master in seclusion, disaster has struck."

"Is there a way to overcome it?" Lu Changkong asked, sitting cross-legged.

Lü Dongxuan touched his gold chain, shaking his head. "I don't know."

Nearby, Lü Mudui approached with his staff, accompanied by Mingyue, a veiled girl holding a pipa. "I'll take Mingyue to West County to lend what aid we can," Lü Mudui said.

Lü Dongxuan nodded. "Good."

Jing Yue approached, clutching his Jingtian Sword. "Then I'll head to South County. My sword intent's at a bottleneck—perhaps this journey will break it."

Lü Dongxuan glanced at him, surprised. "Good." Jing Yue smiled, sheathing his sword in the scabbard crafted by Gongshu Yu, his eyes gleaming.

Ning Zhao remained silent, her duty to guard Lu unwavering. Yi Yue and Ni Yu stayed as well, loyal to their master's side. Bai Qingniao, cradling her chick, approached Lu Changkong in a panic. "Uncle Lu, is Uncle Jiang in North County? Is he in danger?"

Lu Changkong nodded reassuringly. "Jiang Li is safe in North County. Dantai Xuan won't kill him. As long as North County holds, he's fine."

"I'm going to North County!" Bai Qingniao insisted, as Little Phoenix One chirped from her collar. Nie Shuang, shirtless and sweating, joined her. "I'll go with Sister Qingniao!"

Lu Changkong hesitated, then nodded. “Luo Cheng, go with them. Protect Qingniao and Shuang’er.”

Luo Cheng bowed. “Yes, my lord.” Bai Qingniao ran off, returning with a basket containing two fluffy chicks blinking curiously.

At White Jade Capital’s pavilion, snowflakes drifted down, cloaking the world in white. Lu sat in his wheelchair, an invisible aura repelling the snow before it could touch him. A crane cloak draped over him—likely placed by Ning Zhao—kept him warm. With a flick of his hand, a bronze wine cup flew from a rosewood table into his grasp, its cold metal sending a chill through him.

His mind stirred, and the plum wine within the cup began to boil. Lu smirked. “Looks like I can derive attributes now.” Sipping the warm, tangy wine, he gazed at Beiluo Lake. At its depths, the plane’s origin had grown to the size of a basketball, five-colored energy swirling within. Leaning back, Lu seemed unhurried, his eyes tracing shifting patterns as his vision encompassed the entire Great Zhou, grasping all.

“Wanderers, huh?” he mused. “Fine whetstones.”

Outside Hu Rao Pass in West County, the Overlord, wreathed in black demonic energy, swung his axe, cleaving fearless Guifang warriors in two. Charging at the forefront with axe and shield, he was a god of war, unstoppable. Behind him, the Xiang Family Army and Xiliang cavalry fought with blood-red ferocity, turning the tide against the allied forces.

In the Guifang ranks, the golden-haired youth on his litter locked eyes with the red-robed monk atop the elephant. Both itched to act but hesitated, silently debating who should strike first. The youth grinned, bowing elegantly as if to say, "After you."

The monk chanted a sutra and signaled. The elephant lumbered forward, shaking the earth, as red-robed, expressionless monks marched barefoot toward the Overlord. The Peacock Kingdom's forces parted, leaving corpses as they retreated. The Overlord stood firm, eyes locked on the advancing elephant and monks.

"Governor!" Xu Chu called.

"Where's my Xiang Family Army?" the Overlord roared, veins bulging.

"Fight!" his army bellowed, clashing shields and blades. The Overlord charged, leading his cultivators. His foot shattered the ground as he swung his axe and shield. Leaping, he crushed a red-robed monk's head, using the momentum to vault toward the elephant.

Xu Chu, wielding spiked iron balls, led the Xiang Family Army against the monks, who chanted emotionlessly. In the Guifang ranks, the golden-haired youth watched with amusement. "A mere Qi Condensation cultivator," he scoffed. "No challenge." He let the monk take the lead, deeming the fight a mere spectacle.

Suddenly, his heart skipped. Looking up, he felt an indifferent gaze from the heavens, tightening his nerves. "Just a low-martial world... am I imagining things?" he muttered.

On the battlefield, the Overlord charged, stepping on the elephant's trunk to leap toward the monk. The monk, still gazing skyward in a daze, was caught off guard. The Overlord's axe swung, striking his neck with a sickening crack. Though not severed, the monk's neck twisted unnaturally, and the blow sent him crashing from the elephant's back like a cannonball.

The Overlord pressed his advantage, knowing the monk rivaled the ancient Body Zang cultivator in the dragon gate's palace. He leaped from the elephant, aiming to crush the rising monk. The monk's eyes refocused, a sinister smile curling his lips. "Demon?" he intoned, unclenching his clasped hands to form a fist.

A massive, shadowy fist materialized, slamming into the Overlord's shield. With a deafening crash, the shield shattered, and the Overlord was hurled back, tumbling across the ground. The monk, still in a fighting stance, grinned wickedly. "A Qi Condensation cultivator can't survive that."

But his eyes narrowed. The Overlord rose, wiping blood from his mouth, his gaze wild with excitement, muscles bulging. "Body Zang, huh?" he growled. "Finally, some real pressure."

The monk froze. This guy's pretty tough.