

Starlit Path 175

Chapter 175: A Finger Breaks the World's Barrier

The Xirong King wasn't the only one dumbfounded—Jiang Li was equally stunned. A flash of yellow plummeted from the sky, revealing itself as a chick. Where had it come from?

The Xirong King frowned, eyeing the chick in Jiang Li's arms. This was no ordinary creature; it radiated a peak Qi Condensation aura. A spiritual beast? His eyes gleamed with greed—its essence could boost his cultivation.

Jiang Li clutched the chick, realization dawning. Wasn't this Bai Qingniao's chick? Its presence suggested she was here, but he'd left her in the safety of Beiluo's Lakeheart Island. Why was she in North County's battlefield?

Atop Tianhan Pass, Bai Qingniao appeared, panting, her bamboo basket on her back. Nie Shuang followed, while Luo Cheng, eyes bloodshot, gripped his saber. The carnage below struck him—this border war was far crueler than the empire's internal skirmishes. Retreat wasn't an option here.

Bai Qingniao's eyes burned as she saw Jiang Li, her invincible protector, flung from his horse, spitting blood. Her fury erupted. "Xiao Fengyi! Attack!" she shouted from the ramparts. Her Nine Phoenix Transformation surged, draining her Qi Core's spiritual energy into the chick. Its eyes blazed like fireworks, swelling into a fiery phoenix, its crimson glow evaporating the falling snow.

The Xirong King raised a barrier, blocking the phoenix's flames. Bai Qingniao gritted her teeth, her eyes reflecting the fire. Once, Jiang Li had shielded her, giving her a peaceful world. Now, she had the power to protect him. "You held an umbrella for me; now I'll hold up the sky for you!" she vowed.

“Nie Shuang, let’s go!” she called.

“Alright!” Nie Shuang replied, his young face alight with excitement, trembling not from fear but adrenaline. He’d faced death in Beiluo’s rainy night and survived despair. Luo Cheng drew his saber, dragon blood energy surging, cleaving a Xirong warrior in two. He stayed close, tasked with protecting them.

Bai Qingniao pulled two more curious chicks from her basket. Chi Lian dragged the injured Jiang Li from the battlefield, his meridians damaged by the Xirong King’s strike. He stared, dazed, as a giant fiery chicken battled the king, melting snow with its heat. Bai Qingniao’s chick... so strong?

he thought, stunned. Chi Lian, relieved by her arrival, knew Jiang Li would’ve been doomed otherwise.

Dantai Xuan, his armor blood-soaked and blade dulled, retreated under his cultivators’ protection. The Xirong King’s power chilled them. Numb Xirong warriors charged, met by North County cultivators who fought to the death. Dantai Xuan’s eyes reddened, cursing as he swung his blunted blade, only to be pulled back. “Damn it! If I don’t crush the Xirong, I’m no man!” he roared.

Bai Qingniao, Nie Shuang, and Luo Cheng descended. Nie Shuang, planting his stance, unleashed a punch, his Qi Core’s energy toppling a Xirong warrior. Bai Qingniao, blushing as she saw Jiang Li, shouted, “Xiao Feng’er, Xiao Fengsan, kill them!” Swallowing a Qi Gathering Pill from Ni Yu’s stash, she restored her energy. The two tossed chicks transformed midair, joining Xiao Fengyi in a fiery assault on the Xirong King.

Three phoenixes against one king—a stunning sight. On the ramparts, Mo Beike and Mo Ju were speechless. “White Jade Capital’s cultivators...” Mo Beike sighed. The more he learned of White Jade Capital, the more its dominance over the Hundred Schools made sense. Even their chickens were this fierce.

“Beast taming?” the Xirong King mused, dodging the phoenixes. “Too weak.” Mere Qi Condensation beasts posed no threat. Bai Qingniao stood resolute, her hair fluttering, as Jiang Li watched in awe. The once-naive chicken girl had grown formidable.

In the capital, heavy snow blanketed the city. Kong Nanfei exited the Zijin Palace, feeling the cold despite his padded Confucian robes. Standing on the palace corridor, he exhaled mist, disappointed by Yuwen Xiu’s response. Doubts crept in— was his master’s persistence misguided?

Stepping through the snow, he ignored the wary glances of dispersing courtiers. After clashing with Yuwen Xiu at court, he was shunned. With Master Kong Xiu retired, his influence waned, and the Black Dragon Guard dominated the capital. Yuwen Xiu, once restrained by Jiang Li’s presence, now ruled unchecked, rumors swirling of him cultivating through human lives.

At the Scholar’s Pavilion, Kong Nanfei shook snow from his cloak and entered, warmed by the sound of boiling tea. Mo Tianyu, drinking from a gourd and studying hexagrams, nodded at him. Kong climbed to the second floor, where his master sat in a rocking chair, wrapped in a blanket, gazing at snow-laden banana leaves. Letters about the Five Barbarians’ chaos lay on the blanket.

“Master,” Kong greeted, sitting on a cushion and adding wood to the fire. He recounted the morning court, and Kong Xiu’s expression shifted.

“Did His Majesty truly say that?” Kong Xiu asked.

Kong Nanfei sighed, nodding. “His Majesty’s decree was sent to North County by fast horse.”

“Yuwen Xiu seeks to weaken the three counties using the barbarians,” Kong Xiu said. “He’s too young. If the late emperor were here, he’d crush the invaders without hesitation. Internal strife is one thing, but foreign enemies must never be tolerated. Growing up in the palace, Yuwen Xiu faced constant pressure from factions. He yearns to restore Zhou’s glory, seeing the barbarian chaos as an opportunity. But foreign enemies are foreign enemies.”

Kong Xiu sighed, holding a letter from Dongyang County. Kong Nanfei adjusted his master’s blanket and joined Mo Tianyu outside. “What did your divination reveal?” he asked.

“The Five Barbarians’ chaos is dire for Zhou,” Mo Tianyu said gravely, then added, “But for the capital and the pavilion, it’s auspicious.”

Kong Nanfei choked, his face darkening. Mo Tianyu bristled—his divination was sound, especially with Lu in seclusion. Why the disdain? Kong, ignoring him, glanced at the pavilion’s second floor, his heart heavy.

The battles in West, North, and South Counties stabilized, but Dongyang County defied expectations. Facing the Dongyi, its border city, Donghai Pass, held firm without cultivators. Its dragon gate, a deadly inferno, produced no cultivators, yet Dongyang’s soldiers, using sheer flesh and blood, repelled the Dongyi’s eerie warriors, who lacked the strange cultivators seen elsewhere.

In South County, Sima Qingshan's painting trapped the burly man. Tang Yimo burst from the earthen sphere, veins bulging, blood seeping. He charged, kneeing the man's chin, sending him airborne. A storm of punches kept him aloft, preventing his earth-based sorcery. The Nanman army faltered, while South County's forces cheered, urging Tang Yimo to kill the "elegant" barbarian.

His relentless assault cracked the man's face like a broken clay figure. A final kick shattered him into fragments. Panting, Tang Yimo collapsed, his second meridian exhausted. But the fragments writhed, reforming into the burly man, fingers crossed elegantly.

In West County, the golden-haired youth, stabbed by Mo Liuqi's scissors, laughed, his body glowing as he became a light figure, blasting Mo Liuqi away. The evil Buddha, blood-soaked, emerged from a trench, his sinister gaze fixed on Nie Changqing atop the ramparts. A blood Buddha loomed behind him.

In North County, the Xirong King swatted away the phoenixes and tore off his mask, revealing a charred face. Sparks flared, and an oppressive aura silenced the battlefield.

On Beiluo Lake, Lu pressed his hand to the world's origin, its five elemental energies swirling. His eyes tracked the battles: West County's blood Buddha and light figure, North County's unmasked king, South County's clay man. "Getting serious?" he smirked. These wanderers, equivalent to attribute-enhanced Body Zang cultivators, were mere whetstones for his world's growth.

"It's time," he said, eyeing the restless origin. His white robes billowed as he clenched the golden orb. At Lakeheart Island, Ni Yu and Ning Zhao froze, unable to move. Clouds spun wildly above, forming a spiritual hand that crushed the orb. A deafening boom sent energy rippling into the sky, shaking Zhou like a drumbeat.

Lu held five colored lights, his other hand pointing skyward, unleashing a flood of spiritual energy. The lake erupted, Little Yinglong roaring as it absorbed the energy. Lu flicked the lights skyward, their beams—gold, wood, water, fire, earth—filling the heavens. A chained barrier appeared, symbolizing the world's shackles. With a finger, Lu shattered it.

The heavens... changed.