

Starlit Path 186

Chapter 186: Whence Come the Reinforcements?

South County

The war outside Nanjin City had temporarily ceased, but the mysterious powerhouse from the Nanman tribe still lived. Thus, the defenses of Nanjin City remained unyielding.

A fine drizzle fell from the sky.

Sima Qingshan and Tang Yimo stood atop the city tower of Nanjin City. The forces of the Dao Pavilion and Sword Pavilion had already withdrawn, leaving the city steeped in a desolate, somber air. The thick scent of blood seemed to linger in the air around the tower.

Ever since Sima Qingshan was saved by Nie Changqing that day, Tang Yimo had taken notice of him and recommended him to train at the Dragon Gate. Now, Sima Qingshan had achieved considerable progress in his cultivation.

Tang Yimo had never believed in the existence of prodigies, but upon meeting Sima Qingshan, he understood—Sima Qingshan was a true genius. Merging the art of painting with cultivation, two entirely different disciplines, was no small feat. Even with the aid of immortal fate, such an accomplishment required extraordinary talent and aptitude.

“Qingshan, are you really leaving?” Tang Yimo asked, looking at Sima Qingshan. He took a deep breath, the misty rain making his body feel cold.

“The path of cultivation is long, and my art of painting has only just begun to take shape. Since Master Lu of White Jade Capital is giving a lecture on cultivation in Beiluo, I might seek his guidance,” Sima Qingshan replied.

“Lu Ping’an, the world’s foremost cultivator, will surely offer me better advice.”

Within three days, the Tianji Pavilion’s decree spread across the land, announcing that Lu Ping’an would deliver a lecture on cultivation. The news sent ripples of excitement through the world. Both cultivators and ordinary folk flocked to Beiluo, hoping to gain insights or perhaps even awaken as cultivators themselves.

In this era, being a cultivator meant elevated status—a dream for many commoners. For cultivators, however, Lu Ping’an’s lecture promised profound insights into the nature of cultivation, akin to a chess grandmaster teaching apprentices the intricacies of strategy. It was a rare and exhilarating opportunity.

Within two days, the news had spread far and wide.

Sima Qingshan bid farewell to Tang Yimo and set off from Nanjin City, riding swiftly toward Beiluo. Tang Yimo stayed behind to guard the city. Though the Nanman army had retreated, there was no guarantee they wouldn’t return with renewed ferocity.

Watching Sima Qingshan disappear down the official road, Tang Yimo sighed. He couldn’t hinder Sima Qingshan’s future. After all, Sima Qingshan’s path wasn’t rooted in martial combat, and Tang Yimo had little to teach him. Perhaps the enigmatic Master Lu could guide him better.

Shortly after Sima Qingshan's departure, a scout, drenched from the rain, galloped to the city.

"Report, Commander!" the scout shouted. "Dongyang County is under siege by the Dongyi army and is in grave danger. They request aid from South County!"

Tang Yimo turned in the rain, water pattering against his armor and splashing outward.

"Requesting aid from South County? Why not from the Imperial Capital?" Tang Yimo's eyes narrowed.

The scout hesitated, then replied, "Commander, according to our spies in the capital, Dongyang County did request aid from the Imperial Capital, but... there was no response."

No response?

Tang Yimo froze, then his face twitched with realization. He understood.

"Dispatch a hundred South County soldiers and twenty thousand troops to reinforce Dongyang County. If the capital won't help, South County will!" Tang Yimo sneered. "What a laughable emperor, still scheming to weaken the counties."

An emperor untouched by the horrors of war, who only knew how to play at conspiracies, earned nothing but Tang Yimo's disdain. Thanks to Tang Xiansheng's guidance, Tang Yimo had developed a keen sense of the broader situation. He could guess why the capital had remained silent.

Raising his head, he let the cold rain pelt his face. Without hesitation, he issued the order.

Imperial Capital

Two fine horses trotted slowly toward the city, their riders braving the wind and snow.

The ancient walls of the Imperial Capital, weathered by time, stood resolute atop a land buried with countless bones. Removing his bamboo hat and shaking off the snow, Jiang Li gazed at the ancient city with a complex expression.

Beside him, Chi Lian also removed her hat. "My lord, must you really go?" she asked, her eyes filled with concern.

"Wouldn't it be better to retire and return to the fields?" Jiang Li turned to her with a smile.

Chi Lian faltered, quickly waving her hands. "My lord, that's not what I meant. It's just... the capital is dangerous now."

“You wish to retire, but the emperor... may not allow it.”

Jiang Li stretched out his hand, catching a snowflake in his palm. “Broken armor, blood staining the horizon—for whom do we fight?” he murmured. “Better to retire, brew a pot of tea, and sip a bowl of chicken soup.”

His smile carried a trace of disappointment.

Compared to the iron resolve of the Northern County’s army or the fierce spirit of those guarding the frontier, Jiang Li had once believed he could mold the capital’s soldiers to rival those of the Northern or Western Counties. Now, he saw the truth.

No matter how hard he trained them, the capital’s soldiers lacked the raw courage of their counterparts. In terms of spirit, they were utterly outmatched.

Jiang Li felt lost. He saw no path to victory. Worse, the young emperor’s opportunistic tactics disgusted and angered him.

“General, I finally understand the sorrow and disappointment you showed that day under the setting sun,” Jiang Li murmured, recalling Bai Fengtian’s helpless sigh on horseback amid the yellow sands. With Chi Lian, he spurred his horse toward the capital.

Outside the city, Kong Nanfei awaited with his troops. Seeing Jiang Li, his eyes lit up. “General Jiang, you’re back!” Clad in scholarly robes, he patted Jiang Li’s shoulder with respect.

Jiang Li only smiled, glancing at the Black Dragon Guards behind Kong Nanfei. He saw fervor in their eyes. “Chi Lian, stay here,” he said. “If I don’t return, take care of Qingniao.”

Chi Lian’s long lashes trembled, panic flashing across her delicate face. “My lord, let me come with you!”

“Be obedient. You’re the only one I trust,” Jiang Li said earnestly.

Chi Lian wanted to protest but found herself speechless. Kong Nanfei sensed the tension. “Brother Jiang...”

Jiang Li waved him off, saying nothing more. In the heavy snow, he strode toward the Imperial Palace.

Kong Nanfei stood frozen, watching Jiang Li’s faltering figure in the snow, a lump forming in his throat. Perhaps, in the capital, only the snow-laden banana trees under the Scholar’s Pavilion remained unchanged. Everything else—people, places—had transformed.

The ancient capital radiated coldness. Snow fell heavily, frost withering the grass. Jiang Li walked deliberately, each step measured, as if feeling the pulse of the ancient city.

On the Imperial Avenue, officials braving the snow spotted Jiang Li, their eyes lighting up. Jiang Li’s status in the Great Zhou Dynasty was undeniable; with the Grand Tutor’s decline, he was arguably the dynasty’s foremost figure.

The officials greeted him warmly, astonished to see him return after being captured by the Northern County. Had the young emperor's strategy worked? Had Tantai Xuan submitted to the Great Zhou?

Their minds raced with speculation.

Jiang Li's expression, however, was cold as frost. In the Zijin Palace, its long corridors stretched endlessly. The carved wooden doors stood open, with young eunuchs bowing respectfully.

Jiang Li removed his black cloak, handed his hat to a eunuch, shook off the snow, and stepped into the palace. The morning court proceeded as usual.

Yuwen Xiu, clad in an embroidered dragon robe, sat in his wheelchair, listening to the officials' reports with a gentle smile.

"Your Majesty, White Jade Capital has issued another Tianji Decree. Master Lu of Beiluo will lecture on cultivation by Lake Beiluo," an official reported, bowing.

"Lu, the world's greatest cultivator, lecturing on cultivation? We cannot miss this. I will dispatch my personal guards to record every word he says," Yuwen Xiu replied calmly from his wheelchair.

The officials below hesitated but fell silent at the mention of his guards. The Black Dragon Thirteen Armor, Yuwen Xiu's elite force, was notorious in the capital. Once led by Kong Nanfei and Jiang Li, they now operated independently, even commanding the Black Dragon Guards.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the official replied, retreating.

Yuwen Xiu’s gaze finally settled on Jiang Li. Rising from his throne, he smiled broadly. “My dear Jiang, you’ve returned at last! That old traitor Tang Xiansheng conspired with the Northern County against you. It was my oversight that led to your ordeal. Are you well? Once you’ve recovered, rally the troops and march south to exact revenge!”

Jiang Li bowed. “Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. I am unharmed.”

“Good. The Black Dragon Guards, built under your guidance, cannot function without you. The position of their Grand Commander remains yours,” Yuwen Xiu said, his smile warm.

“Your Majesty,” Jiang Li interrupted suddenly.

The atmosphere in the court grew tense.

“Yes, Jiang?” Yuwen Xiu’s smile faded.

“Your Majesty, I return weary in body and soul. I request to retire and return to the fields,” Jiang Li said, bowing.

He looked up, meeting Yuwen Xiu's shifting expression, which settled into a faint smile. "You must be exhausted, Jiang. I grant you a few days' rest. Retire? Nonsense. The nation needs pillars like you in these troubled times."

Yuwen Xiu waved dismissively, returning to his throne. The old eunuch's face twitched, and the officials below shrank back, some paling as they regretted greeting Jiang Li earlier. If the Black Dragon Guards learned of their interactions, their heads might end up on the city walls.

Yuwen Xiu glanced at the trembling officials, a cold smile curling his lips.

Jiang Li stood firm, looking calmly at Yuwen Xiu. "Your Majesty, I request again to retire and return to the fields."

His words hung in the air, met by a chilling laugh that echoed through the hall. With a resounding thud, Yuwen Xiu slammed his hand on the armrest of his throne, the sound like thunder, shaking the court into silence.

Dongyang County

Dongyang County bordered the sea, where the Dongyi people, natives of eighteen islands large and small, launched their invasions. Uncivilized and skilled in watercraft, they built narrow wooden boats to cross the sea and raid the county's beaches.

As the sun rose, painting the horizon fiery red, countless boats appeared, sails catching the wind as they sped toward the shore.

On the beach, cavalry scouts patrolled, their faces paling at the sight. They had seen this too many times. The boats signaled another Dongyi assault.

A scout blew a bronze horn, its deep sound reverberating across the land. Other scouts joined in, the alarm spreading to the city's defenses. Soldiers on the walls sprang into action, preparing for battle.

On the city tower, Yang Mu, the governor of Dongyang County, walked with Grand Tutor Kong Xiu and Mo Tianyu when the horn sounded. His face darkened. "Damn it, the Dongyi are attacking again," he growled, his eyes flashing with resolve.

"It seems Dongyang won't see aid from the capital," he sighed, drawing his sword and donning his armor to lead the defense.

The rising sun pierced the darkness, casting light on the weathered walls of Dongyang's defenses. Yang Mu apologized to Kong Xiu and led his troops to the shoreline for a beachhead battle.

Thousands of Dongyi boats surged forward, their warriors roaring and firing arrows that sailed with deadly force. Yang Mu's army countered, slamming heavy bronze shields into the sand and returning fire with their own archers.

After a volley, the first boat reached the shore. Some Dongyi warriors fell to arrows, but others charged with wild abandon. Arrows rained down, turning many into pincushions, but the Dongyi's arrows claimed lives among Yang Mu's men as well.

Yang Mu roared, his voice hoarse, swinging his sword. "Attack!"

Boat after boat piled onto the shore, and the Dongyi charged, turning the battle into a brutal melee. Blood soaked the sand as fearless Dongyi warriors smashed through the shield wall, creating a breach that widened like a broken dam.

On the tower, Mo Tianyu's face paled, his blood seemingly drained by the sight of the carnage. It was his first time witnessing such brutality.

The Grand Tutor, hunched and weathered, watched the battle, his wrinkled face etched with shock. After a long silence, he sighed. "I once called Bai Fengtian cruel for ordering the slaughter of three hundred thousand Rong soldiers. Now I understand... he was right. Against a different race with foreign hearts, mercy is a luxury we cannot afford."

Yang Mu had hoped for aid from the capital, but... where were the reinforcements?

The beachhead battle ended in defeat for Dongyang's forces. The city gates opened, and soldiers on the walls readied their bows and crossbows. Young recruits, eyes red with fear, trembled at the thought of war.

Yang Mu, bloodied, led his remaining men back to the city. "Fire!" he bellowed, pulling the reins as he entered.

Every defense was a desperate struggle. The Dongyi could regroup and attack again if they failed, but for Dongyang, defeat meant the fall of the city and death.

Outside, bodies littered the ground. The Grand Tutor stood at the wall, his robe fluttering, his eyes reflecting the arrows flying below.

Suddenly, his gaze sharpened, fixed on the distant sea. A lone boat approached, carrying a towering figure whose fingers were elegantly clasped at his waist. Beneath a black robe, his eyes studied the sunlit walls of the city, a faint smile on his lips.

He had failed to breach South County, but Dongyang... Dongyang was defenseless. Sensing no cultivators among the city's forces after multiple probes, he launched his attack.

This battle, he was certain, he would win. Breaking Dongyang's defenses and entering the Great Zhou would allow him to test the strength of the Plane's Master. If the Master was merely a figurehead wielding the world's origin, as he suspected, this was his chance.

Yet, a faint sense of danger stirred within him. On the city tower, an old man in scholarly robes stood, gazing calmly in his direction.