

Starlit Path 187

Chapter 187: The Grand Tutor Stands Guard at the Nation's Gate

A single Tianji Decree set the world abuzz. Following the previous grand gathering where the Hundred Schools challenged Lu Ping'an in Beiluo, this was the second major event, once again centered in Beiluo City.

Lu Changkong, dressed not in armor but in simple robes and a thick cloak, stood atop the city tower. Behind him, Luo Yue stood with a sword at his side. A line of Beiluo's Dragon Blood Army flanked the ramparts, gazing out over the vast, snow-covered plains beyond the city. Each soldier exuded a formidable aura, a blend of spiritual energy and the unique dragon blood essence granted by the Dragon Blood Elixir. This was a truly elite force, a trump card capable of rivaling South County's South Manor Army, Western County's Xiang Family Army, or even the Imperial Capital's Black Dragon Guards.

Outside Beiluo, the expansive plains were blanketed in thick snow. Bare trees, their branches heavy with frost, dotted the landscape. The rumble of hooves shook the snow from their limbs, scattering it across the ground.

Beneath the city, the snow-draped official road teemed with figures—cultivators from all corners of the land. The recent celestial phenomenon had birthed a new wave of cultivators. Though most were merely at the initial stage of the Qi Core Realm and lacked formal cultivation methods, they were still cultivators. Drawn by the news of Lu Ping'an's lecture on cultivation, they flocked to Beiluo.

Among them were noble scions, accompanied by servants carrying their burdens, traveling in grand processions. When these young lords met others of their kind on the road, they exchanged courteous greetings before continuing together. There were also true martial artists from the rivers and lakes, unlike the rabble who had come before. Surprisingly, the crowd included commoners from humble backgrounds, who, having seized spiritual energy during the celestial event, trudged through the winter snow in patched clothes and straw sandals, their steps resolute as they made their pilgrimage to Beiluo.

The city loomed before them, shrouded in dense spiritual energy, like a vision of an immortal realm. Many gasped in awe, and some scholarly types couldn't resist composing poems on the spot. But upon reaching Beiluo's gates, their excitement gave way to caution. Beiluo was no place for recklessness. The infamous massacre of unruly martial artists had spread far and wide, leaving the world both cheering and trembling at the city's might.

The cultivators noticed Lu Changkong and the Dragon Blood Army atop the tower. The soldiers' potent vitality and overwhelming spiritual pressure made even entering the city a daunting task, requiring gritted teeth to muster the strength.

Two Dragon Blood soldiers conducted inspections at the gate. No one dared resist, for those who did—martial artists who struggled or defied—were swiftly subdued by the soldiers' blades and dragged to Beiluo's dungeons. This was the world's first encounter with an army of cultivators.

Inside Beiluo, the atmosphere was electric. The city's rich spiritual energy left newcomers stunned, as if they had stepped into a fairyland. Some wealthy scions, unwilling to leave, offered fortunes to buy homes, only to learn that Beiluo's houses and land were not for sale.

The crowds gathered at Lake Beiluo, where White Jade Capital lay at its heart. Gazing at the island's pavilions, half-hidden in swirling spiritual mist, they marveled in wonder.

From the tower, Lu Changkong squinted into the distance. The thunder of hooves approached, and his eyes gleamed faintly. The emperor's personal guards—the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor—had arrived. Their horses trampled the snow, kicking up a flurry of white.

Leading them was a figure in black light armor, radiating the peak strength of the Qi Core Realm. He remained mounted, exuding arrogance. Behind him rode a dozen black-armored cavalry, their armor

distinct from his. He was one of the emperor's elite Thirteen Armor; the others were ordinary Black Dragon Guards.

Reining in his horse, the leader narrowed his eyes. The crowd at the gate shrank back, intimidated by the guards' ferocious aura and the spiritual pressure they emitted, which left weaker cultivators trembling.

"Clear the way!" barked two Black Dragon Guards as they dismounted, shoving aside the onlookers. Several humble scholars in straw sandals were pushed to the side of the road. One fell into the snow, rising with a glare but too afraid to speak.

The leader, still mounted, rode slowly to the base of the tower. Lu Changkong, in scholarly robes, descended with Luo Yue and several Dragon Blood soldiers at his side.

"I am Liu Tao, Thirteenth of the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor, here to greet City Lord Lu," the leader said, offering a slight bow from horseback.

Lu Changkong's brow furrowed. Luo Yue, behind him, fixed the man with a glare. "You've entered Beiluo City and still don't dismount?" Luo Yue snapped.

Liu Tao's guards hesitated but dismounted. Liu Tao, however, remained seated. With a faint smile, he addressed Lu Changkong. "City Lord Lu, I come on the emperor's orders to record Master Lu's teachings on cultivation. Unless Master Lu himself appears, I see no need to dismount."

Silence fell over the gate. The air grew heavy with tension, as if the swirling snow had turned to blades.

The gathered cultivators whispered among themselves. The pushed-aside scholars glared in anger. Lu Changkong said nothing, but Luo Yue's beard bristled as he drew his sword in a flash of white light. "What did you say, you insolent dog?"

Liu Tao's condescending tone infuriated him. Who was this fool to disrespect Lu Changkong, the lord of Beiluo City?

Liu Tao's eyes narrowed. His guards drew their weapons, and the Dragon Blood Army responded in kind. The clash of auras scattered the snow around them.

Clad in black armor, Liu Tao's expression hardened. As one of the emperor's Thirteen Armor, favored by Yuwen Xiu and trained in the Black Dragon's killing techniques, he had risen through the ranks with unmatched prowess. In the capital, he was feared; high officials trembled before him, and many had fallen to his blade. Emboldened by his status and the Black Dragon's teachings, Liu Tao believed he could stride through Beiluo unchallenged—unless White Jade Capital's disciples intervened. Representing the emperor's will, he saw no need to dismount.

Lu Changkong chuckled. "I've heard the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor are like demons in the capital, slaughtering at will and striking fear into all. Seeing you now, the rumors seem... well-earned."

Liu Tao smirked. "If City Lord Lu acknowledges our reputation, then let us enter."

Lu Changkong's smile faded. "But the capital is the capital, and Beiluo is Beiluo. Even if His Majesty came himself, he would dismount before me. Who are you, a mere guard, to act so boldly? Stay on that horse one moment longer, and see what happens."

The air grew thick with killing intent. The Dragon Blood soldiers' eyes blazed with menace. Liu Tao raised his head, staring at Lu Changkong. His black armor trembled as spiritual energy surged within his Qi Core, emitting a low, dragon-like hum.

“Lu Changkong—”

His words were cut short. A terrifying pressure descended, freezing his spiritual energy mid-flow. His eyes widened in horror, the force far surpassing even the emperor's Black Dragon.

A faint voice echoed through the air. “My father's name isn't for the likes of you to utter.”

The pressure was like a mountain crashing down, threatening to burst Liu Tao's eyes from their sockets. Despair gripped him.

A silver streak flashed across the sky like a meteor, circling the gate before vanishing. To the onlookers, it was as if nothing had happened.

Then, blood sprayed from Liu Tao's neck. His face frozen in shock and fear, his head toppled from his shoulders, his armored body slumping from the horse.

Luo Yue's sword hand paused mid-motion. Lu Changkong stared at the corpse, stunned. Was that... Lu Ping'an's voice?

“Hah! Daring to look down on Beiluo’s lord!” Luo Yue roared with laughter. “My young master’s got a short temper when it comes to protecting his own. He’d kill you without a second thought!”

Lu Changkong smiled, glancing toward the island at the heart of Lake Beiluo. His son was still looking out for him.

“Take the rest to the dungeons,” Lu Changkong ordered a nearby guard, hands clasped behind his back. “Send word to His Majesty: Liu Tao, for his insolence, has been executed. The remaining Black Dragon Guards will be returned to the capital after the cultivation lecture.”

The guard’s eyes flickered as he accepted the order and departed. Luo Yue waved a hand, commanding the Dragon Blood Army. “Tie them all up!” he barked, sneering at the guards.

The commotion at the gate fell silent. What was expected to be a major confrontation ended in an instant. Liu Tao, presumed formidable as an emperor’s guard, was dead in under three seconds—a pitiful end.

Word spread that Master Lu himself had acted, his fiery temper matching the legends. The gathered cultivators, already cautious, grew even more restrained.

Lake Beiluo, White Jade Capital

On the second floor of the pavilion, Lu Ping'an leaned against the railing, watching the snow fall. The scene was breathtaking. Ning Zhao, her dark hair cascading, gently warmed plum wine in the snow, her movements graceful.

A silver flash streaked toward him, halting abruptly and embedding itself in his wheelchair. Killing Liu Tao was trivial for Lu Ping'an. Protective by nature, he had crushed the King of Xirong for injuring Nie Shuang; Liu Tao's disrespect toward his father was a death sentence.

Yet, Liu Tao's aura surprised him. "The Black Dragon's scent..." Lu Ping'an mused, tapping the armrest of his wheelchair. He hadn't paid attention to the Black Dragon in some time, but Liu Tao's energy suggested it was veering down a dangerous path.

Dismissing the thought, he turned to more pressing matters. The three days were up, and it was time to address the celestial phenomenon and guide the future of the cultivation world, fostering a new era of contention among the Hundred Schools before the world ascended to mid-tier martial status.

Dongyang County

On the city's battlements, Governor Yang Mu, his armor battered and bloodied, climbed the walls to direct the defense. The battle was grueling, largely due to the Dongyi's fearless warriors. These eerie figures scaled the walls bare-handed, undeterred by swords, stones, or even crushed skulls, making the defense a nightmare.

“Grand Tutor, please retreat to the city. It’s too dangerous here,” Yang Mu urged Kong Xiu.

Mo Tianyu, his face no longer pale but flushed with newfound ferocity, was stirred by the soldiers’ fearless resolve. He itched to draw his sword and join the fray but restrained himself for the Grand Tutor’s sake. “Master, let’s go. The city is safer,” he said.

Kong Xiu, however, waved them off, his eyes fixed on the towering figure standing elegantly on a lone boat in the distance. He refused to leave, despite Yang Mu and Mo Tianyu’s protests.

“Grand Tutor, please! I cannot let anything happen to you,” Yang Mu insisted. As a revered Confucian scholar, Kong Xiu’s safety was his responsibility.

Mo Tianyu’s mind was in chaos. Before leaving, his divination for the Grand Tutor and the Scholar’s Pavilion had predicted great fortune. Great fortune? What a joke! Cold sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Why retreat?” Kong Xiu asked calmly, his hunched figure unyielding. “Are the lives of these soldiers, defending their homeland, any less precious than mine? They have aging parents waiting for their safe return, devoted wives longing for their embrace, and young children needing their guidance. They are the hope of many. What right do I have to flee?”

His words, steady and resolute, struck like a hammer. Yang Mu trembled, his heart shaken. Mo Tianyu’s face paled further. In that moment, the frail, elderly Grand Tutor seemed to shed his age and weariness, standing tall with the vigor of his youth, when he had challenged the Hundred Schools single-handedly.

A surge of invisible energy gathered above the city, forming dense clouds. Kong Xiu smiled, radiant and commanding. "Those old fools like Lü Dongxuan think they embody the last glory of the Hundred Schools, forgetting how I bested them one by one in my youth. If this is the final flourish of that era, how can it lack me?"

His Confucian robes billowed as he laughed, his voice echoing across the battlements. With a single step, his frail frame erupted with boundless momentum. His beard and hair flared as he spoke, his words flowing like a river, blooming like a lotus.

A vast aura of righteous energy coalesced above him. The defenders of Dongyang felt a warm, invigorating force wash over them, as if war drums thundered in their hearts and horns blared in their minds. This power became their backbone, igniting hope and boundless courage.

Fear of the Dongyi's relentless warriors vanished. On the battlements, bare-chested drummers roared, infused with righteous energy, pounding their drums with fervor until their faces flushed and the sound thundered like lightning, reflecting their resolve: no return until the enemy was broken.

Yang Mu's blood surged. He stared at the Grand Tutor, his body trembling with emotion. As governor, he wasn't naive. The lack of response from the capital to his pleas for aid revealed the emperor's intent: to weaken the counties using the barbarians. Yang Mu had nearly lost hope, but Kong Xiu's journey east had rekindled it. Now, bathed in righteous energy, watching the unyielding Grand Tutor, how could he despair?

Raising his sword, Yang Mu roared, "Kill!"

Mo Tianyu stood stunned, the copper divination coins slipping from his hand to clatter on the battlements. His eyes fixed on the Grand Tutor, crowned with righteous energy.

In that moment, the Grand Tutor stood guard at the nation's gate.