

Starlit Path 189

Chapter 189: A Single Breath Illuminates History

The Grand Tutor's righteous energy quelled ten thousand troops—a scene so awe-inspiring that it left Yang Mu, the governor of Dongyang County, breathless as he watched from the city's battlements. When an elderly man, seemingly at the twilight of his life, erupted with the brilliance of a blazing sun, the world stood in reverent silence.

Yang Mu strode to the side of a drummer, taking the drumsticks himself. With his vitality surging, he pounded the war drum, its surface trembling as dust rose. Sweat and blood dripped from his forehead, splattering with each strike. "Fight!" he roared.

Below, the Grand Tutor recited poetry, his voice calm and serene. Each verse flowed from his lips, imbued with a tranquil grace. Righteous energy, though intangible, merged with the clouds, taking on a visible form. This energy was a manifestation of will. In the past, the Grand Tutor had wielded it, but never to this extent. The recent celestial phenomenon had shattered his limitations, allowing his righteous energy to reach new heights, capable of repelling entire armies with a single shout.

The towering figure in the black robe, his expression cold, felt an unprecedented pressure from a mere mortal—an unthinkable sensation. Raising his hand, he summoned the earth to churn, forming two massive earthen barriers that rose like brown tapestries to shield him. The hand formed of righteous energy crashed down, striking the barriers with a resounding hum. Dust and earth scattered, and the ground quaked.

Dongyi soldiers coughed blood, their resolve crumbling. Even their fearless undead warriors, charging recklessly, faltered under the righteous energy, collapsing like powerless eels. This energy not only bolstered morale but served as a potent weapon, purging evil and malevolent forces.

A fierce wind howled, kicking up sand and stone across the battlefield. The Grand Tutor stood unwavering, his blood-stained robes billowing. His aged, piercing eyes seemed to bore through the earthen shield, seeking the figure beyond.

Dongyang's army, their blood surging with fervor, gripped their weapons tightly. The Grand Tutor's back loomed like a towering mountain, shielding them from the enemy's onslaught. With him present, their resolve stood unshaken. Once, Yang Mu had been their pillar, but now the Grand Tutor had taken his place, his charisma and influence undeniable—a true Confucian master who had once stirred the tides of the Great Zhou.

Mo Tianyu, clutching his sword, watched with a racing heart. He cursed himself for ever divining fortunes. A distant explosion sounded as the earthen barriers parted, revealing the towering figure, who stepped forward with an air of elegance. Having blocked the righteous energy's assault, he gazed at the Grand Tutor with appreciation. "A mere mortal wielding such power through will alone... You are a prodigy among men," he said.

Raising his hand, he chanted incantations, the ground twisting as it rose into dozens of mud figures, each mirroring his form but weaker than the clone used in South County. They stood elegantly, poised for battle.

The Grand Tutor's eyes narrowed, his righteous energy gathering anew above him. From his sleeve, a bamboo scroll slipped into his hand. Tapping it lightly, he ignored the charging mud figures and unfurled the scroll, reciting the poetry and prose of ancient sages. With each verse, the righteous energy behind him grew stronger.

Clouds gathered overhead, blotting out the dawn's light. A chilling wind stirred, carrying fine snow like grains of rice. The battlefield fell silent, save for the Grand Tutor's resonant voice.

Imperial Capital

In the Zijin Palace, Yuwen Xiu sat on his throne, his face etched with cold fury. Jiang Li had been imprisoned, charged with treason against the late emperor. The court's officials stood silent, not daring to speak. The Grand Tutor had left, and now Jiang Li sought to retire—everyone was abandoning him. From a powerless young emperor to the master of the Black Dragon Guards and the Great Zhou court, had he not done enough? Why did they all forsake him?

Before the palace, the old eunuch knelt, head bowed. "You old fool, tell me—why?" Yuwen Xiu demanded, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at the eunuch. The old man trembled but remained silent. "Always silent, never answering!" Yuwen Xiu stood, exhaling sharply at the mute eunuch. "I'm going to the Imperial Garden. No visitors. If Kong Nanfei seeks me, stop him."

With that, he swept out, his heavy footsteps echoing through the hall. "Yes, Your Majesty," the eunuch murmured, bowing lower. Once Yuwen Xiu was gone, he raised his weary face, dusted his robes, and shuffled out.

Kong Nanfei approached, his scholarly robes flowing, his eyes sharp with anger. "Eunuch, why has His Majesty imprisoned Jiang Li? What crime has he committed?" he demanded.

The eunuch replied calmly, "Jiang Li is charged with harming the late emperor. His Majesty's decree is just."

“Don’t deceive yourself,” Kong Nanfei snapped, taking a deep breath. “Yuwen Xiu’s mind is clouded by the Black Dragon. Feeding it human lives, practicing demonic arts—the court is a cesspool! How is this any different from when the Northern and Western Counties besieged the capital? Without Jiang Li, the Great Zhou would have fallen. Yet now, Yuwen Xiu jails him, discarding a loyal servant like a used tool. With the Black Dragon Guards, does he think he can slaughter loyal subjects at will?”

The eunuch listened impassively to Kong Nanfei’s furious tirade. “The Grand Tutor left, Jiang Li seeks to retire—His Majesty suffers from losing his closest allies. He only fears Jiang Li was swayed by the Northern County rebels.”

Snow fell coldly between them. After a long stare, Kong Nanfei shook his head in disappointment and turned away. “Tell His Majesty,” he called through the snow, “the Grand Tutor’s departure, Jiang Li’s resignation—he must look within for the cause. As the Grand Tutor said, every effect has its cause.”

The eunuch’s bowed figure trembled slightly. In the capital’s dungeons, dank and moldy, the old eunuch arrived by carriage. Two Black Dragon Guards stood watch. Recognizing him, they hesitated before fetching a figure in black light armor—one of the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor.

“Eunuch,” the guard greeted with a bow.

“I wish to see General Jiang. Please grant me passage,” the eunuch said.

The guard frowned. “Do you have His Majesty’s decree?”

“No,” the eunuch replied, shaking his head.

“Then I’m sorry—without His Majesty’s order, no one may enter. Jiang Li is a grave offender,” the guard said firmly.

The eunuch fixed him with a deep stare. “I only wish to speak with General Jiang. When the Black Dragon Guards were formed, he and I worked closely together. Seeing him imprisoned pains me.”

The guard raised an eyebrow. The eunuch was leveraging Jiang Li’s role in founding the Black Dragon Guards. True, Jiang Li had created and trained them, but now the Thirteen Armor held sway. Still, the guard smirked and stepped aside. “Very well, Eunuch, go ahead.”

The eunuch entered the dark, damp dungeon, his expression grave. Passing cells filled with listless prisoners, he reached the deepest chamber. There, on a straw-covered bed, Jiang Li sat, his wrists and ankles bound by heavy chains. Sensing the eunuch, he slowly opened his eyes.

Chi Lian waited in vain for Jiang Li’s return, only to learn he had been imprisoned. The news sent shockwaves through the Great Zhou court, stirring outrage. Officials condemned Jiang Li, accusing him of being swayed by Tantai Xuan in the Northern County or blaming him for the failed northern campaign. Most focused on his alleged crime of regicide.

Chi Lian’s face flushed with anger. When Kong Nanfei returned, his expression dark, she knew the young emperor meant to kill Jiang Li. “When the Great Zhou was in peril, who stood tall?” she spat toward the Zijin Palace. “Has that wretched emperor no conscience?”

Under Kong Nanfei's protection, she fled the city on horseback. With Jiang Li's imprisonment, the capital was a storm of suspicion, the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor and their guards hunting his allies. Everyone feared for their lives. As Jiang Li's subordinate, Chi Lian had to escape to preserve herself for his rescue.

Deep within the Zijin Palace, in the Imperial Garden, Yuwen Xiu stood by a pond, hearing the terrified cries of eunuchs and maids and the sound of crunching bones. Gazing at the falling snow, his face was calm. "If the world demands my cruelty, then I shall be a tyrant," he had once declared to the traitor Zhao Kuo by this pond, entwined with the Black Dragon. Now, those words were coming true. Kindness and weakness invited betrayal, but he was neither anymore. The Great Zhou was his.

As the pond's waters stilled, he turned, hands clasped behind him, approaching the edge. The air reeked of blood, the water stained with spreading crimson. The Black Dragon emerged, baring its sharp teeth. Yuwen Xiu stroked its icy, chilling scales. "I have nothing left but you," he murmured. The Grand Tutor had left, Jiang Li sought to retire—everyone had abandoned him. The Black Dragon coiled around him, faint black mist seeping from its scales into his body.

Urgent footsteps broke the silence. A young eunuch rushed forward. "Your Majesty!" The Black Dragon's piercing gaze fixed on him, its roar shaking the air, gills flaring as water splashed. The eunuch paled, trembling. "Speak," Yuwen Xiu commanded, calming the dragon.

"News from Beiluo," the eunuch stammered. "Liu Tao, of the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor, led the guards to record Master Lu's lecture as per Your Majesty's decree. But for refusing to dismount before Lu Changkong, he was slain. The remaining guards are in Beiluo's dungeons. Lu Changkong says they'll be released after the lecture."

The air in the garden turned icy. Yuwen Xiu's cold, merciless eyes pinned the eunuch, who collapsed, paralyzed by fear, a foul odor spreading as he knelt.

Outside Dongyang County

The Grand Tutor, his robes bloodied, gazed calmly at the advancing mud figures. He had long known the mysterious power of cultivators. When he faced Lu Ping'an in Beiluo, he sensed a terrifying pressure, even though Lu hadn't fought at full strength. Back then, Lu's name was not yet renowned. Now, as the world's foremost cultivator, he had bested four masters of the Hundred Schools.

"Cultivators..." The Grand Tutor shook his head with a smile. "They say only cultivators can counter cultivators. I believe it, but I refuse to accept it." The Hundred Schools were no mere trifles; they had once defined an era.

His eyes blazed like a flame in the night, dazzling and fierce. Turning to the fervent Dongyang army and Mo Tianyu's reddened eyes, he smiled. "In my life, I've done many things," he sighed. "Now, my only wish is to see you all return home safely—a redemption for the Great Zhou's failures."

His hair fluttered without wind, his robes billowing as if fanned by a breeze. His gaze burned with a fiery intensity. Righteous energy gathered above, blazing like a bonfire, radiant and dazzling.

The towering figure frowned, a sense of foreboding rising. The mud figures he controlled faltered. With a solemn expression, he urged them forward. "A mortal dares challenge a cultivator?" he scoffed, unconvinced.

The Grand Tutor glowed with blinding brilliance. Though he had never entered the Dragon Gate or cultivated spiritual energy, his aura soared, rivaling the peak of the Qi Core Realm or even the Body Zang Realm. Igniting his soul and righteous energy with the recitation of sacred poetry, he illuminated the world.

“Only one breath illuminates history,” his voice boomed.

The mud figures melted under the radiant glow, vanishing like snow. The towering figure clutched his head, blood streaming from his orifices as he fell to one knee, screaming in agony. His soul was battered, his disbelief fixed on the radiant old man. “This world... its people are mad!” he cried, fleeing into the sea, vanishing as the Dongyi army scattered in disarray, clambering onto their boats.

The heavens’ fiery light faded, giving way to somber white snow, like a mournful elegy falling upon an old man standing tall, gazing into the distance.