

Starlit Path 190

Chapter 190: Lifelong Rival, Lifelong Friend

The vast snow fell from the heavens, drifting down like a mournful elegy.

“Boom!” “Boom! Boom!” The war drums thundered, their final resounding crash shattering the falling snowflakes as if tearing through a drumhead. The Dongyi army had retreated, fleeing in their boats as the towering figure, gravely wounded, led their escape.

From the battlements, Yang Mu’s eyes blazed red. Casting aside the drumsticks, his blood-crusted armor frozen stiff, he leaned against the parapet, gazing at the figure seated amid the swirling snow below. His expression was a complex mix of admiration and awe.

Mo Tianyu, his sword plunged into the snow, sprinted toward the Grand Tutor. As he drew near, he saw the old man seated amidst a battlefield strewn with corpses, weary yet nostalgic. “Master...” Mo Tianyu knelt, his heart gripped with anguish.

The Grand Tutor sat cross-legged, snow blanketing him, sapping the warmth from his body, leaving him increasingly cold. Gazing toward the vast sea, where snowflakes vanished into the waves, he watched the fleeing Dongyi boats scatter like frightened rats.

“Cultivators... they are truly formidable,” the Grand Tutor said, exhaling softly.

Mo Tianyu clutched the snow, gasping as the icy air pierced his lungs, choking him with tears. “Master, let’s return to the Scholar’s Pavilion,” he pleaded, coughing and weeping.

“Why weep?” the Grand Tutor asked calmly, his voice still robust. “I haven’t long left to live. Birth, aging, sickness, death—these are human constants. Rather than fading away in the Scholar’s Pavilion, watching snow bend the banana trees, I’d rather end in this clash with a cultivator, victorious and without regrets.”

His serene words struck Mo Tianyu like a hammer. He had felt Lu Ping’an’s overwhelming power, the might of cultivators. Yet the Grand Tutor, through action, proved that a mortal could triumph over them.

Looking toward the horizon, the Grand Tutor imagined a rising sun casting radiant light on his face, though the sky above the sea remained overcast. “Is there wine?” he asked softly.

“Yes, yes!” Mo Tianyu snapped to attention, unfastening the gourd at his waist. A lover of wine, he never went without. After three sips, he’d divine a fortune. Wiping the gourd’s mouth with his sleeve, he handed it to the Grand Tutor.

The old man smiled, his hand trembling as it reached for the gourd. His cold fingers brushed Mo Tianyu’s, chilling him to the bone. Taking the gourd, he sipped, exhaling deeply as if intoxicated, his eyes squinting. Holding the gourd, he gazed at the imagined red dawn.

The scene froze. Snow fell on Mo Tianyu’s neck, its icy touch piercing. He collapsed backward, sitting in the snow as the storm intensified, cloaking the Grand Tutor in a thick layer of white.

Beiluo, Lake Island, White Jade Capital

Atop the pavilion, Lu Ping'an sighed deeply. He hadn't expected the Grand Tutor to draw the curtain on the Hundred Schools era in such a manner. A truly admirable elder, he thought. Holding a bronze wine cup, he leaned against the railing, tilting the cup to pour its contents in a crystalline arc—a toast to the Grand Tutor.

Below, Lü Dongxuan, eagerly awaiting Lu's lecture, froze as he saw the spilled wine. His divination sensed something amiss, his heart trembling. Clutching his gold chain, he spun it rapidly, the buzzing sound echoing. His face paled.

Hua Dongliu, noticing his distress, asked bluntly, "Old Lü, what's wrong?"

Lü Dongxuan's lips quivered. Gazing east through the island's spiritual mist, he murmured, "Old Kong... he's gone, free at last." His voice was hoarse, heavy with emotion.

Xie Yunling's body shook, his eyes narrowing. Hua Dongliu's sword intent flared uncontrollably, sharp as an unsheathed blade. Gongshu Yu opened his mouth but found no words. Having opposed Kong Xiu alongside Mo Beike for a lifetime, the news stunned him, followed by a tide of helplessness and nostalgia.

The surrounding crowd, puzzled, saw the masters of the Hundred Schools staring skyward, lost in thought. Combined with Lu's act of pouring wine, they sensed a momentous event had occurred, though its nature eluded them.

Northern County

Mo Beike stared east, his hand trembling uncontrollably. Clutching it, he couldn't stop the shaking. A sense of loss washed over him. Rising from his chair, he stepped out of his tent, gazing at the endless snowfield beyond Tianhan Pass. A snowflake melted in his palm, like a tear. His heavy eye bags quivered. After a long silence, he sighed, "Lifelong rival, lifelong friend. Farewell, old friend."

Imperial Capital, Scholar's Pavilion

Amid curling sandalwood smoke, Kong Nanfei stood by a window, staring at snow-laden banana leaves, his heart uneasy. A sharp crack sounded as a leaf snapped under the snow's weight, falling to the courtyard. He gazed at it, a heavy silence settling over him, his heart sinking with an inexplicable weight.

White Jade Capital

Lu's hair fluttered in the wind. He hadn't monitored the battle in Dongyang, unable to watch the world's every corner. But now, his eyes flickered with patterns, replaying the clash outside Dongyang. The Grand Tutor, with no trace of spiritual energy, had burned his will and righteous energy to nearly obliterate a peak Foundation Building cultivator, forcing him to flee, bloodied.

“No spiritual energy, yet he stirred the world’s origin with sheer will, surpassing the Body Zang Realm in that moment,” Lu mused, tapping his wheelchair’s armrest. “Only one breath illuminates history.”

Gazing at the old man clutching a wine gourd, facing the sea, Lu’s tapping paused. With a flick, a phoenix’s cry rang out as the Phoenix Feather Sword transformed into a blazing phoenix, soaring into the Dragon Gate.

In Dongyang’s Red Dragon Gate, the slumbering dragon awoke, its fiery eyes wide. A deafening roar shook the air as a fiery phoenix emerged, a red sword at its core, radiating terrifying power. The dragon shrank back, retreating as the phoenix soared over Dongyang’s sky, a streak of flame tearing through the clouds.

Yang Mu, atop the battlements, stared in awe at the blazing phoenix as it plunged into the sea. A massive vortex formed, burning the water. Beneath, the towering figure, healing in the mud, cried out, “The Plane’s Master?!” Before he could react, the fiery light engulfed him, leaving no trace.

Back at White Jade Capital, Lu, having unleashed the Phoenix Feather Sword, acted as if it were trivial. Facing the crowd below, he began, “The heavens hold will, forming origins and attributes. Cultivators defy the heavens, gathering spiritual energy for immortality...”

His voice, though soft, reached every ear. The crowd stirred, realizing the lecture had begun. “The world has attributes—metal, wood, water, fire, earth—corresponding to the five organs tempered in the Body Zang Realm. New cultivators gather spiritual energy in their dantian, forming a Qi Core. At its peak, a vortex forms, leading to the Body Zang Realm, unlocking the body’s treasures and birthing attribute energy. Beyond lies a higher realm, akin to the Qi Core. The Qi Core forms a virtual core; beyond Body Zang, the body’s essence fuses with spiritual energy to form a solid core—the Golden Core Realm.”

The crowd was stunned, their understanding of cultivation reshaped. Lu Changkong and others listened, entranced. Ning Zhao's eyes gleamed—beyond Body Zang was the Golden Core, a daunting challenge to form a solid core from nothing.

Sima Qingshan, on his ink boat, frowned, pondering the Golden Core and attribute energy. Lu continued, "The Golden Core method comes from beyond the heavens, a natural progression. But cultivators defy nature, so I offer another path. Beyond Body Zang lies the Heavenly Lock Realm. The spine has thirty-three segments, divided into nine extremes, called the Nine Heavenly Locks. Tempering the spine and breaking these locks is the realm beyond Body Zang. The ninth lock, the Heavenly Palace Lock, triggers a heavenly tribulation."

The crowd was shocked. This path was harder, riskier, but promised greater power. "These methods are distant goals," Lu said. "The celestial phenomenon was an immortal's design, spreading spiritual energy so all could cultivate. Yet, due to talent, few will succeed. In ancient times, a glorious cultivation era fell to ruin because cultivators and mortals were too weak to resist calamity. Now, with spiritual energy resurging and immortal legacies appearing, White Jade Capital leads cultivation to avoid past mistakes, hence this lecture."

Many were confused, unaware of the ancient battlefield Lu had witnessed. With a wave, he conjured an image in the air—a vivid depiction of the ancient cultivation civilization's war against extraterrestrial demons. The crowd, shaken, felt urgency and crisis. "With the world's origin coalescing, attributes form, and all paths lead to immortality," Lu said. "Cultivation methods are fixed, but people are not. Each of you can forge your own path, like the Hundred Schools era. Only through contention can progress thrive. The cultivation world is harsher than you imagine."

His words, delivered with burning intensity, sparked questions from the crowd, which he answered patiently. The lecture stretched from day to night, ending with Lu granting a night to digest his teachings. His goal was to prepare for a mid-tier martial world, driven not by him alone but by the world's cultivators, with him merely guiding their path.

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The Phoenix Feather Sword returned, glowing brilliantly. The last wanderer's soul was obliterated. Lu sighed. The Grand Tutor's death was unexpected yet fitting. Never entering the Dragon Gate or cultivating spiritual energy, his days were numbered. Yet, in Dongyang, he nearly vanquished a peak Foundation Building cultivator, closing the Hundred Schools era gloriously, departing without regrets.

As dawn's light tore through the snow, a grave and shocking message spread across the Great Zhou: the Grand Tutor had fallen.