

Starlit Path 191

Chapter 191: What Use Is an Emperor Who Does Not Cherish This Land?

When the Southern Manor Army, dispatched by Tang Yimo, arrived at Dongyang County, the war had already ended. The Dongyi forces had suffered a crushing defeat, fleeing in disarray and leaving behind a field of corpses. The Southern Manor Army's commander was stunned. Dongyang, lacking a cultivator army, had held its ground? Even more astonishing, the casualties were minimal—far fewer than those in South County. Many soldiers remained intact, a near-miraculous outcome.

Yet, the Dongyang troops showed no joy or triumph. Governor Yang Mu personally greeted the Southern Manor Army. Though Dongyang and South County had clashed in the past, Yang Mu had sent a desperate plea for aid, never expecting South County to respond with their elite cultivator army. "Thank you..." he said, his gaze heavy with complexity.

The Grand Tutor's death had revealed a bitter truth: no aid would come from the imperial capital. The emperor had no intention of supporting Dongyang. A fire of resentment kindled within Yang Mu.

Soon after, the Western Liang Iron Cavalry, the Xiang Family Army, arrived, followed by Northern County's lightly armored troops. Yang Mu had sought aid from the Western and Northern Counties as well, and both had answered, unlike the imperial capital. But the war was over. Yang Mu briefed the reinforcements on the battle, recounting the Grand Tutor's heroic feats.

The allied forces were shocked, exchanging glances of disbelief. As cultivators, they knew the vast advantage they held over mortals. Yet the Grand Tutor, a mere mortal, had crafted a mythical victory. A wave of admiration surged for the fallen scholar.

The allied armies withdrew, carrying news that would shake the world. Carrier pigeons, their white feathers fluttering, spread the tidings far and wide: the Confucian Grand Tutor had fallen in Dongyang.

The news, amplified by the Tianji Pavilion, swept through the Great Zhou, leaving Confucian scholars weeping and many factions enraged—not just at the loss, but at the imperial capital’s inaction.

Dongyang had sent pleas to South, Western, and Northern Counties, as well as the capital. The capital, closest and first to receive the plea, had ignored it. Meanwhile, South County, despite past tensions, and the Western and Northern Counties had sent aid. The emperor’s silence, without even a reply, was deafening. The Grand Tutor had shouldered the burden alone, burning his righteous energy to repel the Dongyi invaders.

The Confucian scholars’ fury turned the capital into a target of scorn.

Imperial Capital

Yuwen Xiu’s face was icy. The news from a young eunuch stunned him, fueling his rage. “Beiluo dares to humiliate me so!” he seethed, referring to Liu Tao’s execution for disrespecting Lu Changkong. But the next message hit like a tidal wave: the Grand Tutor had fallen in Dongyang, his righteous energy illuminating history by defeating a cultivator.

Yuwen Xiu’s body grew cold, his emotions barely settling. Another eunuch entered the Zijin Palace, trembling. “Your Majesty, the Grand Tutor’s death has sparked outrage among the Confucian scholars. They blame the capital’s inaction and are gathering on the main street, demanding answers.”

The palace, unlit by candles, was shrouded in darkness. Yuwen Xiu’s voice was cold. “What answers do they want? Don’t I grieve for the Grand Tutor? Who are these scholars to judge me? If he’d stayed in the capital, would he have died? Why did he go to Dongyang?”

His voice rose to a roar, the eunuch cowering in fear. "They point fingers, do they?" Yuwen Xiu said, calming slightly. "Summon the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor."

The eunuch scurried out, and soon, twelve figures in black light armor, etched with dragon heads, entered. "Your Majesty," they intoned, bowing.

"Gather the Black Dragon Guards and suppress the capital's unrest," Yuwen Xiu commanded. "I am the Son of Heaven. These wretched scholars have no right to judge me, no matter how many point fingers."

The twelve exchanged glances, nodding. "As you command." They exited, mounting black horses and galloping through the snow.

On the capital's main street, Confucian scholars in robes gathered, their voices raised in righteous anger, forming a swelling tide toward the Zijin Palace. More scholars from beyond the capital joined, demanding justice for the Grand Tutor and answers for the emperor's inaction. The Dongyi were part of the Five Barbarians threatening the Great Zhou, yet the emperor had done nothing.

The onlookers watched the scholars' procession with complex emotions. In a teahouse, the beautiful Qianqian, her eyes wavering, murmured, "The heavens are changing..." as snow fell, chilling her.

Hooves thundered, snow scattering. Black-armored Black Dragon Guards, led by the head of the Thirteen Armor, charged down the street. Their masks and deathly aura struck fear. The leader raised a hand, and the guards surged forward like cavalry, their spears glinting in the snow, tearing through the air.

Blood and defiant cries filled the street. The capital's main thoroughfare became a scene of carnage—a dark day for Confucian scholars. Bystanders trembled, some collapsing in fear. Qianqian covered her mouth, her eyes wide with disbelief.

As the hooves stilled, the street was littered with scholars' corpses, snow stained red. Kong Nanfei, arriving late, dropped his sword, staring at the massacre. His lips quivered, his expression a mix of grief and madness. He recalled the Grand Tutor's disappointed look as he left the Scholar's Pavilion. Yuwen Xiu had changed, and so had the capital.

The Great Zhou, founded on Confucianism, had witnessed such a tragedy. Black Dragon Guards, their spears still dripping, eyed Kong Nanfei coldly. The leader, astride his horse, watched the seemingly deranged scholar. The air grew tense.

Kong Nanfei glared at the guards he had once trained, now butchers. Slapping his own face, he turned and walked away, his solitary figure fading into the snowy official road, leaving the Scholar's Pavilion and the capital behind.

A carriage sped toward Beiluo, its horses panting steam. Mo Tianyu, weathered and disheveled, stepped down, carrying a figure on his back. His eyes flickered as he gazed at the city. Bidding farewell to Yang Mu, he had raced to Beiluo. "Master, you wished to retire here. Your disciple has brought you," he said.

Trekking through the snow, he approached the city. Atop his wheelchair, Lu Ping'an sensed his arrival, his white robes fluttering. With a wave, Beiluo's gates opened, the snow melting to form a pristine path to the lake island. Mo Tianyu's face trembled at the sight. He had come from the east, fulfilling the Grand Tutor's unachieved wish to rest on the island.

Tightening his grip on the figure, Mo Tianyu walked forward. Snow fell, but none touched him, parting above his head.

Tianhan Pass

Nie Changqing strode through the snow, light as a swallow, leaving no tracks. He caught up to Li Sansi, who was battling the Xirong army alone. Drawing his butcher knife, Nie slashed, dispersing the snow. "Where is the Xirong King?" he demanded coldly.

His strike sapped the Xirong's will to fight. A tribal leader, trembling, said, "The Xirong King is dead! A palm from the heavens struck him—divine punishment!" The leaders knelt, awed by the Great Zhou's cultivators.

Nie and Li Sansi exchanged glances. Nie's killing intent faded. "The young master intervened," he said, realizing Lu had protected Nie Shuang. Exhaling, he slashed again, carving a trench in the snow. The Xirong fled, and Nie and Li, one with a knife, the other a sword, herded them westward like shepherds driving sheep.

Northern County

Tantai Xuan slammed the table, tea spilling. “Jiang Li imprisoned? For retiring? Charged with regicide?” he roared, his face red with fury. “Is that little emperor mad?” He had released Jiang Li, not expecting this betrayal.

The news of the Grand Tutor’s fall shocked him further. The Confucian pillar of the Great Zhou was gone. The counties hesitated to attack the capital because of Kong Xiu, not the Black Dragon Guards. Tantai Xuan feared no guards—every county had cultivator armies, including his own.

“No aid sent, using the Five Barbarians to weaken the counties—well played, little emperor!” Tantai Xuan sat, gulping tea from the pot. Recalling his dream of slaying a black dragon, blood soaking him, he set the pot down, resolve hardening. “Fetch the Giant and Mo Ju,” he ordered.

At Tianhan Pass, Mo Ju stood on the battlements, his crane cloak billowing in the cold wind, gazing at the snowy expanse. Memories flooded him: a ragged youth by the roadside, approached by a kind old man from a carriage. That man’s guidance had transformed Mo Ju from an overlooked Mohist to Northern County’s strategist. Though the guidance had purpose, it had given him hope in his darkest hour.

“Farewell, Grand Tutor,” Mo Ju murmured, tears glistening in the snow’s reflection. A servant’s urgent footsteps pulled him back. “Master Mo, the governor summons you to the study.”

Mo Ju nodded, shaking snow from his cloak, and headed to the study. Tantai Xuan and Mo Beike awaited, the air heavy. Tantai Xuan rose, bowing to both. “Thank you for your support. I hope for your continued aid.”

Mo Beike narrowed his eyes, sensing something amiss. Mo Ju felt it too. Tantai Xuan took a deep breath. “The Grand Tutor is dead, Jiang Li imprisoned, the Five Barbarians ravage the Zhou, yet the capital does

nothing, watching us bleed. We fight the Xirong to protect this land and its people, but what has the emperor done? If he doesn't cherish this land, what use is he?"

His voice rang with conviction, shaking the room. Mo Ju's breath quickened; Mo Beike gripped his chair, his calm facade hiding inner turmoil. Tantai Xuan's words hinted at a monumental decision.

Sitting, Tantai Xuan gazed at them, his voice steady but resolute. "I will found a new dynasty, named Great Xuan. I shall be its king, the Northern Xuan King. We march to overthrow the Zhou!"