

Starlit Path 193

Chapter 193: The World Thinks I Will Fall

In the swirling snow, a figure in white robes walked slowly, his butcher knife at his waist clinking softly. Each step crunched harshly in the snow. Nie Changqing looked up at the towering Tianhan Pass, exhaling a misty breath. For half a month, he and Li Sansi had driven the Xirong army westward until the snow gave way to boundless desert—an expanse Nie Changqing saw as the world’s edge. Beyond, he imagined, might lie nothing but void. Unsure of what lay further, they ceased the pursuit, racing back to Tianhan Pass where Nie Shuang awaited.

Atop the pass, Nie found only his son, obediently waiting. “Where are Qingniao and Luo Cheng?” he asked, brushing snow from his robes.

“Qingniao went to the capital,” Nie Shuang replied. “They say Jiang Li was imprisoned by the emperor. She took her chicks to break him out, and Luo Cheng went to protect her.”

Nie Changqing’s expression turned odd. Jiang Li imprisoned? Much had changed in half a month. Listening patiently as Nie Shuang recounted events, he ruffled his son’s hair, his eyes softening. Even as a Body Zang Realm cultivator, unmatched in the world, his son remained his heart’s tender spot.

Nie Shuang’s tale left him reeling. The world had transformed dramatically. “Tantai Xuan founded Great Xuan, naming himself Northern Xuan King. The Overlord established Western Liang... A time of great contention,” Nie Changqing mused, stroking his son’s head. “Time to go home.”

Leading Nie Shuang, he met Great Xuan’s Xuanwu Guards, who saluted respectfully. Despite their critical role in Tantai Xuan’s campaign against the Zhou, two had stayed to protect Nie Shuang. “Go, aid your king,” Nie told them. The guards’ eyes lit up with fervor, saluting before rushing to join the march. For Great Xuan’s soldiers, dying in battle was an honor.

Father and son trudged through the snow toward Buzhou Peak's Dragon Gate. No snow fell on the peak, as if an invisible barrier repelled it. Lush greenery thrived. At the peak, a girl played a flute on a bluestone, its melody swaying the plants. Nie Changqing nodded to her, sensing a terrifying aura akin to Lu Ping'an's, though Lu's was deeper. She ignored him, her flute song unbroken.

Passing through the Dragon Gate, they returned to Lake Island. Nie Changqing felt as if he'd stepped into another lifetime. Spying Nie Shuang, Ni Yu's eyes brightened, waving. Nie Shuang, still a child at heart, ran to her with his father's smile. Nie Changqing approached White Jade Capital's pavilion.

On the second floor, Lu Ping'an leaned in his wheelchair, holding a crystalline Buddhist relic. Nie Changqing's eyes narrowed, recognizing the aura of the monk from the Western County battlefield. So, the heaven-shaking palm had indeed been Lu's doing. "You're back?" Lu said, glancing at him. "You missed my lecture on realms beyond Body Zang. Ask Ning Zhao or Old Lü for details."

Nie Changqing's eyes gleamed. Realms beyond Body Zang? "Young Master, for half a month, Li Sansi and I drove the Xirong to the world's edge—a vast desert. We pushed their tribes into it."

"The world's edge?" Lu smiled. "Are you sure? You haven't walked to the desert's end. How can you call it the world's limit without seeing it? Perhaps the world has no end. You see Great Zhou as its center, but it may just be one region."

Nie Changqing froze, struck by Lu's words. "Go cultivate," Lu added. "You've fallen behind this half month." Snapping out of it, Nie saluted and left. He spotted Ning Zhao, her body wreathed in five spiritual energy vortexes, forming a refined spiritual armor—superior to his own. While he chased Xirong, his progress had stagnated. Having tempered his five organs, he needed to develop attribute energy, a daunting task. Ning Zhao, cultivating on the spiritual-rich island, had caught up.

Scanning the area, he saw a familiar face. “You? The poor painter?” Nie Changqing laughed, spotting Sima Qingshan. Rising, Sima saluted. “Master Nie.” He avoided calling Nie a butcher, mindful of decorum. “You’ve reached Body Zang?” Nie raised an eyebrow, surprised.

“During the celestial phenomenon, I gained insight,” Sima said. “With Young Master Lu’s guidance, I’ve tempered two organs.” He bowed deeply. “Thank you for saving me at Nanjin City. Without you, I wouldn’t be here. I owe you a debt—name your request, and I’ll brave any danger.”

Nie waved it off. “It was nothing. Are you with White Jade Capital now?”

Sima shook his head, his patched robes swaying. “Young Master Lu refused me. He told me to found a sect in the martial world, to spark a new era of contending schools.” Nie’s brow rose—Lu didn’t favor Sima. “Having thanked you, I’ll take my leave,” Sima said, saluting Lu, Ni Yu, and others before painting an ink boat and drifting away.

Nie watched Sima’s departure, eyes narrowing. New talents were rising. With the celestial phenomenon, Body Zang was no longer so rare. If he didn’t strive harder, he’d be overtaken. Discussing Lu’s lecture with Ning Zhao, he delved into the realms beyond Body Zang.

From the pavilion, Lu observed Nie’s urgency with a slight smile. Pressure bred progress. He wondered who would first reach the Heavenly Lock Realm, breaking the low-martial barrier to elevate Five Phoenixes to mid-martial status. Anyone seemed possible.

Holding the Buddhist relic, Lu reflected on the past half month. He’d studied Buddhism via the Myriad Methods Furnace, gaining insights. Immortal, demon, and Buddhist paths converged in him. “Time to complete the world upgrade mission,” he mused. Though he’d dealt with the wanderers, the golden-haired man and Xirong King’s souls remained, leaving the task at 3/5. With his Buddhist studies done, he could focus on the upgrade.

The Great Zhou's wars didn't concern him. In this era of contention, he saw no reason to intervene. Dynasties rose and fell by fate. Vaguely, he considered a novel idea: a path of dynastic dragon qi and fate, allowing emperors to pursue an alternative cultivation. He might task Lü Dongxuan with exploring it. Nie Changqing's report on the desert intrigued him. Beyond the Five Barbarians, did other lands exist? Lu had glimpsed beyond the desert—a vast expanse. Would those driven there survive to reach it?

Rubbing his brow, Lu sighed. So much to ponder—it was exhausting.

The Great Zhou is unjust; the world strikes it down. This cry echoed across the land. Western Liang's Iron Cavalry, led by the Overlord, crossed the Dongyan River, charging toward the capital. Tantai Xuan, as Northern Xuan King, led Great Xuan's army south, unstoppable. Counties and clans hesitated, weighing their allegiance. Choosing a side in this great contention risked centuries-old legacies. The Zhou, weakened by the Grand Tutor's death and Jiang Li's imprisonment, seemed a sick deer before a tiger and lion.

Many expected South County to follow, declaring independence. Its wealth could sustain a war despite past defeats. Yet, Tang Xiansheng and Tang Yimo remained silent, defying expectations.

Imperial Capital, Zijin Palace, Morning Court

Yuwen Xiu sat high on the dragon throne, his robes immaculate. Below, officials stood silent, gripped by fear. Some planned to flee after court, dreading Yuwen Xiu's wrath if the Zhou fell. The old eunuch stood quietly beside him. Yuwen Xiu savored the familiar tension—once, when Northern and Southern armies besieged the capital, he was a puppet. Now, he held absolute control, relishing it.

“Regarding the rebels’ advance, what say you?” he asked coolly. Silence answered. His fingers tapped the throne. “Nothing? Then court is dismissed.” Rising, he glanced at the officials, knowing their plans to flee. “Let them try to leave the capital,” he thought. “They won’t take a step.”

“The world thinks I’ll fall,” he muttered, clenching his fists beneath his robes. “Do they believe without Kong Xiu and Jiang Li, I’m a lamb for slaughter?” Turning to the eunuch, he ordered, “Bring Jiang Li to the Imperial Garden. I’ll see him myself.”

The eunuch’s eyes flickered but he bowed. “As you command.” Yuwen Xiu strode to the garden, the eunuch heading to the dungeon with a sigh, his back hunched.

In the Imperial Garden, Yuwen Xiu stood by the pond, gazing at the Dragon Gate, his eyes burning. Without the Grand Tutor or Jiang Li, he still had his greatest ally—the Black Dragon. Two of the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor stood guard, masked and silent.

The pond exploded as the Black Dragon surged forth, its aura reeking of blood. Yuwen Xiu stepped forward, stroking its head. Black mist coiled from it, entwining him. The dragon had transformed—its scales gleamed with a bloody sheen, two of four abdominal bulges had burst, revealing sharp claws that cracked the pond’s edge. Two bulges on its head hinted at further change.

The eunuch announced, “Your Majesty, Jiang Li is here.” Chains clinked as Black Dragon Guards escorted Jiang Li, his wrists and ankles bound. Snow fell, tousling his hair. He looked up, locking eyes with Yuwen

Xiu and the Black Dragon. Its menacing aura seemed to melt the snow. As Yuwen Xiu turned, the dragon's eyes shifted, and Jiang Li's pupils constricted—their gazes seemed to merge as one.