

Starlit Path 194

Chapter 194: Tantai Xuan Seems Full of Weaknesses...

The biting wind carried heavy snow, the winter deepening with plummeting temperatures. Jiang Li stared at the Black Dragon in the jade-green pond, its mere presence soul-shaking. Its dense scales gleamed, and its sharp claws gripped the pond's edge, crumbling the stone as if it were tofu. With a slight flex, it could shatter it entirely.

Yuwen Xiu stood beneath the dragon, his imperial robes billowing, snow dusting his hair, his eyes alight with excitement as he gazed at Jiang Li. "The Black Dragon..." Jiang Li muttered, his handcuffs and shackles clinking.

"This is my Black Dragon," Yuwen Xiu declared, arms outstretched. Black mist seeped from the dragon, coiling into his body. Jiang Li had never seen such an eerie sight, but in this era of cultivators—where Xirong Kings' heads blazed and chicks transformed into phoenixes—it seemed almost ordinary.

The old eunuch stood silently to the side, head bowed. The Black Dragon Guards, tasked with Yuwen Xiu's safety, watched with interest. They knew Jiang Li, their former commander who trained them, but as Black Dragon Elites, their growing power had eroded their awe. Jiang Li, uninitiated in the Dragon Gate, was a mere mortal; they were cultivators.

Yuwen Xiu kept his distance. "Minister Jiang, did you know the Grand Tutor is dead?" he asked.

Jiang Li froze. Confined in the dungeon, he'd been cut off from news. Yuwen Xiu's words hit like a chill. "They say with Kong Xiu within and Jiang Li without, the Great Zhou was secure," Yuwen Xiu continued, voice heavy with feigned sorrow. "Yet now, the Grand Tutor is dead, and you seek to retire. Are you trying to ruin the Zhou?"

Jiang Li remained silent, steeped in grief for the Grand Tutor, a man he revered despite rare meetings. Kong Xiu had single-handedly held the realm together in its darkest hour—an awe-inspiring figure.

“Minister Jiang, aid me again,” Yuwen Xiu pleaded, eyes flickering with emotion. “Tantai, that old traitor, founded Great Xuan, and Xiang Shaoyun established Western Liang. Their armies march under the banner of overthrowing the Zhou. I need you.”

Jiang Li’s face stayed calm. “Alas, what a pity...” he sighed, mourning the Grand Tutor. “Your Majesty, I’ve already retired.”

“I forbid you to retire!” Yuwen Xiu’s eyes narrowed, his voice sharp. The Imperial Garden’s atmosphere turned heavy, laced with menace. Jiang Li tensed as Yuwen Xiu advanced, an unseen force scattering the snow. The Black Dragon opened its maw, reeking of blood.

“Today, you choose: serve me, or feed my Black Dragon,” Yuwen Xiu said coldly. “Pick one.”

Jiang Li shook his head. “If I pledged to serve, would Your Majesty trust me? You only want my submission, to see my fear. But if Your Majesty ruled justly, I’d never have retired. I’d have died on the battlefield for the Zhou. Have you seen the warriors at Tianhan Pass, fearlessly facing the Xirong to protect this land and its people? Your Majesty didn’t send aid—fine, the Zhou is weak. But to exploit the crisis? That, you should not have done. In this, you fall short of Tantai Xuan.”

Yuwen Xiu’s fists clenched, his face darkening. “What wrong have I done?” he roared. “Exploit the crisis? Fall short of Tantai Xuan? I only wanted you back!” The Black Dragon, sensing his fury, roared, its oppressive aura crushing Jiang Li.

The dragon surged, a black lightning bolt aiming to devour him. Paralyzed by its might, Jiang Li bit his tongue, blood snapping him from fear. With a shout, he snapped his shackles, spiritual energy surging. Stomping the ground, he shot backward, evading as the dragon's strike cratered the earth.

Breaking his chains, Jiang Li's gaze grew grave. The old eunuch, watching, smirked faintly—his cultivation method had worked. In half a month, Jiang Li had cultivated in secret, reaching this level. Escaping the capital's iron-clad defenses, however, seemed impossible with the Black Dragon Guards, elite Zhou soldiers, and the sinister dragon.

Yuwen Xiu, surprised, sneered. "Didn't you swear never to enter the Dragon Gate or cultivate spiritual energy?"

"It happened by accident," Jiang Li replied, tossing aside the broken chains. "I couldn't help it." He eyed the dragon, its presence suggesting Body Zang Realm strength. He had no confidence against it.

"Black Dragon Guards, kill him," Yuwen Xiu ordered with a wave. Jiang Li was right—Yuwen Xiu sought validation, not true loyalty. Even if Jiang Li had agreed to serve, his fate was sealed.

The two elite guards charged, swift and deadly, joined by more from outside the garden. The old eunuch remained still, and Yuwen Xiu spared him a glance but said nothing. Jiang Li wielded a broken chain like a whip, clashing with the guards—peak Qi Core cultivators, trained by the dragon's dark arts. After a few exchanges, Jiang Li struggled, retreating under their onslaught.

"Commander Jiang, remember me? The soldier you once scolded," one guard taunted, removing his mask with a mocking smile. His fists, charged with spiritual energy, forced Jiang Li back, blood trickling from his mouth.

Surrounded by black-armored guards, Jiang Li heard only the crunch of snow underfoot, the clanging armor fading. He smiled bitterly. A lifetime leading soldiers, only to die at their hands—a soldier's irony. Like Bai Fengtian, would he perish in the nation he protected? The memory of a desert sunset figure haunted him, chilling his heart.

Roaring, Jiang Li refused to die. He had to protect Bai Qingniao, to see her grow. Unleashing his Qi Core's full spiritual energy, he overpowered a weaker guard, smashing his face and seizing his knife. Sparks flew as he fought, snow scattering.

The elite guards, infused with the dragon's eerie power, grew fiercer. One, his skin sprouting black scales, shattered Jiang Li's knife with a punch, sending him crashing back, coughing blood. The Black Dragon lunged again, its stench overwhelming. Jiang Li couldn't dodge, the dragon's maw looming large.

Suddenly, a yellow blur fell from the sky, bouncing off Jiang Li's head. The dragon froze. Jiang Li stared at the fluffy yellow ball—a familiar sight.

South County, Nanjiang City, Tang Mansion

Cold winter rain fell, its chill biting. Tang Xiansheng, no longer sitting in the courtyard, warmed himself by a fire pit inside, a thick blanket over him. His aged face glowed in the firelight as he watched Tang Guo eat fruit and read bamboo slips, his mood bright.

Footsteps sounded. Tang Yimo entered, his armor dripping with rain. Shedding it, he shook off the wet clothes and joined the fire. "Brother!" Tang Guo greeted warmly, her eyes bright. Tang Yimo's stern face softened, smiling as he ruffled her hair. "Go play," he said. Tang Guo, delighted, tucked away her slippers, fruit in mouth, and scampered off.

Tang Xiansheng chuckled. "That girl's been cooped up with this old man too long." Tang Yimo nodded. "She's young, let her play."

With Tang Guo gone, Tang Yimo's face grew cold again. Tang Xiansheng smirked. "You don't visit unless there's trouble. What's the problem?"

"Tantai Xuan founded Great Xuan, and the Overlord established Western Liang. The pressure's on South County. What should we do?" Tang Yimo asked bluntly.

The room fell silent, save for the crackling fire. Tang Xiansheng considered, then asked, "What's your view?"

"The world expects South County to declare independence," Tang Yimo said, exhaling. "But you think you're unfit to rule a nation, don't you?" Tang Xiansheng replied.

Tang Yimo nodded. "You'd lose in this great contention," Tang Xiansheng said frankly. "You can't outmatch the Overlord or Tantai Xuan. Though you may surpass Tantai in personal strength, emperors don't rely on that alone."

Tang Yimo accepted the critique, used to his father's bluntness after mistakes managing South County. "What then?" he asked.

Tang Xiansheng rose, coughing, his hunched frame moving to the window. Gazing at the rain, he said, "Not declaring independence may spare South County disaster. The tide is unstoppable, unless you're a cultivator like Lu Ping'an." Coughing again, he continued, "Prepare a carriage and a Southern Manor Guard. I'll meet the Northern Xuan King."

Tang Yimo paused, grasping his father's intent. "Why Tantai Xuan? You think he'll win?"

Tang Xiansheng smiled at the rain. "The Overlord seems flawless, but his weaknesses are too clear. Tantai Xuan seems full of weaknesses... yet, in truth, he has none."