

## Starlit Path 196

### Chapter 196: Wings Clipped in the Snow

Blood splattered across the snow, staining the pristine white a vivid crimson. Heavy snow fell from the heavens, only to melt into water upon touching the searing heat below.

A magnificent creature, its sleek form adorned with fiery red feathers, hovered in the air. Its phoenix beak, sharp as a honed blade, could tear through anything with ease. The black dragon, wounded by the graceful yet ferocious fire phoenix, bore bloody claw marks across its body. Its scales clattered to the ground with a metallic ring.

This was no mere fledgling but a true fire phoenix, far stronger than before. The second transformation of the Nine Phoenix Art—Phoenix Feather.

Everyone in the Imperial Garden stood frozen in shock. Yuwen Xiu's eyes widened, his fists clenched tight. His black dragon was injured!

Having entered the Phoenix Feather Realm, the young phoenix sprouted fiery feathers. With each flap of its wings, it seemed to command the wind itself, its blazing flames growing even more formidable. A piercing cry rang out, sharp and resonant, as the phoenix, radiant as a blazing sun, locked eyes with the black dragon. The dragon, silent and unyielding, stared back. In the Imperial Garden, the two titans faced off, an invisible surge of energy clashing between them.

The Nine Phoenix Art was an enigmatic technique, its rank so profound even Lu could not discern it, a testament to its immense power. The young phoenix's transformation through this art was nothing short of extraordinary. The second and third phoenixes, however, had not undergone such a change—not because they couldn't, but because the white-robed girl lacked the strength to trigger it. Forcing the first phoenix into the second transformation had already left her bleeding from her nose and mouth. To push the others to the same realm would likely kill her on the spot.

Jiang Li's eyes burned with anguish. The moment the white-robed girl collapsed, he surged forward. "Retreat!" he roared, seizing the chance as the black dragon and its guards were locked in a standoff with the first phoenix.

He scooped up the white-robed girl, who had lost control over the second and third phoenixes. They reverted to their chick-like forms, dazed and bewildered. Gazing at the girl in his arms, her face pale and blood trickling from her nose and mouth, Jiang Li's eyes reddened with fury. A desperate yearning for power surged within him. Too weak to protect those he cared for, he had to rely on her to shield him instead.

He leaped onto the back of the second phoenix. Luo Cheng, fighting as he retreated, sprang up and grabbed the third phoenix's talons. The two phoenixes soared, scattering the snow below.

"Stop them!" Yuwen Xiu's eyes blazed as he barked the command.

The black dragon guards snapped to attention, charging forward. The elite Black Dragon Thirteen Armor unit sprinted and leaped into the fray. Below, archers notched their arrows and fired. A barrage of arrows arced toward the phoenixes in the sky. Jiang Li swung his long blade, slicing through the ordinary arrows with ease. Luo Cheng, with a fierce glare, swept his blade, sending the arrows plummeting to the ground.

"Useless!" one of the Black Dragon Thirteen Armor snarled, snatching a bow from an archer. He drew a feathered arrow, exhaling slowly as he pulled the string taut, bending the bow into a perfect crescent. With a snap, the bowstring shattered from the force, and the arrow screamed through the air with a sonic boom, aimed directly at the unconscious white-robed girl.

The archer had realized she controlled the phoenixes. If she died, the phoenix capable of challenging the black dragon would falter.

On the second phoenix's back, Jiang Li's heart lurched. The arrow hurtled toward them, too fast to evade. He channeled his spiritual energy to intercept it, but the arrow, infused with the power of a cultivator, was nearly unstoppable. Its target was the girl below. Unable to block it, Jiang Li twisted his body to shield her.

A sickening thud rang out as the arrow pierced his flesh, its icy tip emerging from his body, halting just before the girl's pale face. Warm blood dripped onto her long lashes.

The second and third phoenixes beat their wings, speeding away. The first phoenix clashed once more with the black dragon before retreating, its wings flashing like a streak of fire as it fled. In an instant, it caught up to the others, its larger form—transformed by the second stage of the Nine Phoenix Art—able to carry both the second and third phoenixes on its back. With a resonant cry, it soared over the imperial city like a blazing sun.

But just beyond the city walls, its energy depleted, it plummeted from the sky. The second and third phoenixes, reverting to fluffy chicks, lay exhausted in the snow. Luo Cheng hit the ground, rolling to his feet with the resilience of a cultivator. He rushed to Jiang Li, who had been pierced by the arrow, and helped him up.

"Move," Jiang Li said, his face calm despite the blood seeping from his wound.

Luo Cheng's eyes hardened. He nodded, gathering the three limp chicks and tucking them into his robes. Blade in hand, he sprinted toward the capital's outskirts.

“Yuwen Xiu won’t let us escape,” Jiang Li said. “He’ll mobilize the capital’s army to hunt us down. The order’s just been given—we need to move fast.”

Clutching the white-robed girl, Jiang Li pressed forward, each step resolute despite the blood soaking his shoulder. Behind them, the thunder of hooves grew louder. The capital’s cavalry had been dispatched. The streets, emptied of civilians, lay desolate under the falling snow.

Luo Cheng’s face reddened from the biting snow as he glanced back. The Great Zhou’s elite soldiers closed in, a dark tide of steel. His expression shifted. This was a dead end. Was this where he, Luo Cheng, would fall? His father hadn’t even seen him marry. Gritting his teeth, he shook off the thought, his mind drifting inexplicably to the figure of a Taoist nun fading into the distance atop the city walls. Startled by his own thoughts, he slapped his face to focus.

Jiang Li’s face grew paler, the blood loss taking its toll. He didn’t need to look to know the Great Zhou’s iron cavalry was closing in. As a seasoned commander, he could tell they were ten breaths slower than their usual drills.

“Luo Cheng, keep moving!” Jiang Li urged, refusing to give up as he trudged through the snow with the girl in his arms. He’d promised Bai Fengtian to protect her, to ensure she lived a safe life. Now, with her in this state, he couldn’t face Bai Fengtian even in death. He had to get her out of this wretched capital.

Luo Cheng glanced back at Jiang Li’s resolute face, his chapped lips trembling. “There’s no way out,” he said.

“No way?” Jiang Li gasped. “Then we’ll carve one.”

“I regret not cultivating sooner,” he continued. “If I had, I wouldn’t be so powerless now. The Overlord was right—power is everything in this era. It’s a time for miracles.”

Blood stained the snow red as Jiang Li pressed on. Luo Cheng tightened his grip on his blade, unleashing the full force of his dragon blood. If escape wasn’t an option, then he’d fight. Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao had once cut down thousands of soldiers. He could do the same. He wasn’t weaker than they had been. But killing took time, and if they were delayed, the black dragon guards and the Thirteen Armor would catch up. Only cultivators could counter cultivators—a truth that held firm.

As Luo Cheng prepared to make his stand, a heavy creak echoed behind them. He turned, incredulous, to see the capital’s sealed gates swinging open. Jiang Li, pale and clutching the girl, looked toward the city walls in astonishment.

At the gate, two weathered Great Zhou soldiers in armor pushed open the heavy vermilion doors. They removed their helmets, gazing silently at Jiang Li. No words were spoken, but a solemn air hung between them.

Luo Cheng froze. Jiang Li’s eyes wavered. On the city walls, the elite soldiers he’d once trained stood watching. The archers, bows drawn taut, lowered their weapons. One by one, they removed their helmets, their eyes fixed on Jiang Li.

The sound of hooves faded. Jiang Li glanced back to see the Great Zhou cavalry standing still in the snowy streets. They drew their swords and plunged them into the snow, their faces flushed as they watched him in the swirling snow.

Jiang Li, bloodied and pale, felt a pang in his heart. It was as if a hammer had struck his chest. He remembered the days defending Yuan Chi City with these soldiers—eating heartily, drinking deeply, never giving up despite the odds. Who said soldiers were heartless?

Biting back tears, Jiang Li seized the moment. Spiritual energy surged beneath his feet, blasting the snow apart as he sprinted toward the gate. Luo Cheng sheathed his blade and followed, rushing out of the capital.

As they passed the two old soldiers at the gate, Jiang Li caught their hoarse, accented voices. “General, live on.” “In the next life, we’d serve under you again.”

Snow exploded underfoot as Jiang Li and Luo Cheng broke free of the ancient city. Beyond the walls, the world was a sea of white.

Twenty black dragon cavalry galloped past the Great Zhou soldiers in pursuit. “Who opened the gates? Courting death?” one of the guards roared, slashing his blade. The heads of the two old soldiers soared into the air, blood staining the snow before the city walls.

The black dragon guards spurred their horses in pursuit, while the Great Zhou soldiers, exchanging glances, drew their weapons from the snow and followed—though their pace lacked urgency.

Jiang Li, vision blurring, trudged through the snow. Luo Cheng, blade at the ready, kept pace. The thunder of hooves grew closer as the twenty black dragon guards closed in. Though they’d escaped the capital, the danger was far from over.

Suddenly, amid the swirling snow, a figure emerged, staggering and reciting slurred poetry. It was a disheveled scholar, clutching a wine jug, taking swigs between steps. Behind him was a young man in Confucian robes, a long spear strapped to his back, carrying two unopened wine jugs.

The scholar and the youth, utterly out of place, stumbled into the snowy battlefield. Luo Cheng's hairs stood on end, a chill of danger washing over him. Jiang Li, clutching the girl, paused, startled.

The black dragon cavalry reined in their horses, hooves kicking up snow. "Who are you?" their leader demanded. "We're the Black Dragon Guards of the capital, pursuing fugitives. Stand aside!"

The scholar gulped from his jug, then smashed it to the ground. Brushing aside his tangled hair, he revealed a face familiar to all. "Haoran Sect, Kong Nanfei... the Nanfei who can't escape his fate," he slurred, hiccuping. "I'm here for an old friend. Anyone who stands in my way... hic... dies."

The youth behind him hesitated, then added, "Meng Haoran, of the Haoran Sect..."

The scholar shot him a glance, silencing him. The youth quickly tossed him another jug. The air grew still, save for the howl of the snowy wind.

Jiang Li stared, disbelief etched on his face. Was this... Kong Nanfei?