

## Starlit Path 198

### Chapter 198: The Stance of White Jade City

A vast army marched from the north, their ranks stretching across the snow-swept highway, dense and unending. The clank of armor and the scrape of blades filled the air, like a lion striding from its domain, baring its sharp claws.

Dantai Xuan rode atop his horse, clad in heavy armor. Mo Beike, too old for such rigors, traveled by carriage, while Mo Ju, like Dantai Xuan, rode on horseback. As dusk fell, Dantai Xuan ordered the army to make camp, setting up stoves to cook.

Inside the main tent, Dantai Xuan and Mo Beike discussed the details of their campaign against Great Zhou. A general tapped the sand table, pointing to a marker. "Your Majesty, thirty miles ahead lies Great Zhou's defensive city, Yuan Chi. Our Great Xuan army once breached it, but now it's back under Great Zhou's control, guarded by the Black Dragon Guards."

"Yuan Chi City... a familiar name," Dantai Xuan said with a faint smile.

Mo Beike's weathered fingers traced the positions of Great Zhou's six defensive cities on the sand table. "Great Zhou's six stronghold cities—Beiluo, Tong'an, Pingnan, Yuan Chi, Wangtian, and Zuilong—are manageable, save for Beiluo. We're confident in taking the others, but Beiluo..."

The tent fell silent. Mo Beike broke the quiet, his voice measured. "What's uncertain is Beiluo's stance in this war—or rather, White Jade City's stance."

Lu's prior decree to halt conflicts loomed large. If White Jade City issued another ceasefire order at a critical moment, it would spell trouble for Great Xuan's forces. Dantai Xuan frowned, staring at Beiluo's marker on the sand table. His first defeat had been at Beiluo, followed by a string of losses. Though his fortunes had recently turned, this campaign against Great Zhou now faced the same daunting obstacle—Beiluo.

"Someone needs to visit Beiluo and gauge Lu Changkong's intentions, or perhaps Lu Ping'an's," Mo Ju said, draped in his crane-feather cloak.

Many in the tent nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps I should go to Beiluo myself," Dantai Xuan suggested.

"Your Majesty, no!"

"Entering Beiluo is a gamble with your life. You mustn't go!"

"Beiluo is a perilous place. Please, Your Majesty, abandon this reckless idea!"

The ministers and generals erupted in protest, their voices overlapping. Dantai Xuan's face darkened. Why did everyone assume he'd be beaten to death by Lu Ping'an if he went to Beiluo? He might be blunt, but he wasn't foolish.

Mo Beike chuckled, his heavy eye bags quivering as he tapped Beiluo's marker. "Your Majesty, allow this old man to go to Beiluo instead," he said in a raspy voice.

"Report!" A scout rushed into the tent.

"What is it?" Dantai Xuan asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Your Majesty, Tang Xiansheng, Prefect of South County, approaches from the south, seeking an audience," the scout reported.

"Tang Xiansheng? That old fox finally shows himself," Dantai Xuan said, squinting. He'd never liked Tang, who had colluded with barbarians. But learning of South County's heavy losses in resisting barbarian invasions, Dantai Xuan realized Tang had been playing a long game against them. Still, he found Tang distasteful. "Let him wait. We'll meet him after the war council."

The scout nodded and turned to leave, but another burst into the tent. "Your Majesty, someone approaches from the capital through the snow!"

"From the capital?" Dantai Xuan's breath quickened, sensing something momentous. "Who is it?"

The scout hesitated before clasp his fists. "It appears to be General Jiang."

"Jiang Li?" Dantai Xuan's eyes lit up. "Where is he? Take me to him at once!"

Jiang Li's imprisonment had spurred Dantai Xuan to launch this campaign, hoping to rescue him. Chi Lian had rushed to North County for aid, and now, unexpectedly, Jiang Li had escaped. The scout who'd reported Tang Xiansheng's arrival gaped as Dantai Xuan hurried out. Was the king really this impulsive?

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The blizzard howled, the biting wind shrieking like wolves. Jiang Li stood in the snow, watching Luo Cheng and the white-robed girl fade into the storm. He exhaled a cloud of steam, then yanked the arrow from his chest. Blood poured onto the snow as he pressed his hand to the wound, turning to face the dark mass of the approaching Great Xuan army.

He hadn't gone with Luo Cheng to Beiluo. Instead, he'd instructed Luo Cheng to take the unconscious girl there and wait for him. Once Jiang Li finished what he had to do, he'd retire to Beiluo to find her. Luo Cheng, moved by the scene at the capital's gates, understood Jiang Li's choice.

As for the disheveled scholar Kong Nanfei and his disciple Meng Haoran, they too headed for Beiluo to find Mo Tianyu, who remained in the city.

Jiang Li stood in the snow until Luo Cheng's figure vanished, then turned toward the Great Xuan army's camp. Suddenly, he paused. Hooves thundered from the direction of North County. Familiar figures emerged through the snow.

Chi Lian, clad in military garb, spotted Jiang Li. Her eyes reddened as she dismounted, her graceful form stumbling through the snow toward him. Dantai Xuan, seeing Jiang Li, let out a hearty laugh, leaping from his horse and striding forward.

Jiang Li steadied Chi Lian, then looked at Dantai Xuan. “Brother Jiang!” Dantai Xuan exclaimed. “You’re alive—that’s what matters!”

His campaign had been partly fueled by Jiang Li’s imprisonment. Chi Lian stood behind Jiang Li, her lashes trembling as she gazed at his back.

“Commoner Jiang Li pays respects to King Beixuan,” Jiang Li said, bowing.

Dantai Xuan quickly lifted him. “Old Jiang, no need for such formalities between us.”

But Jiang Li remained rigid, his expression stubborn and solemn. “Great Zhou is unjust. I humbly request to join King Beixuan’s campaign against them, offering my modest strength. Please grant this request!”

Dantai Xuan froze. He hadn’t expected Jiang Li’s first act to be a formal pledge to join the campaign. In the past, despite being captured, Jiang Li had refused to join North County, only leading troops against the Xirong invasion. Now, he was volunteering.

Dantai Xuan’s eyes gleamed with delight. “With Brother Jiang’s aid, our Great Xuan army gains wings like a tiger!”

He clapped Jiang Li’s arm, laughing so loudly it shattered the falling snow. “Aren’t you afraid I’m a spy sent by Great Zhou?” Jiang Li asked.

“I trust those I employ and don’t doubt them. I trust you, Brother Jiang!” Dantai Xuan replied, his laughter ringing out.

Jiang Li’s addition to Great Xuan was a morale-boosting triumph. His title as a military god, earned in the era of the Hundred Schools, ensured he’d be formidable in this age of cultivators. As Jiang Li joined, a carriage left the Great Xuan camp, cutting a long furrow through the snow toward Beiluo.

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Outside Wangtian City, the Xiliang army encamped, their disciplined ranks like blossoms in the snow. The Overlord stood gazing at the city, his generals behind him.

“Your Majesty, Xu Chu has led three hundred Xiang Family troops and fifty thousand soldiers to Tong’an City,” a general reported.

The Overlord nodded, stepping forward. His massive frame moved with such control that he left no footprints in the snow, a feat that awed his cultivator-generals. His strength was growing unfathomable.

“Your Majesty, Great Xuan has sent Mo Beike to Beiluo. Should we dispatch someone as well?” a strategist asked.

The Overlord shook his head. “No need. Beiluo won’t interfere in this war.”

He understood White Jade City and the youth in the wheelchair. That young man had no interest in worldly dominion. If he did, the world would already be his. Beiluo wouldn't fight for Great Zhou, so there was no need to probe.

"Rest the army. At dawn, we attack," the Overlord commanded.

His generals bowed, their eyes alight with fervor. The Overlord's decisive style hadn't changed—action over flourish. Capturing the defensive cities would bring them to Great Zhou's capital. Practicality trumped theatrics.

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In Beiluo, at West Mountain, the Trial Tower loomed, its peak lost in the clouds. Inside, Ning Zhao and Nie Changqing sat on mats, their bodies twisting as they entered a vast, strange world resembling a primordial forest. Despite Beiluo's snowy winter, this realm was swelteringly hot.

"Pass the first five levels of the Trial Tower to gain a chance to comprehend the Origin," a voice echoed in Ning Zhao's mind.

She froze, initially mistaking it for Lu's voice, but soon realized it wasn't. "A chance to comprehend the Origin..." Her eyes lit up. She'd been stuck at manifesting elemental spiritual energy for too long. This opportunity could push her to that stage and perhaps toward the Heavenly Lock Realm Lu had mentioned.

“Each level offers three attempts. Death in the first two is reversible; the third is final,” the voice warned.

Ning Zhao’s heart tightened, but she stepped forward without fear. The forest shook, and five eerie figures appeared on the trees, wearing black masks fused to their flesh, each with a single round hole at the center. Spotting her sword, they conjured black cicada-wing blades.

“Five, all at Ninth Stage Qi Core,” Ning Zhao noted, frowning. The challenge seemed trivial.

The figures lunged, their masked eyes cold. “Kill!” they rasped. Ning Zhao met them with her sword, dispatching them effortlessly in moments. Black blood sprayed, repelled by her spiritual armor. “Not much of a challenge,” she said, lifting her chin.

A white array appeared, restoring her spiritual energy and revealing a staircase to the second level. She ascended. The second level was another forest, now with ten masked figures. Their coordination was far superior, making the fight tougher, but Ning Zhao prevailed.

On the third level, ten figures at the peak of Qi Core faced her. The battle was grueling, her spiritual armor shattered, and she was bloodied. She felled eight before a black blade grazed her neck, plunging her into darkness and pain. She’d lost.

Awakening on her mat, sweat beaded her forehead. She glanced at Nie Changqing, still fighting, a “3” hovering above his head. Suddenly, it shifted to “4”—he’d passed the third level. But his fourth-level fight ended quickly, the number fading as he awoke, frustration in his eyes.

They rose, choosing not to continue. The tower's warning about final death loomed, and they needed to analyze their failures. Stepping outside, they faced the expectant crowd. Lu, leaning in his wheelchair, regarded them calmly.

"Young Master..." Ning Zhao said bitterly. She'd fallen at the third level, despite believing her strength formidable. Ten peak Qi Core foes had defeated her, despite her fully tempered organs.

"I saw your fight," Lu said. "Your control over power lags behind Old Nie's. Reflect on your failure and address your weaknesses."

Ning Zhao bowed. Nie Changqing, who'd reached the fourth level, was equally complex. His opponents—five early Organ Tempering Realm figures—had overwhelmed him in ten breaths, a butcher's blade nearly cleaving him. Their strength shocked him, revealing the potential of even early-stage Organ Tempering cultivators.

This tower was a cultivation treasure. Nie Changqing believed it could help him manifest elemental energy or vastly improve his combat prowess. He itched to re-enter but restrained himself, needing to digest his experience.

The crowd outside was stunned. The tower had a hundred levels, yet Nie Changqing had fallen at the fourth. Were White Jade City's disciples so weak? Lu merely sneered at their thoughts.

He summoned Lü Dongxuan. "Issue a Heavenly Secret Decree: all cultivators worldwide may challenge the Trial Tower, but they must be at least Ninth Stage Qi Core."

Lü Dongxuan nodded, and Lu wheeled away from West Mountain. At the city gates, he paused, looking up. Luo Cheng approached, carrying the white-robed girl, three chicks tucked in his robes, followed by a disheveled scholar and a spear-wielding youth. They had returned.