

Starlit Path 91

Chapter 91: The Conqueror's Gambit and the Emperor's Dilemma

In the grand hall of the Mechanism City, the Overlord sat commandingly on the throne-like seat once reserved for the leader of the Mohist sect. Below him stood his loyal warriors and generals, their rain-soaked armor gleaming faintly, their faces alight with fervor. The Mohist Mechanism City, renowned as the world's most impregnable stronghold, had fallen to the iron hooves of the Western Liang cavalry. Every warrior of Western Liang swelled with pride, their eyes fixed on their indomitable leader—the Overlord—who was their unyielding pillar of strength.

The Overlord scanned a letter delivered from the Imperial Capital. After reading, he crushed it into a ball, his voice low and deliberate. "Yuwen Xiu is still too green... and Mo Beike, that cunning fox, is as sly as ever."

Leaning back in the wide, imposing chair symbolizing the Mohist leader's authority, he continued, "Jiang Li is a formidable general. With him holding the line, even capturing Yuan Chi City won't let the Northern County army sweep through unchallenged. It's a pipe dream."

"But Mo Beike knows brute force won't work, so he's playing a softer game. The court of the Great Zhou is rotten to the core. Aside from the Grand Preceptor Kong Xiu, the rest of the ministers are just a pack of fame-chasing opportunists."

"Mo Beike's strategy is clear: he's using a velvet glove to carve into Jiang Li, that tough nut to crack."

The Overlord spoke slowly, his words measured. Below, his Western Liang generals listened intently, knowing their leader was about to unveil his next move. His ambition stretched far beyond the Mechanism City—he aimed to conquer the entire realm.

The Overlord fell silent, his fingers tapping lightly on the armrest. Without Mo Beike, he lacked a strategist, but he didn't need one. With his own prowess as a cultivator and the fearless Western Liang warriors at his back, he was unstoppable. No scheme or plot could stand against absolute strength—a lesson he'd learned vividly during the ambush at Wolong Ridge. If he possessed power rivaling that of an immortal, the world would be his with a mere flick of his hand.

Rising to his feet, the Overlord paced, his towering frame exuding a palpable aura of vitality that left his generals breathless with awe. "Raise the army," he declared, his gaze piercing the cliffside beyond the hall, his voice thundering. "We march straight for the Imperial Capital."

His warriors roared, their eyes blazing with zeal.

Meanwhile, in Yuan Chi City, within the Great Zhou military camp, General Jiang Li, clad in silver armor, studied an imperial edict. His expression remained impassive. The envoy from the Imperial Capital knelt before him, trembling, 不敢动弹.

After a long pause, Jiang Li let out a heavy sigh. Tucking the edict away, he turned to the envoy. "Return to His Majesty and report: a general in the field need not heed every imperial command."

The envoy shuddered. Jiang Li was defying the emperor's orders.

“If I return to the capital, the Great Zhou’s elite forces will be leaderless. The Northern County army won’t miss that chance—they’d overrun us like a landslide,” Jiang Li said.

The envoy, still kneeling, spoke cautiously. “His Majesty understands this and has no true desire to recall you. But the court is in an uproar—ministers are impeaching you, officials are weeping and pleading. The pressure on His Majesty is immense.”

“Moreover,” the envoy continued, clasping his fists, “the court reports that the Northern County army has left only a thousand men to guard Yuan Chi, retreating thirty miles. They claim the war is no longer a threat, thanks to Great Zhou’s might, and urge you to return to the capital at once.”

Jiang Li’s face grew colder, his fists clenching. The corrupt court, scheming noble families, and the hidden hand of the Mohists were all at play. The Imperial Capital was a storm of intrigue. If he abandoned the frontlines, the Northern County army would charge in the next day.

Closing his eyes, Jiang Li deliberated. When he opened them, his resolve was firm—he would defy the edict.

The envoy galloped back to the Imperial Capital with the news. The city erupted. Impeachment memorials poured into the Purple Gold Palace like raindrops in a storm. Inside, the old eunuch could only hear the emperor’s heavy, labored breathing, as if a tempest were brewing.

In the Imperial Capital, Yuwen Xiu sought answers at the Scholar's Pavilion but was once again stopped by Mo Tianyu. "Your Majesty, the Master sees no one," Mo Tianyu said with a smile, then added, "except the Young Lord of Beiluo."

"Why?" Yuwen Xiu demanded, his eyes bloodshot. "I'm lost and need the Master's guidance."

He had long harbored doubts about Jiang Li, suspecting him of regicide. Now, with rumors swirling—some even implicating the Grand Preceptor—his heart was in turmoil.

Mo Tianyu shook his head. "The Master sees no one." After a pause, he offered, "But I could read your fortune, Your Majesty. My divinations are quite accurate."

Yuwen Xiu's face fell. He glanced at the pavilion, catching a glimpse of a figure rocking in a chair by the second-floor window. As for Mo Tianyu's offer to divine his fate? Yuwen Xiu turned and left without a word.

Mo Tianyu stood speechless, stung by the rejection.

Back in the Purple Gold Palace, Yuwen Xiu isolated himself, wrestling with his thoughts. He knew the Northern County's retreat was likely a ruse. Reports flooded in: ministers kneeling outside, demanding Jiang Li's punishment; citizens marching, seeking justice for the late emperor; rumors claiming Yuwen Xiu was a puppet of a regicide, that Great Zhou was no longer Great Zhou.

His face contorted, Yuwen Xiu tore off his crown, his hair disheveled, his mind teetering on madness. On his desk lay nine edicts, ink still wet. He hesitated, knowing their issuance would shake the very foundations of Great Zhou.

Then, Mo Tianyu's words echoed in his mind: "The Master sees no one, except the Young Lord of Beiluo."

In the darkened palace, a spark flickered in Yuwen Xiu's eyes. "Is this the Master's guidance?" he murmured, his breathing quickening. "Lu Ping'an of Beiluo..."

"Prepare the carriage!" he shouted. "To Beiluo City!"

Outside, the old eunuch froze, then trembled as if recalling something terrifying. Still, he bowed. "As you command."

In Beiluo, on Lakeheart Island, Lü Mu felt an inexplicable chill as he stepped ashore. The island had transformed—the air was crisp, almost purifying the soul with each breath. Strange chrysanthemums flourished, their eerie beauty unsettling.

In the distance, a young girl, Ni Yu, was enveloped in faint blue energy, a black cauldron hovering before her, brimming with a terrifying, simmering power. Nearby, Nie Changqing wielded his butcher's knife from afar, cleaving the lake's surface into a white, serpentine scar that lingered. Yi Yue practiced her whip technique, her movements so swift they seemed to shatter the air. Ning Zhao, ethereal in her white dress, stood on the lake's surface, her presence serene—until she opened her eyes, and the water beneath her caved into a bowl-shaped depression under an invisible force.

Lü Mu shivered. These cultivators were terrifying. All he wanted was to claim the promised immortal fate from the Young Lord of Beiluo and leave this fearsome island.

On the second floor of the White Jade Pavilion, the Young Lord leaned against the railing, his white robes fluttering, a warm smile on his face as he waved to Lü Mu. The couplet at the pavilion's entrance radiated such oppressive energy that Lü Mu dared not look at it. He climbed to the second floor, where he met the refined, jade-like Young Lord.

His nerves calmed inexplicably in the Young Lord's presence. With a wave, the Young Lord floated a cup of warm plum wine to Lü Mu. "You did well at Wolong Ridge," he said with a smile.

Lü Mu bowed. "Young Lord, I've come for the promise you made."

The Young Lord's smile widened. "I keep my word. I promised you a thread of immortal fate, and you shall have it." With a gentle gesture, a wisp of spiritual energy surged into Lü Mu's body. His hair and beard flared, his qi core thrumming with newfound energy, his entire being infused with a trace of ethereal grace.

"This... this is spiritual energy!" Lü Mu's voice trembled with excitement.

"Sit, Old Lü," the Young Lord said, reclining in his wheelchair, a wool blanket over his knees, his hair swaying in the breeze. "Let's discuss something else."

Lü Mu's elation froze. "Young Lord... what is it?"

The Young Lord sipped his plum wine, his smile gentle but piercing. “Nothing major. The opening of Wolong Ridge’s immortal palace signals the dawn of the cultivators’ era. The world knows nothing of cultivation systems, methods, or secrets. As the first cultivator force, White Jade Pavilion bears the responsibility of spreading this knowledge.”

“For that, we need a robust intelligence network. But I dislike complications, so... I propose the Tianji School joins White Jade Pavilion.”

Lü Mu felt a chill grip his heart. Though the Young Lord’s smile was warm, an overwhelming pressure squeezed his chest. You, with a good temper? Lü Mu thought skeptically.

Dazed, he descended from the pavilion and boarded his small boat, poling away from the island. Only when he was far from shore did he snap out of his stupor. He knelt on the boat, his heart heavy. He had come to Beiluo for his immortal fate, but somehow... he had ended up pledging the entire Tianji School to the Young Lord.

What had he done?