

Starlit Path 93

Chapter 93: Blood in the South and an Emperor's Desperate Wait

In the southern reaches of the Great Zhou Dynasty lies the South County, a land blessed with fertile soil, majestic mountains, and clear waters, renowned for producing scholars and beauties. The Tang family, the region's most powerful clan, holds dominion over South County, wielding wealth vast enough to rival a nation. Tang Xiansheng, the family's patriarch and the county's governor, presides over this affluent domain. Yet, unlike the zealous uprisings in the Western and Northern Counties, South County remains curiously aloof. Tang Xiansheng has raised the banner of rebellion in name only, never pressing toward the Imperial Capital with the same fervor as his counterparts. South County stands apart, like a refined gentleman observing the chaos of Great Zhou from a distance, its presence barely felt in the turbulent struggle for power.

In South County's Nanjiang City, within the Tang family's sprawling estate, a thick stench of blood spread like ink in water, enveloping the mansion. Servants trembled in fear, and maids screamed in panic. The once serene and harmonious Tang estate was shattered by a single, violent act.

The second young master of the Tang family was dead, his body sprawled in a pool of blood that seeped outward, the acrid scent staining the air and reflecting on every horrified face. Tang Yimo sat on the ground, his eyes wide with terror as he stared at his bloodstained hands, his body trembling uncontrollably. He had killed someone. The second young master, Tang Baichen, a first-rate martial artist, had fallen by his hand.

Tang Baichen's name suggested elegance, and he was outwardly celebrated as a scholar of South County. In truth, he was a vile predator, a notorious scoundrel of Nanjiang City who preyed on women with ruthless abandon, destroying countless families. Worse still, he took perverse pleasure in tormenting Tang Yimo. Though Tang Yimo had trained in martial arts, his second-rate skills were no match for Tang Baichen's prowess. Each act of defiance had left him battered, bruised, and teetering on the edge of death. Were it not for Tang Yimo being Tang Xiansheng's illegitimate son, Tang Baichen

would have killed him long ago. To the second young master, Tang Yimo was nothing more than a loathsome pest.

This time, however, Tang Baichen had set his sights on Tang Yimo's younger sister. When Tang Yimo discovered his sister in danger, he didn't flee. He stood his ground, cutting down Tang Baichen's lackey and engaging the young master in a desperate fight. At the brink of life and death, Tang Yimo broke through his first meridian, unleashing a ferocious palm strike that pierced Tang Baichen's heart.

A low, guttural laugh escaped Tang Yimo's lips. The immortal had not deceived him—the cultivation technique bestowed upon him had granted the power to protect those he cherished. Tears streamed down his face. This might be the last time he could shield his sister and mother. By killing Tang Baichen, he had sealed his fate within the Tang family. Tang Baichen's mother, the second lady of the house, would never forgive him.

As expected, the news of Tang Baichen's death unleashed chaos. Guards stormed the scene, and the second lady, clad in opulent robes, arrived pale and frantic. "Seize this wretched bastard!" she shrieked, tears streaming down her face. "I'll carve the flesh from his bones to avenge my son!"

Tang Baichen was her pride, her foundation in the Tang household, and now he was gone—slain by a despised illegitimate child. The guards surged forward, some grandmaster martial artists among them, their vital energy crackling. Tang Yimo staggered to his feet, his gaze resolute. "Seize the bastard, his lowly mother, and his sister!" the second lady screamed.

A beastly roar erupted from Tang Yimo's throat. The immortal's words echoed in his mind: "What is strength for, if not to protect those you hold dear? Never lose sight of your purpose, stay true to your heart."

His eyes blazed crimson, blood mist seeping from his skin as he broke through his first meridian once more. Power surged through his limbs, threatening to burst his body apart. The Eight Meridians Escaping Armor Demonic Technique—this was his immortal fate. The immortal had granted him a demonic art, to become a demon in sacrifice, to guard what mattered most. Protection demanded bloodshed.

The Tang estate descended into pandemonium, awash in the stench of blood. When Tang Xiansheng returned, he was met with an overwhelming reek of death. Stepping into the estate, he saw corpses strewn across the ground. At the center knelt a blood-soaked figure, hair dripping crimson, each drop splashing onto the floor. Tang Xiansheng's face betrayed shock. Tang Yimo, the overlooked illegitimate son, had slaughtered hundreds of the estate's elite soldiers, including grandmaster guards.

A glint of realization flickered in Tang Xiansheng's eyes. Immortal fate! A cultivator! The terms surged into his mind. The rise of cultivators was the talk of Great Zhou—Beiluo's Young Lord, the Western Liang Overlord, the Wolong Ridge immortal palace. Cultivators were reshaping the world's balance of power. Tang Xiansheng had fretted over how to recruit such beings, never imagining one would emerge within his own family—his own son.

Stepping through the blood, he approached the panting, blood-drenched Tang Yimo, whose consciousness seemed to waver. Tang Xiansheng's eyes gleamed briefly before softening into boundless warmth. "My child, you've suffered," he said, his trembling hand gently touching Tang Yimo's bloodied cheek.

In Beiluo City, the emperor's six-steed carriage rolled through the gates, greeted by Lu Changkong and his elite troops. It was Yuwen Xiu's first visit to Beiluo, a place he'd heard much about but never seen. "Welcome, Your Majesty," Lu Changkong said, kneeling on one knee.

Yuwen Xiu quickly raised him. “No need for formalities, Lord Lu. I’ve come to Beiluo seeking answers. I’ve heard your son, Lu Ping’an, gained an immortal fate and saved Beiluo from peril. Today, I’ve braved the storm to seek his counsel, a strategy advised by the Grand Preceptor himself.”

Hope flickered in the young emperor’s eyes. The pressures of recent days had weighed heavily on him, and now, following what he believed to be the Grand Preceptor’s guidance, he clung to Beiluo as his last hope.

Lu Changkong sighed, clasping his hands. “Your Majesty, my son is in seclusion and has refused to see anyone.”

Yuwen Xiu froze, then pressed urgently, “I’ve come in person, with utmost sincerity!”

“Outrageous!” a grandmaster martial artist at Yuwen Xiu’s side bellowed. “His Majesty has come himself—how dare a subject refuse to meet him?”

The old eunuch’s face darkened. With a flick of his whisk, he struck the martial artist, snapping, “Silence!” The grandmaster grudgingly complied.

“Lord Lu,” the eunuch continued, “His Majesty’s presence is a gesture of great sincerity. Could you visit Lakeheart Island and inform your son that His Majesty awaits him?”

He knew well the enigmatic and fearsome reputation of Beiluo’s Young Lord. Yuwen Xiu glanced at the eunuch, surprised. This trusted aide, a seventh-resonance grandmaster, stood firm even against Jiang Li, yet now adopted a posture of utmost humility.

Lu Changkong shook his head. "Eunuch, when I heard of His Majesty's arrival, I already visited the island. My son is truly in seclusion. Due to his leg ailment since childhood, he has a volatile temper. Disturbing him now could lead to... unfortunate consequences."

He spoke earnestly, knowing his son's temperament all too well. Yuwen Xiu paced, hands clasped behind his back. After a long pause, he looked up. "Lord Lu, I will wait in Beiluo until Lu Ping'an emerges."

The decision stunned those around him. The old eunuch remained composed, but the grandmasters and generals escorting Yuwen Xiu were aghast. The capital was in chaos, memorials flooding the court, yet the emperor chose to linger in Beiluo, waiting for a mysterious figure some called a charlatan.

"Your Majesty, this is unwise!" a general pleaded, kneeling and kowtowing. "Beiluo is no place to linger. If the Northern County rebels march and trap you here, it would be Great Zhou's doom!"

The general had opposed the trip from the start but couldn't defy the emperor's will. "This must be Kong Xiu's scheme!" he cried, near tears.

The old eunuch stayed silent, his face grim. Yuwen Xiu's expression darkened further. Lu Changkong watched, expressionless, but sighed inwardly. Mo Beike's machinations had driven a wedge between the court, the Grand Preceptor, Jiang Li, and the emperor, pushing Great Zhou to the brink.

"My decision is final," Yuwen Xiu snapped, climbing into his carriage. "I will wait for Lu Ping'an." His voice was cold, but within, he harbored a secret: like Lu Ping'an, he too had received an immortal fate. Thus, he was willing to stake everything on this wait.

Lu Changkong bowed, leading Yuwen Xiu to the shores of Beiluo Lake, though they did not cross to the island. Day turned to night, and a day and night passed. The atmosphere by the lake grew heavy.

Word of the emperor waiting by Beiluo Lake for the Young Lord spread to the capital, igniting an uproar. Mo Beike's agents fanned the flames of rumor: "The emperor's trip to Beiluo is Kong Xiu's trick, luring him from the capital—Great Zhou teeters on collapse!" "The young emperor is bewitched by Lu Ping'an's sorcery, a demon sowing chaos in the realm!"

The capital boiled over, ministers wept, and memorials flew like arrows. Self-proclaimed loyalists, under the dim starlight, rode carriages to Beiluo. Lu Changkong allowed these officials entry without obstruction.

By Beiluo Lake, ministers knelt before the emperor's carriage, sobbing and urging him not to fall for the demon's wiles, to return to the capital and summon Jiang Li for judgment. Inside the carriage, Yuwen Xiu remained silent.

As the first rays of dawn leaped from the horizon, scattering golden light across the shimmering waters of Beiluo Lake, a figure stirred on Lakeheart Island. In the White Jade Pavilion's second floor, seated in a wheelchair, clad in white robes with hair fluttering in the breeze, the Young Lord slowly opened his eyes.