

Starlit Path 103

Chapter 103: A Scholar's Regret and a Challenger's Trial

In the capital's Scholar's Pavilion, Kong Nanfei watched Prime Minister Zhao Kuo storm off, then returned inside. The Grand Preceptor, clad in a wide robe, sat in his rocking chair, sunlight bathing his face in a serene glow. Kong Nanfei couldn't fathom his master's intentions. The capital's chaos had begun when Kong Xiu withdrew from court. Had he remained, suppressing the ministers, this bloody purge would never have happened. What was the Grand Preceptor planning?

"Zhao Kuo left?" Kong Xiu asked.

Kong Nanfei nodded, keeping his doubts to himself.

"Good riddance. That man harbors ambitions of a wolf. The late emperor knew it, and now he can't hide his schemes," Kong Xiu said. "Lu Ping'an sent Beiluo's cavalry to purge the capital's noble families, and Zhao Kuo seizes this chance to step into the spotlight. He Shou is merely his pawn. Zhao thinks he can wield Beiluo's blade, but without the strength to control it, he'll cut himself."

Kong Xiu's eyes closed, as if the world's turmoil was no concern of his. "He seeks to ride the east wind, forgetting who stirs it."

Kong Nanfei pondered, finding his master increasingly enigmatic.

The carriage wheels rolled, crushing dust. Luo Cheng dragged He Shou, whose face was deathly pale. He had witnessed noble houses fall and ministers perish in blood. These were executioners, merciless and unreasonable. His former pride, once bold as he penned his proclamation under moonlight, now seemed laughable. That single document had turned the capital upside down.

He Shou thought of the Prime Minister, who had urged him to write it. His eyes flickered with resentment. Beiluo's cavalry had razed countless noble houses but spared Zhao Kuo's mansion. The Prime Minister, ever in semi-retirement, had submitted no memorials or spread rumors. All the slanders, the proclamation, the attacks on Kong Xiu—Zhao Kuo had orchestrated them through his pawns.

Why should he escape unscathed? He Shou's gaze burned with venom. As the last noble house fell, Nie Changqing stretched lazily in the carriage, his eyes settling on He Shou. "There's still... Prime Minister Zhao Kuo!" He Shou shouted, frantic. "He's the mastermind! He made me write the proclamation, spread the rumors! Go kill him!"

Nie Changqing's voice was calm. "No need. They're coming to us." At the street's end, a dark mass of troops approached, their armor clanging, a chilling aura of death in the air.

On Beiluo Lake, a lone boat swayed gently. Mo Liuqi leaned at the bow, staring at his reflection in the water. The Mohist Mechanism City was gone, and with it, the person he held dear. No longer bound by tasks, no longer an assassin, he was adrift. In a rainstorm, he had challenged the Overlord, only to be crushed like an ant. That defeat ignited a hunger for strength.

His reflection showed a numb, expressionless face, devoid of joy or emotion. He had returned to Beiluo, to Lakeheart Island, knowing that only by following the Young Lord and joining White Jade Pavilion could he surpass the Overlord. Suddenly, ripples spread across the lake. Mo Liuqi's eyes sharpened as a terrifying presence approached from behind.

He turned to see the lake churn with towering waves, as if stirred by force. Birds scattered, their wings beating wildly. His boat rocked violently. Standing, he stared into the misty distance. A gust tore through the fog, revealing a towering figure treading white waves.

"It's him!" Mo Liuqi's fists clenched, his breath quickening. The Overlord of Western Liang, Xiang Shaoyun.

On Lakeheart Island, a breeze stirred. Jing Yue, bearing his pearwood sword case, felt his heart race. A deafening roar echoed from the lake. "Such a powerful aura..." he muttered, his feet twitching as if to retreat, but he held firm. This was Lakeheart Island, guarded by the Young Lord. He had no need to flee.

Lü Mu, white beard fluttering, sensed the presence too, his fingers tracing his tortoiseshell. Mingyue, the pipa girl, huddled behind him, frightened by the ominous air startling the island's birds. At the pavilion's base, Lü Dongxuan opened his eyes, now deep and profound. He inhaled deeply, the island's spiritual energy swirling into him like a vortex. In that moment, he formed a Qi Core, a breakthrough sparked by the plaques' insight.

"You've gained understanding, so you're worthy to ascend the pavilion," the Young Lord's calm voice echoed in his ears.

Lü Dongxuan rose, adjusted his robes, and climbed to the second floor. There, on the jade-carved terrace, the Young Lord leaned against the railing, his white robes billowing, exuding effortless grace. "Young Lord," Lü Dongxuan said, flashing a yellow-toothed grin.

“Since you’ve joined White Jade Pavilion, call me Young Master like the others,” the Young Lord replied, placing a black chess piece on the board. Holding a bronze wine cup, he sipped. “Sit.”

Lü Dongxuan sat cross-legged before the board. “What did you glean from the plaques’ verses?” the Young Lord asked.

“I understood, I understood! Your verses, Young Master, are unmatched in history, peerless in heaven and earth!” Lü Dongxuan said, thumb raised, grinning widely.

Ni Yu, brewing wine nearby, couldn’t stifle a laugh at the blatant flattery. Is this man really a master of the Tianji School? She thought her Young Master immune to such sycophancy. But the Young Lord glanced at her, his expression amused yet stern, and her laughter stopped abruptly.

On Beiluo Lake, laughter rolled like thunder. “Xiang Shaoyun of Western Liang, passing through Beiluo, comes to pay respects!” The Overlord’s voice echoed across the island.

Lu Changkong followed in a boat, trailed by dozens more carrying a thousand elite soldiers, ready to aid the Young Lord if needed. Xiang Shaoyun, treading waves, broke through the fog, his eyes widening at the spiritual-energy-wreathed island. On the shore stood Ni Yu, her hair in a bun, a black wok on her back, her face scrunched in distress as she faced him.

Xiang Shaoyun paused, surprised. “Old Nie and Ning aren’t here, so the Young Master sent me to greet you,” Ni Yu called, her voice trembling.

On the island, Jing Yue palmed his forehead, bewildered. Sending Ni Yu to face the Overlord? Is the Young Master serious? Did she offend him somehow?

Ni Yu removed the wok, gripping it with effort and pointing it at the Overlord. “The Young Master says you’re too arrogant. To board the island... withstand three strikes of my wok,” she said, her chubby face quivering, her words lacking the domineering tone the Young Lord had taught her.

Xiang Shaoyun, stunned, burst into laughter, his eyes sharpening. “They say Beiluo’s Young Lord has a strange temperament. Today, I see it’s true.” He looked to the pavilion’s terrace, where a white-robed youth leaned against the railing. He didn’t underestimate the girl—Lu was testing him through her.

On the terrace, the Young Lord sat in his wheelchair, one hand propping his chin, the other placing a chess piece. A faint smile curved his lips as spiritual pressure thickened the air. Across the board, Lü Dongxuan sweated under the weight. As the Young Lord placed a piece, Ni Yu swung her wok on the shore. The black wok hurtled toward the Overlord, who, treading waves, narrowed his eyes in shock.