

Starlit Path 113

Chapter 113: A Taoist Plays a Melody on the Bluestone, While “Zhulong” Listens in the Dawn

"Take over the Daoist Sect..."

His tone was calm, as if he were merely noting the sky might rain and suggesting Nie Changqing fetch the laundry.

Nie Changqing, seated cross-legged on a cushion, stiffened slightly. The Daoist Sect... had it somehow touched a nerve with the Young Master?

Among the Hundred Schools, the Daoist Sect was a formidable force, one of the first schools the Young Master had encountered. Nie Changqing himself was a former outcast of the sect. Han Lianxiao, sent by the Daoist Sect's scholars to kill Nie Changqing and take Nie Shuang, had been thwarted by the Young Master's unintended interference. Nie Changqing had once believed that Han Lianxiao's death would draw a host of Daoist Sect experts to Beiluo City, seeking vengeance.

But he was wrong.

The Daoist Sect remained silent. Han Lianxiao's death was like an autumn leaf sinking to the bottom of a pond, barely stirring a ripple.

"Young Master... are you serious?" Nie Changqing asked, suppressing the shock in his heart.

Leaning back in his wheelchair, the Young Master was bathed in the radiant glow of dawn, a faint purple hue shimmering behind him, dazzling and captivating.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" he replied. "You're heading to the Daoist Sect to save your wife anyway. While you're at it, take over the sect. It's not a bad deal."

He rolled up his sleeve, placing a white chess piece on the Spirit Pressure Board, and continued, "Taking over the Daoist Sect was just a spur-of-the-moment idea."

The Young Master had long been stuck in a misconception. To establish White Jade City as a transcendent force above the Hundred Schools, there was a simpler path: conquer a few key schools to intimidate the rest. This would maintain White Jade City's mystique while showcasing its strength, cementing its status as a supreme power.

He always considered himself a reasonable man. So, he decided to let Old Nie test the waters. If the Daoist Sect agreed to be absorbed, like the Tianji School had, everyone would be happy. If not, well, he had at least extended the courtesy.

Nie Changqing's throat felt dry. Absorbing the Tianji School and now targeting the Daoist Sect... he could sense the Young Master's grand ambitions. His heart raced with both apprehension and excitement.

"What? Scared?" The Young Master glanced at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Your current strength is at the eleventh stage of Qi Dan. Refine one more wisp of spiritual energy, and you'll reach the peak of Qi Dan, ready to attempt the Body Treasury breakthrough," the Young Master said, his words lingering on the terrace.

Nie Changqing straightened, his expression serious.

"Breaking into the Body Treasury isn't easy. Even the Overlord, charging through ten thousand soldiers alone, failed to break its shackles by a hair. Do you think you can make the leap without some pressure?" the Young Master asked.

Nie Changqing's heart jolted. The Overlord, charging through an army alone?

"Don't get too comfortable. Your current strength is nothing to boast about. If you stagnate, you'll be left behind in the future," the Young Master warned.

Nie Changqing clenched his fists tightly.

"Get yourself ready. Ask Ni Yu for three Qi-Gathering Pills—no more than three. Pills are useful, but you, Ning Zhao, Yi Yue, and the others can't rely on them to break through like Ni Yu can. If you break this rule, the punishment will be severe."

His fingers tapped the armrest of his wheelchair as he spoke.

Nie Changqing nodded solemnly, his face stern. Was the Young Master giving up on Ni Yu? He glanced at her on the island, giggling foolishly while refining pills, her backside in the air, and pursed his lips.

"Go," the Young Master said, waving his hand.

Nie Changqing stood, descending from the White Jade City pavilion.

The wheelchair turned automatically, and at the railing, the Young Master gazed at the lake under the morning light, a faint smile curling his lips. He suddenly felt a spark of anticipation for the moment White Jade City would absorb the Hundred Schools and rise as a transcendent force. It was only a thin veil away from that goal, and absorbing the schools would tear that veil apart.

On the lake island, Mo Liuqi knelt quietly on a bluestone slab. He had knelt all night, yet the Young Master hadn't spared him a glance. Still, Mo Liuqi refused to give up. He wanted to join White Jade City, learn the ways of immortal cultivation, become a true cultivator, and seek revenge.

Suddenly, his body trembled. He looked up hopefully toward the misty silhouette of the White Jade City pavilion.

"Young Master..." Mo Liuqi clenched his fists.

"You lost to the Overlord. Failure isn't the problem. The problem is failing to rise after defeat, letting hatred blind you," the Young Master's ethereal voice echoed in his ears.

"Young Master... what should I do?" Mo Liuqi asked, loosening his fists, his palms trembling, tears streaming down his face.

He had watched Ah Zhu wither before him like a blood-red mandala. He had picked up the shattered half of Mo Yiheng's mask. His taut heart was breaking.

"Young Master... you're all-powerful. Can you save Ah Zhu and the Masked One? I'll serve you like a beast of burden for their safety..." Mo Liuqi sobbed, collapsing to the ground like a broken child.

On the island, Nie Changqing, Ning Zhao, and others turned to look, their gazes softening at Mo Liuqi's heart-wrenching cries. Such raw grief could only come from losing someone dear.

"They're dead," the Young Master's voice drifted. "Once dead, their souls enter the underworld, and revival is nearly impossible."

His words chilled Mo Liuqi's heart.

"But with spiritual energy reviving and the world changing, travel far and wide, seek opportunities for immortal destiny. In the future... you might just reopen the underworld and call their souls back."

Mo Liuqi froze, then looked up, his eyes blazing with hope.

"Get stronger. When you're powerful enough to reopen the underworld, that may be the day you reunite with them," the Young Master's voice remained ethereal, yet it was like sweet dew, nourishing Mo Liuqi's parched, despairing heart with hope.

Mo Liuqi stood, bowing deeply to the Young Master. Then, he turned, boarded a lone boat, and left the lake island. He would leave Beiluo City, roam the continent, seek immortal destiny, and grow strong enough to reopen the underworld's cycle.

"You could try the borderlands. Sometimes, hope lies in the most desperate places," the Young Master called from the pavilion, sipping plum wine as he gazed out, his words mingling with the mist.

Mo Liuqi's figure faded into the haze.

Bei Commandery, Buzhou Peak

Li Sansi slowly opened his eyes. The peak was eerily silent, as if even the wind had stilled. Clad in a green robe, he grabbed his wooden sword and turned warily.

Then he froze.

Behind the bluestone sat a young girl, knees drawn up, eyes closed, her long lashes trembling slightly. How had a girl appeared on Buzhou Peak, of all places?

Leaping down from the bluestone, Li Sansi scanned his surroundings cautiously. The dark cave entrance was still littered with withered bones, yet this girl showed no fear. Something was off about her. She exuded an unsettling aura of dread.

Gripping his wooden sword, spiritual energy swirling within his Qi Dan, Li Sansi stared at the girl. But then he paused. Her skin was smooth as jade, her youthful face carrying a touch of innocence and naivety about the world. That purity struck his heart like a small hammer, stirring a tremor.

She reminded him of his sister, Li Sansui. Once, she had been just as pure and innocent. But purity was fragile, easily wounded. When his sister's heart broke and she changed her name to Mo Chou, the pure Li Sansui was gone, leaving only the Daoist nun, Li Mo Chou.

Lowering his sword, he said, "Miss..."

The girl didn't respond, only raised a finger to point at the wooden flute tucked at his waist.

Li Sansi blinked. "You want to hear a flute tune?"

She nodded.

He scratched his head, embarrassed. He often played alone in the wilderness because his tunes weren't exactly pleasant. Performing for others wasn't his thing. He opened his mouth to decline, but seeing her curled up, her youthful face tilted up, his heart softened, and he couldn't refuse.

"If I play poorly, please don't mind, miss," he said, scratching the back of his head.

He leapt back onto the bluestone, sat cross-legged, propped his sword on his knees, and drew out the flute. Pressing it to his lips, he blew, fingers dancing as a gentle melody flowed. On Buzhou Peak, the flute's notes mingled with the dawn's glow, serene and tranquil.

A green-robed Taoist played, and a youthful girl listened. The scene was harmonious.

But if someone viewed from outside Buzhou Peak, they would see no girl. Only a creature with a human head and serpentine body, slithering from the dark cave, hovering before Li Sansi, eyes closed, listening.

Oblivious, Li Sansi was caught in the moment, as the saying goes: "You can't see the true face of Mount Lu because you're standing on it."

When the tune ended, Li Sansi opened his eyes, smiling at the girl. She nodded slightly and pointed at the flute again.

He chuckled, less shy now, and played another piece. The melody filled him with joy at having an audience. As it echoed, the oppressive, indescribable terror lingering over Buzhou Peak seemed to dissipate.

"Not my best, miss," Li Sansi said with a grin, scratching his head as he looked at her curiously. "I'm Li Sansi—Li as in 'wood,' Sansi as in 'think thrice before acting.' May I know your name?"

The girl hesitated, her lashes trembling, before speaking in a voice as soft as a mosquito's hum. "My father... calls me... Zhulong."

"Zhulong?" Li Sansi mused, nodding. "What an elegant name, like moonlight on bamboo, delicate and refined. Much better than the awful name my sister picked for herself, Mo Chou."

The girl seemed puzzled but didn't correct him. She pointed at the flute again, clearly fond of the music.

"Let me rest a bit. I've played a few tunes, and my mouth's dry," Li Sansi laughed, pulling a wine gourd from his waist, uncorking it, and taking a hearty swig.

The girl's lashes fluttered, her nose twitching as she pointed at the gourd.

Li Sansi paused mid-sip. "You want a drink? No, no, that won't do."

The girl pouted, her jade-like skin flushing red, her lashes trembling as if she might cry. Li Sansi, reminded of his sister's childhood tears, panicked. Flustered, he handed her the gourd.

"Just one sip," he instructed sternly.

Her flush faded as she clutched the gourd, gulping down the entire contents in one go. Then she pointed at the flute again.

Li Sansi laughed, exasperated. This girl was truly odd. Sitting on the bluestone under the dawn's light, he played again, the flute's notes drifting softly. The girl listened, tapping the empty gourd, hoping for more wine.

Beiluo, Lake Island

Playing chess, the Young Master suddenly froze. His eyes shifted, lines of energy flickering as he glimpsed a serene scene on Buzhou Peak: a green-robed figure playing the flute.

His lips twitched. "That fool Li Sansi!" he muttered. Had he just created Zhulong only for her to be charmed away?