

Starlit Path 114

Chapter 114: The Quest for the Dragonlands

The Celestial Pavilion sent out a proclamation: eight Dragonlands had emerged across the realm, each brimming with unparalleled immortal opportunities.

The Great Zhou Empire was thrown into a frenzy. Every faction, from martial sects to regional warlords, began scouring the land for these fabled sites. The legend of the Wolong Ridge Secret Realm had already proven the existence of such divine prospects, so the Pavilion's message was met with fervent attention. Whether it was martial clans or provincial governors, no one could ignore the call.

The governors, long suppressed under the dominance of the three great powers—Tang Xiansheng of the South, Dantai Xuan of the North, and Xiang Shaoyun of the West—saw this as a rare chance to break free. For these lesser lords, caught in the shadow of the triumvirate, survival was a daily struggle. They lived in constant fear of annihilation, much like the tragic fate of the Pingyang Governor, who had dared to challenge Xiang Shaoyun only to meet a gruesome end, his territory swallowed by the West.

The White Jade Capital and the rise of cultivators had become the focal point for the empire's warlords and major factions. Though the Celestial Pavilion hadn't disclosed the precise locations of the Dragonlands, spies dispatched by various powers scoured the realm, unearthing faint clues. As the hunt for these sacred grounds ignited, the Dragonlands began to reveal their enigmatic allure.

The East Yan River, Western Prefecture

The East Yan River roared with turbulent waters, twisting through nine bends and eighteen turns, its white waves crashing relentlessly. Jagged rocks lined its rugged banks, resembling the coils of a ferocious dragon. Yet, upstream, a crowd had gathered—Western Prefecture martial artists, clad in simple cloth robes, their weapons slung across their backs.

“This is the place! Someone saw a white streak churning in the river, like a dragon in motion!” one exclaimed.

“There’s an oppressive aura near this river. It has to be one of the Dragonlands the Celestial Pavilion spoke of!” another declared.

“Whoever claims the immortal opportunity here could ascend to immortality in a single step!” a third voice rang out, brimming with excitement.

The martial artists of the West were known for their rugged ferocity, their eyes alight with anticipation. Yet, they warily eyed one another, suspicion simmering beneath their fervor.

Suddenly, the faint sound of hooves echoed through the river’s mist. The crowd froze, turning to see a troop of ten iron-clad riders charging through a cloud of dust. At their forefront was a figure astride a sleek black steed, ribs sharp as blades, clad in light armor with an axe and shield strapped to their back. The sheer presence of this warrior radiated menace.

The martial artists gasped as they recognized the figure. “It’s the Overlord!” one cried out in terror.

“Western Liang Army business. Clear out, or face death,” barked Xu Chu, a towering figure behind the Overlord, hefting two spiked warhammers with an icy glare.

The martial artists erupted in outrage. “This is too much! We were here first! The immortal opportunity belongs to those destined for it!”

The Overlord reined in their horse, eyes sweeping over the defiant crowd. “Destined, you say?” they said coolly. “Who claims that? Speak again.”

The crowd fell silent, fear gripping them like a vice.

“Leave the East Yan River—retreat a hundred miles. Destiny won’t help you if you’re dead,” the Overlord declared.

With that, they dismounted, striding toward a jagged rock. The martial artists, trembling, fled in a panicked scramble, their weapons clattering.

Standing atop the rock, the Overlord inhaled deeply. Spiritual energy, like tiny serpents, flowed into their body from the heavens. “This is indeed a Dragonland... spiritual energy is manifesting,” they murmured, a glint of resolve flashing in their eyes.

Without hesitation, they leaped from the rock, plunging into the raging river. Mist swallowed their form instantly.

The fleeing martial artists halted, stunned, turning back to stare. “The Overlord... jumped into the river?” they whispered.

Moments later, a thunderous roar split the air. The river exploded, and a massive white serpent surged forth, its underbelly sprouting four clawed limbs. It writhed through the water, hissing as a hazy mist

swirled around it, entwining the Overlord. With a bellow, the Overlord unleashed a torrent of dark, demonic energy, clashing fiercely with the serpent. The river erupted repeatedly, sending shockwaves through the onlookers, who stood frozen in awe.

The East Yan River had become the stage for the Overlord's battle with a dragon.

The Daoist Sect, Southern Prefecture

High in the Southern Prefecture, atop the majestic Tianhuang Mountain, stood the Daoist Sect. Nestled on Star-Picking Peak, the sect's temples stretched across the summit, their white walls and green tiles gleaming like an immortal abode. At night, the stars seemed close enough to pluck from the sky, giving the peak its evocative name.

The Daoist Sect, one of the few remaining active schools among the Hundred Schools of Philosophy, retained its formidable reputation in the Great Zhou. Though the Hundred Schools were once numerous, only a handful—Daoist Sect, Sword Sect, Celestial House, Strategist School, and Medical School—remained prominent. The Mohist Mechanical City had been razed, leaving the Mohists, Yin-Yang School, and Mechanism School in ruin. The Military School had faded with Bai Fengtian's death, while the Agricultural and Legalist Schools had long vanished into obscurity. Even Confucianism had grown silent since the National Teacher's seclusion.

Within a temple, a Daoist nun walked slowly, her gaze fixed on the thick, unyielding clouds above. Her eyes betrayed both solemnity and curiosity. Faintly, she glimpsed a serpentine figure weaving through the mist.

Climbing onto the temple's roof, she stood tall, her large eyes locked on the descending clouds. The mist seemed to press closer, almost brushing her face. Her heart skipped as a creature emerged from the clouds, meeting her gaze face-to-face.

Across the Realm

As the search for the Dragonlands gripped the empire, their mysteries unraveled one by one. In the Southern Prefecture's Great Marsh, a massive serpent was spotted coiled upon the ground. Those who tried to capture it were crushed as it rose, twisting and killing with terrifying strength. The marsh was soon confirmed as a Dragonland, and Governor Tang Xiansheng dispatched troops to secure it.

In Dongyang Prefecture, a chasm glowed with crimson light. The local governor, ecstatic at discovering a Dragonland, sent ten thousand soldiers and hundreds of martial artists into the rift. But a scarlet serpent emerged, its passage melting stone and incinerating soldiers with blistering heat. Only half the force returned, the rest reduced to ash. The governor's joy turned to despair, a stark reminder that the Dragonlands held not only opportunity but also mortal peril.

The Great Zhou Empire churned with unrest, as factions vied for control of these sacred sites.

North Luo, Lakeheart Island

On Lakeheart Island, a figure sat in a wheelchair by a red-carved railing, sipping plum wine while playing chess with Lü Dongxuan. Their eyes flickered with intricate patterns, tracking the unfolding events across the Dragonlands. Nearly all eight had been uncovered.

Tapping a chess piece, they mused, "The Dragonlands are almost fully revealed. It's time to prepare the secret realm I designed."

Below the pavilion, Nie Changqing approached, a bundle slung over their shoulder. They bowed slightly to the figure in the wheelchair. “Ready to depart?” the figure asked.

Nie Changqing smiled, their eyes gleaming with barely contained anticipation. “I can hardly wait,” they replied, their voice tinged with suppressed emotion. Reuniting their family had been a long-cherished dream, one they thought impossible—until this figure had given them hope.

“Young Master, you mentioned subduing the Daoist Sect... How exactly? Will they relocate to Lakeheart Island like the Celestial House?” Nie Changqing asked, puzzled.

Lü Dongxuan, mid-move, flushed slightly. “Lakeheart Island isn’t open to just anyone,” the figure in the wheelchair said slowly.

Nie Changqing frowned, still confused.

The figure offered no further explanation. Subduing the Hundred Schools didn’t mean bringing them all to Lakeheart Island for slow integration. They lacked the patience for that. The Hundred Schools had developed too slowly, and a single cultivator faction like White Jade Capital wasn’t enough to elevate this low-martial world to a mid- or high-martial one. The world needed multiple factions—vibrant, competing, thriving—to accelerate its transformation.

Nie Changqing departed, a butcher’s knife strapped to their back, heading south to challenge the Daoist Sect.