

Starlit Path 115

Chapter 115: Li Sansi's Stand

The North Luo Lake shimmered with gentle ripples across its surface. Nie Shuang stood shirtless by the shore, his lean frame steady as he balanced on the water, gazing at the lone boat vanishing into the distance. His father had set off south to the Daoist Sect to reunite with his mother. Whether he would succeed, Nie Shuang could only hope.

He had longed for their family to be whole again. Since childhood, his mother's absence left only a vague silhouette in his memory, her face never clear. "Father, you must succeed," he whispered, clenching his fists.

A figure approached from behind. Nie Shuang turned to see Jing Yue, a sword case strapped to his back. "Uncle Jing," Nie Shuang greeted.

Among the lake's inhabitants, Jing Yue was the closest to Nie Shuang. Talkative and warm, he often chatted with the boy, even sharing insights on cultivation. "Don't worry," Jing Yue said, ruffling Nie Shuang's hair with a grin. "Your father will succeed. He's a disciple of White Jade Capital, after all."

Nie Shuang's face lit up, nodding earnestly. "Keep training hard," Jing Yue continued. "Don't be like your father, waiting years to fetch your mother. A real man protects the woman he loves."

Nie Shuang's cheeks flushed. "My father's not useless!" he protested.

Jing Yue waved it off. "Train well. Once you sense the qi, I'll gift you a sword. Deal?"

Nie Shuang's eyes sparkled. "It's a promise!"

With renewed vigor, he darted to a giant chrysanthemum nearby, practicing his stances with focus. Jing Yue, hands clasped behind him, gazed at the lake's glistening surface, his smile fading into melancholy.

"Little Jing! Run!"

"Flee far, escape the village, escape those barbarians' blades. You must live!"

Jing Yue closed his eyes, fragmented memories flickering—screams, faces he could no longer recall. Only the desperate cries of "run" and "live" lingered. "Father, Mother... I'll live well," he murmured softly to the lake.

Buzhou Peak, Northern Prefecture

Li Sansi rode his green ox to the foot of Buzhou Peak once more. Tying the ox securely, he patted the bulging wineskin at his waist. He'd traveled miles to buy "Bamboo Leaf Green" from the finest tavern in the nearest town, certain that Zhulong would love it.

Days spent with the girl Zhulong atop the peak had revealed her pure, untainted nature—like flawless white jade, untouched by the world’s grime. Li Sansi felt an urge to protect her. Her only flaw? An astonishing tolerance for wine.

Training on Buzhou Peak had strengthened his cultivation, an unexpected boon. In such a blessed land, his qi reservoir had grown from sixteen strands to eight.

He climbed the peak. The familiar bluestone was pristine, not a leaf or speck of dust in sight. Li Sansi smiled. Near the stone, Zhulong sat by the cliff’s edge, eyes closed, her bare feet dangling.

Leaping onto the stone, Li Sansi lifted his robe and offered her the wineskin. “Little Bamboo, try this—Bamboo Leaf Green, a wine of refined taste.”

Zhulong’s long lashes fluttered as she accepted it. “Sip slowly,” Li Sansi advised. “Wine’s meant to be savored.”

She nodded, then gulped the entire wineskin dry in one go. Li Sansi sighed, amused but unsurprised. Sitting cross-legged, he drew his flute and began to play. Zhulong swayed her legs to the melody.

Below, the thunder of hooves echoed. “Villagers confirm it—this is a Dragonland!” an armored soldier declared. “Seize it, and the immortal opportunity is ours!”

“Report to the Governor! We’ve found a Dragonland in the North!” another soldier shouted, galloping off.

The lead soldier eyed the tethered ox, then signaled his men to dismount and ascend Buzhou Peak. The flute's haunting notes drifted down, oddly distant yet slightly off-key.

As the soldiers reached the summit, they froze. On the bluestone sat a Daoist, playing a flute. Beside him, a serpentine creature with a girl's scaled face coiled around the stone, swaying to the music. A demon dragon!

The soldiers gasped, stunned. The lead soldier recognized the Daoist. "Li Sansi, first of the Daoist Sect?" A hero who, with one ox and a wooden sword, had crushed barbarian foes at the border.

Their eyes, however, lingered on the dragon, confirming this as a true Dragonland—an immortal opportunity. But Li Sansi noticed their gazes shift to greed and excitement as they stared at Zhulong.

He sighed, leaping down from the stone to reason with them. "Stop!" a soldier shouted. "It's escaping into the Dragonland!"

Weapons drawn, they charged. Zhulong, panicked, fled toward a dark cave. Li Sansi's brow furrowed. "Stand down," he commanded, raising his wooden sword.

A soldier swung, only to be flung back by a single strike. "Li Sansi, you're a hero! Leave now—soon the Governor's army will arrive. You can't protect this opportunity!" the lead soldier warned.

"I'm not here for opportunities," Li Sansi replied coolly. "I just can't stand you bullying a young girl."

“Retreat, or die.”

The soldiers’ faces twisted. “You’re mad, Li Sansi! That’s no girl—it’s a demon dragon! You’re bewitched!”

They rushed him. Li Sansi sighed. He’d sworn his sword would only strike barbarians, yet today, he faced Great Zhou’s soldiers. In the cave, Zhulong’s black-and-white eyes watched.

Blood mist clouded Buzhou Peak. When the clash ended, silence returned. The Daoist, robe stained red, leaned on his wooden sword, glancing back at the cave with a faint smile.

Dantai Xuan received the report, eyes gleaming. “A Dragonland at Buzhou Peak? Excellent! The North finally has one!”

Six of the eight Dragonlands had surfaced: the Emperor’s residence in the capital, North Luo Lake, the Southern Great Marsh, the Daoist Sect’s Star-Picking Peak, the West’s East Yan River, and Dongyang’s Rift Valley. None were in the North, driving Dantai Xuan to frustration. Had he offended the immortals? Was he doomed to miss every opportunity? The Wolong Ridge fiasco had been bad enough.

Now, a Dragonland in his territory. “Buzhou Peak, near Tianhan Pass... Deploy thirty thousand cavalry!” Dantai Xuan’s red robe flared as he issued the command. Hooves thundered toward the peak.

At the base, scouts knelt, trembling. “Governor, Li Sansi of the Daoist Sect has lost his mind! Bewitched by a demon dragon, he’s slaughtering our men!”

Dantai Xuan’s gaze sharpened, but he pressed forward, leading his army up the peak. At the summit, Li Sansi stood, bloodied robe fluttering, wooden sword in hand, his expression complex. The cave behind him was empty—Zhulong had not returned.

He realized now that Zhulong might indeed be the demon the soldiers claimed. But what did it matter? Her purity, untouched by the world’s corruption, had stirred his heart. She reminded him of his sister, Li Sansui, their images overlapping. Bewitched or not, he didn’t care.

Li Sansi lived by one principle: to act without regret. Sitting on the bluestone, he exhaled, circulating the qi in his reservoir. Below, the cavalry charged, armor clanking. He smiled, tapping his sword against the stone to flick off the blood.

North Luo, Lakeheart Island

Lu sat in his wheelchair, one hand propping his chin, the other holding a chess piece. The lake breeze lifted his hair as his eyes tracked patterns on the spiritual pressure board. Above White Jade Capital’s pavilion, dark clouds gathered. The lake churned, fish rising frantically to the surface as an oppressive aura enveloped the island.

Lü Mudui, sharing tea with Lü Dongxuan, shivered, staring at the lake. A yellow dragonet flapped its wings, water swirling around it.

On the pavilion, Lu's gaze deepened. Lines on the spiritual pressure board mapped the eight Dragonlands, with red dots marking the strong gathered outside them. Rubbing the chess piece, Lu's lips curved upward.

He placed the piece, sliding it gently. As the orchestrator, he moved the pieces of fate.

The spiritual resurgence, second phase.

Begun.