

Starlit Path 146

Chapter 146: You've Caught the Young Master's Eye

He left Beiluo City and returned to the Imperial Capital, his spirit somewhat shaken. This journey to Beiluo had shown him the true meaning of a cultivator. Once, he had prided himself on mastering the Eight Meridians Escaping Armor Magic Technique, believing he could stand above the world, looking down on all others. Now, he realized how far he still had to go. Reality had dealt him a crushing blow.

Compared to Lu Ping'an, the lord of Baiyujing, he was nowhere close. Even Lu Ping'an's coachman was far beyond him. A single glance from that coachman had nearly suffocated him. He reckoned that to match the coachman's strength, he would need to unlock his second meridian.

Back at the residence in the capital, specially prepared for him by the hospitable host, the host greeted him with a warm smile. "My dear friend," the host began kindly, eager to hear about the journey's gains. But he waved a hand dismissively, his face blank, showing no desire to talk. As his figure vanished into the night, the host stood with hands clasped behind his back, letting out a soft sigh.

"Lu Ping'an of Beiluo... is he really that formidable?" the host murmured. "To leave such a proud young man so defeated..." A seasoned man, the host could see the weight of the blow he had suffered. He, too, had known such setbacks in his youth, when he was far from exceptional.

Pacing to the carved wooden door of the young man's room, now dark with its lights extinguished, the host offered a few gentle words of comfort before returning to his own quarters. In the flickering lamplight, he held a bamboo scroll, reading quietly as if waiting for something.

A rustle came from the rafters. A shadow descended, kneeling before him. "My lord, the young master has met secretly with the Chiyao Clan's young priestess. Their forces have been integrated into the Southern Command's army."

The host, still scanning the scroll, responded, "The Chiyao Clan, the strongest of the southern tribes, has unified over a hundred tribes. Their warriors, hardened by battles with wild beasts, are formidable. Such a force, hidden within the Southern Command, won't be easy to control."

"It was chaotic at first, nearly exposed," the shadow reported. "But the young master secured the young priestess's cooperation, separating the barbarian troops from our own. For now, harmony holds."

The host nodded approvingly. "A good test for him, and he's handled it well." Then, after a pause, the shadow added hesitantly, "My lord, they are not our kin; their hearts differ. Allying with the southern tribes is like scheming with a tiger for its pelt..."

The host's hand stilled, setting the scroll down. "Do you think I'm unaware? The tribes are savages, untamed and resistant to civilization. But if used well, they're a sharp blade. If they defy control... they'll be dealt with." His voice was calm but resolute. "I admire Bai Fengtian's ruthlessness—burying 300,000 Rong soldiers in one command. The southern tribes, though, are more organized under the Chiyao Clan's rule. That order breeds ambition, and ambition can be swayed by profit."

Tapping the scroll lightly, he asked, "Did the young priestess discuss the Dragon Gate with him? What was his choice?"

"The young master refused," the shadow replied. "The priestess left in a rage."

The host's lips curved into a satisfied smile. After a long pause, he said, "The barbarian soldiers are a blade. When it dulls, it's time to discard it. Our Southern Command has the Dragon Gate, and the Southern Army trained there is our trump card against the Chiyao Clan."

The shadow bowed. "Send word," the host continued. "Have him dispatch 100,000 troops north in two waves. Let the wolves devour the tiger while the cultivation world's structure is still forming. We must end this conflict swiftly." His white temples gleamed in the lamplight, his tone grave.

"Yes, my lord." The shadow vanished with a flicker. Silence returned, the candle's flame steady, leaving only the host's heavy breaths. "Cultivators..." he mused. "Perhaps it's time to visit Beiluo City myself. This young master Lu must be met."

Meanwhile, two prominent scholars safely departed Beiluo City, stunning the world. Many had expected them to fail in challenging Lu Ping'an, perhaps to be imprisoned on Beiluo's Lake Island or, like the Tianji School, to submit to Baiyujing and join its ranks. Yet neither happened.

In the misty rain, the scholars from the Daoist and Sword Sects rode away calmly. But as they left, an explosive rumor spread: upon returning to their sects, the Daoist Sect renamed itself the Daoist Pavilion, and the Sword Sect became the Sword Pavilion. The martial world reeled. These two titans, pillars of the Hundred Schools, had changed their names—a move eerily reminiscent of the Tianji School's renaming to Tianji Pavilion after joining Baiyujing.

"Even the Daoist and Sword Sects have been absorbed by Baiyujing!" The news left martial artists dumbfounded, sparking a storm that swept through the Great Zhou Dynasty. Days of drizzling rain left the air heavy with a languid dampness.

On Beiluo City's walls, a yawning armored guard squinted through the haze. Suddenly, his eyes widened. Clutching his spear, he spotted countless figures emerging from the misty plains below—travelers, not

soldiers, as they wore no armor. Still, their numbers, at least a thousand strong, unnerved him. He rushed to the watchtower, striking the bronze bell.

Commander Luo, clad in armor and flanked by elite soldiers, arrived swiftly. Their vitality thrummed, their presence oppressive. With Lu Changkong cultivating on Lake Island, Luo was tasked with guarding the city and maintaining order while training the Dragon Blood Army.

“Commander, a large crowd has gathered below—over a thousand!” the guard reported, kneeling.

Luo frowned. “Who dares attack Beiluo now, after the young master’s fame?” North Command? Impossible. West Command? Even less likely; their overlord knew Lu’s strength. Stepping to the battlements, Luo gazed at the figures approaching from the plains. His expression turned odd. “These aren’t attackers. They’re martial artists and clan members... like pilgrims?”

The soldiers around him exchanged glances. Soon, the travelers reached the city gates, armed with swords, spears, and axes. Most were second-rate or lesser martial artists, with a few first-rate fighters and masters among them. Luo ordered the gates sealed.

The crowd demanded entry. “I am from the Liu Clan of Dongyang Command, seeking immortality! I wish to join Baiyujing and follow the young master!” one shouted, kneeling. Others followed, proclaiming their origins—West Command, North Command, South Command—spanning all thirteen commands of Great Zhou.

Luo hesitated. These weren’t enemies; he couldn’t order them slain. Dispatching a rider to Lake Island, he sought guidance. The island was serene, a stark contrast to the city’s clamor. Peach and chrysanthemum blossoms swayed in the breeze, ripples dancing across the lake.

On the second floor of Baiyujing's pavilion, Lu played chess, refining his soul and mastering his power. The urgency of the world's tier assessment seemed forgotten. Yet he wasn't unprepared. Nie Changqing's return had prompted Lu to push him and Ning Zhao into rigorous training, while Ni Yu was tasked with refining Gathering Qi Pills daily, exhausting her but sharpening her skills. Her latest pills even bore dan patterns, a sign of her growing mastery.

Luo arrived, greeted by Nie Shuang, who beamed with joy from reuniting with his mother. Luo smiled warmly, seeing great potential in the boy. Under a chrysanthemum, Lu Changkong meditated, absorbing spiritual energy. Sensing Luo, he opened his eyes. Hearing of the martial artists' demands, he looked to the pavilion's balcony, where Lu focused on his chessboard. "Ask him," Lu Changkong said.

Luo approached, heart pounding. "Young Master..." Before he could finish, Lu's voice cut through, calm but firm. "I know. Baiyujing lacks no disciples." The sound of a chess piece landing punctuated his words.

Luo understood. Returning to the city walls, he faced a growing uproar. Rival martial artists clashed below, their shouts and surging vitality shattering the morning's quiet. "Enough!" Luo's voice boomed. "The young master has spoken: Baiyujing takes no disciples."

Silence fell, then chaos erupted. "Baiyujing, the greatest cultivation force, above the Hundred Schools—how can it refuse disciples?" one cried. "I traveled a thousand miles for this!" another roared. "Open the gates! We demand to see the young master!"

Luo's face darkened. Drawing his blade, he unleashed a pressure surpassing a master's, honed by Dragon Blood Pills. "The young master's word is final. Cease this noise, or face death." The crowd quieted briefly, then surged again, emboldened by their pilgrimage. Some rogues cursed, their defiance tearing through the dawn.

On Lake Island, Lu frowned at the noise. He disliked their clamor, their self-righteous demands binding Baiyujing to their will. Pinching a black piece, he placed it on the board, a breeze lifting his robes. His spiritual sense surged, crossing the distance to enter Luo's mind.

Luo, startled, then smirked with pity at the clamoring crowd below. "Well done," he thought. "You've successfully drawn the young master's attention."