

Starlit Path 152

Chapter 152: This World Is a Deception!

In the Imperial Capital, dawn's golden rays pierced the heavy clouds, spilling across the imperial city's roads like molten gold. Newly appointed officials, adjusting their caps, walked cautiously toward the Purple Gold Palace. Tang Xiansheng, with his son Tang Yimo by his side, strode through the unfamiliar streets. Jiang Li, clad in silver armor, stood by a white stone railing, his red cape billowing, silently observing the officials crossing the palace threshold. Spotting Tang Xiansheng, he nodded in response to the governor's subtle bow.

As the court convened, a eunuch's sharp voice shattered the morning's quiet. The new officials, fearful after recent purges, lined the palace hall. The young emperor's newfound ruthlessness had replaced the court with fresh faces. Yuwen Xiu, perched on the dragon throne, squinted at them, satisfied. "Your Majesty, a report from North Command," a burly minister said, stepping forward. "Tantai Xuan has discovered a new dragon-rearing ground and is leading his army there."

Yuwen Xiu's fingers paused on the throne, his gaze shifting to Tang Xiansheng, who seemed half-asleep. "Minister Tang," he called, raising his voice to rouse him. "North Command has found another dragon-rearing ground. How should Great Zhou respond?"

Tang straightened, alert. "North Command's Buzhou Peak dragon ground is perilous—Tantai Xuan lost thirty thousand men there, so it's no threat. But this new ground, Tai Ling's Wentian Peak, is different. It could fuel North Command's rise."

"And your suggestion?" Yuwen Xiu asked.

"Attack North Command!" Tang's aged frame radiated resolve. "Seize Tantai Xuan's dragon ground!" The hall buzzed. Attack North Command, with Great Zhou still recovering? "My ten thousand South Command troops are en route as the vanguard," Tang continued, bowing. "They're Your Majesty's

troops. I urge you to appoint General Jiang Li to lead the campaign. Only a war god like him can counter North Command's army, backed by Mo Beike. We can't let them secure another dragon ground, or the consequences will be dire."

Yuwen Xiu's eyes narrowed, a dangerous glint within. Tang was pushing Jiang Li to lead? Yet, with the Black Dragon Guard in place and Kong Nanfei securing the capital, Yuwen Xiu was tempted. Seizing another dragon ground could bolster Great Zhou's forces. Delay, and Tantai Xuan's cultivated army would make victory harder. His hand stilled on the throne. He exhaled, resolved.

On Beiluo's Lake Island, Lu stowed his chessboard, leaning back in his wheelchair at the railing, sipping plum wine from a bronze cup. The island was serene: Ni Yu toiled to refine a three-lined Gathering Qi Pill; Jing Yue practiced tirelessly with his new sword; Nie Shuang guided his mother along the island's edge, savoring the scenery. From Baiyujing's pavilion, the clanging of Gongshu Yu's forging echoed as he crafted Jing Yue's scabbard with care.

Lu sipped the tart wine, his gaze piercing the Dragon Gate to the central palace, where Nie Changqing and the others battled the ancient Body Treasury cultivator in a heated struggle. Their strength paled against the ancient's, so they opted for attrition, chipping away at his spiritual vortices. It was a test of patience and time. Lu watched briefly, then turned away.

Luo Yue sensed something off about Xie Yunling but couldn't pinpoint it. He respected the former Hundred Schools scholar, a symbol of a bygone era's peak, even if Lu had surpassed them. "Here to see the Young Master?" Luo asked, unsuspecting. As the Daoist Pavilion was now under Baiyujing, a visit seemed natural. He led Xie and elite soldiers to the lake.

Xie stood at the shore, gazing at the mist-shrouded lake, a glint in his eyes. “A blessed land, rich with spiritual energy,” he muttered. “Worthy of the world’s top cultivation force.” Luo, puzzled, asked, “What did you say, Elder?” Xie shook his head, his gaze seeming to pierce the fog. Luo summoned a boat, and Xie boarded, his robe fluttering as they glided into the mist, revealing the stunning island at the lake’s heart.

On the boat, Xie raised an orchid-shaped hand, sensing the air’s energy. His lips curved. “No peak foundation-building aura. This so-called top cultivator, Lu Ping’an, is nothing special. A low-martial world—what was I worried about?” He chuckled, self-mocking, then stepped off the boat onto the lake’s surface. Waves surged with each step, building a terrifying pressure.

Luo’s face darkened. Something was wrong—Xie’s intent felt impure. “Challenging the Young Master again?” He drew his saber, the clang echoing, but Xie’s orchid fingers flicked, forcing the blade back into its sheath with overwhelming force. Xie laughed, ignoring Luo’s shock, and walked toward the island, waves roaring.

On the island, everyone tensed. Lu Changkong, cultivating under a chrysanthemum, stood, staring at Xie. Gongshu Yu emerged from his forge, bewildered. “Old Xie, what are you doing?” he shouted. Xie ignored him, exuding a demonic pressure, stirring the lake. From the pavilion’s second floor, Lu’s calm voice rang out: “Pay him no mind. Do what you were doing.”

The islanders relaxed slightly but stayed put, unable to ignore Xie’s menacing aura. Unlike his prior visit, driven by regret for a fading era, this Xie radiated hostility. “That’s not Xie Yunling,” Lu Changkong said. Gongshu Yu nodded. “Not his demeanor or aura—especially that orchid gesture.”

Xie’s laughter, husky yet alluring, sent shivers through the islanders as he stepped ashore, waves crashing. Lu, sipping wine, studied him curiously. “A puppet?” he mused. “A low-martial world’s top

force, its top cultivator, just a qi condensation kid who hasn't reached foundation building," Xie taunted, his words confusing the islanders but clear to Lu.

Lu smirked. Qi condensation meant Qi Core; foundation building, Body Treasury. Xie—or whoever controlled him—was here to clarify things. Unfazed by the lack of response, Xie frowned, pinched his orchid fingers, and vanished in a blur, reappearing on the island. Before he could steady himself, Lu's voice drifted down. "Did I permit you to step ashore?"

Xie's eyes narrowed. Lu, unfazed by his exposed cultivation, sipped his wine calmly. "You..." Xie began, but Lu flicked his wheelchair's guard. A silver blade shot out, tearing the air like a meteor. Xie roared, pushing his orchid hands forward, forming an invisible barrier. The blade halted, trembling before him.

Xie laughed. "Is that all?" Lu shook his head, disappointed. "A novice Body Treasury, yet so arrogant. You disappoint me." Xie froze. Arrogant? A qi condensation kid calls me arrogant? "Qi condensation?" Lu scoffed, glancing at Xie as if seeing through his soul to the black-robed figure miles away. "Say that again, if you dare."

With another flick, a hundred silver blades erupted from the wheelchair, swirling like a starry river. Lu's spiritual pressure chessboard floated before him, his robe billowing. Holding a chess piece, he dropped it with a boom, unleashing a mountain-like spiritual pressure, compressed into a pinpoint, slamming into Xie. The force drove Xie to his knees, prostrate and immobile, the blades hovering above every inch of his body.

Miles away, the black-robed figure spat blood, staggering back in terror. Qi condensation? Nonsense! "That pressure rivals peak foundation building! Low-martial? Who's this fooling?" Wiping blood from his face, he moved to sever his link with Xie. His caution had saved him—had he come in person, he'd be dead. "Qi condensation? No way. Peak foundation building, maybe even golden core!" Patting his chest, he gasped, "A trap! A scam! This low-martial world hides a golden core monster, hoarding all its resources. A ruthless man!"

As he tried to cut the link, his face paled. On the lake, Xie's body floated before Lu, a faint blue spiritual thread trailing from his forehead. Lu pinched it, his eyes tracing countless lines. "Found you," he said, looking toward a plain outside Beiluo. Raising a hand, the island's spiritual energy surged, coalescing into a massive hand above the city, its palm lines vivid. It shot toward the plain.

Lu set down his cup, brushing the Phoenix Feather Sword. A fiery glow erupted with a phoenix's cry, the blade streaking after the spiritual hand. Fifty miles out, on a flat stone, the black-robed figure looked up in horror as the giant hand descended toward him.