

## Starlit Path 197

### Chapter 197: The Jester in the Palace

In Beiluo City, at the foot of West Mountain, an unprecedented bustle stirred the air, as if the snow blanketing the slopes might melt under the fervor. A thunderous roar erupted from the ground, and a towering white pagoda materialized out of nowhere, piercing the clouds. Its immense presence loomed over Beiluo, gazing down upon the city and its inhabitants like a silent colossus.

Crowds flocked to West Mountain. Beyond the cultivators who sensed the profound shift, ordinary folk gathered, drawn by curiosity. Lu Changkong deployed the Dragon Blood Army to maintain order, then joined the others from Lakeheart Island at the base of the mountain. From a distance, they spotted Lü Dongxuan and Lu, seated in his wheelchair.

Only someone like Lu could conjure something as miraculous as this white jade pagoda.

Figures darted through the air, their movements swift enough to tear through the swirling snow. Lu, unfazed by the gathering crowd, seemed to expect it. A spectacle of this magnitude would be hard to miss, and if no one noticed, he'd question their awareness.

Ni Yu, lugging her black cauldron, trailed behind Ning Zhao, panting as she approached. Yi Yue, clad in a goose-yellow fur coat with a whip at her waist, followed close behind.

"What... what a tall tower!" Ni Yu gasped, her cauldron slung over her back. Standing before the white jade pagoda, she felt like an ant gazing up at a hundred-layer rice cake tower.

Nie Changqing and the others arrived soon after, nearly the entire Lakeheart Island contingent present. Even Gongshu Yu, who rarely left his forge, hurried to the scene. As a master craftsman obsessed with artifact forging, Gongshu Yu's discerning eye far surpassed that of cultivators like Ni Yu, who could only muster a "wow."

"What exquisite craftsmanship, what terrifying energy fluctuations..." Gongshu Yu marveled. "The one who built this white jade pagoda must be a master! This is a top-tier spiritual artifact!"

Now wholly devoted to forging, Gongshu Yu understood the hierarchy of spiritual artifacts. Lu had once explained the tiers—Heaven, Earth, Mysterious, and Yellow. Gongshu Yu could only craft Yellow-tier artifacts, and even then, a high-grade Yellow-tier piece demanded his utmost effort. Mysterious or Earth-tier artifacts were beyond his wildest dreams.

Thanks to his craft, Gongshu Yu's strength was formidable, reaching the peak of the Qi Core realm—rivaling the hardest cultivators. As a scion of the once-great Mohist School, his talent was undeniable.

"Young Master... what tier is this spiritual artifact?" Gongshu Yu's eyes blazed with fervor, fixed on the pagoda as if it were the most beautiful woman in the world, impossible to look away from. His obsession with forging transcended mere passion; he'd once spent a lifetime perfecting a single hidden weapon.

"Don't fixate on tiers," Lu said. "With enough strength, even a low-tier artifact suited to you can unleash astonishing power. As for this tower... let's call it Earth-tier."

Earth-tier? Gongshu Yu trembled, nearly collapsing in awe, his gaze locked on the pagoda.

Lu ignored him, turning to the gathered crowd. The “Trial Tower” behind him was, as its name suggested, built for testing. He beckoned to Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao.

“Young Master,” they said, stepping forward.

“This is the Trial Tower, one hundred levels high. Enter and proceed as far as you can,” Lu instructed.

The two exchanged glances. A tower for training? Without hesitation, trusting Lu would never harm them, they bowed and approached the pagoda.

The structure was massive, its intricate carvings and elegant eaves resembling a work of art. Lu leaned back in his wheelchair, calm and composed, observing them. He’d chosen Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao because both had fully tempered their five organs, achieving synergy and manifesting spiritual armor. What they needed now was to comprehend elemental spiritual energy, and the Trial Tower was perfect for that.

At the tower’s entrance, Ning Zhao’s flowing skirt and dark hair fluttered in the wind. A heavy pressure gripped her heart, making it tremble. She pressed her hand against the door, pushing as if opening a gate sealed for ages. The door swung open, revealing a pitch-black interior. Ning Zhao and Nie Changqing stepped inside and vanished.

Outside, the crowd buzzed with curiosity, craning their necks to glimpse the tower’s secrets. Anything created by the master of White Jade City was bound to be extraordinary.

Ni Yu sidled up to Lu, munching on sugar-coated Qi Gathering Pills from her pouch. Jing Yue, standing behind Lu with his sword, glanced at her handful of pills, snorted disdainfully, and carefully drew a single

pill from his own pouch. He licked it once before wrapping it back up. Rarity was its own joy—Ni Yu, with her handfuls, couldn't understand the thrill of a single pill.

“Young Master, what's inside the tower? Is it dangerous?” Ni Yu asked, popping another pill into her mouth.

Jing Yue pricked up his ears.

Lu smiled, one hand propping his chin, the other tapping his phoenix-feather armrest. “The tower is a place to break through limits. I sent those two in to give them some competitive pressure. It has a hundred levels. Imagine if Old Nie reaches the fifth level and Ning Zhao only the fourth—her frustration will push her to train harder.”

Jing Yue nodded thoughtfully.

“Young Master, why only the fifth level for Old Nie?” Ni Yu asked, crunching another pill.

Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao, both at the Organ Tempering Realm, were a mere step from the peak, needing only to manifest elemental spiritual energy.

Lu glanced at her with a cryptic smile. “Enter the tower yourself. Reach the third level, and I'll reward you with a special pill recipe. Fail, and... well.”

Ni Yu's face twitched, nearly dropping her handful of pills. It sounded daunting. Still, the promise of a new recipe piqued her interest. She was tired of Qi Gathering Pills and couldn't yet refine Body Tempering Pills, so a new, delicious pill sounded tempting.

While the mood outside was light, inside the Trial Tower, Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao faced far graver challenges.

---

Outside the capital, a fierce wind whipped up the snow, blanketing the ground in a thick white shroud. The twenty black dragon cavalry stared, stunned, at the disheveled scholar who brushed aside his tangled hair.

It was Kong Nanfei—their former commander.

The Black Dragon Guards had two leaders: Jiang Li and Kong Nanfei. After Jiang Li's imprisonment, Kong Nanfei, with the Black Dragon Elite taking control, had vanished from the capital. Now, he reappeared in this ragged state.

Luo Cheng, recognizing him, was shocked. How had the once-refined scholar fallen so low? Was it the death of the Master? Yet Kong Nanfei didn't seem so frail.

"Commander Kong, you know the Black Dragon Guards' duty. Interfere, and you die," said a masked guard astride his horse.

Kong Nanfei, clutching his wine jug, gave the guard a sidelong glance and laughed. “Grown bold, have you?” Turning to Jiang Li, he smiled. “Brother Jiang, it’s been a while.”

He tossed the jug to Jiang Li, who caught it with one hand while holding the white-robed girl. “It’s cold out here. Warm up with a drink,” Kong Nanfei said, wiping his mouth with his tattered sleeve.

He staggered toward the twenty black dragon cavalry, shaking his head at their pristine armor, a flicker of sorrow in his eyes. The youth behind him drew his spear, its tip dragging a line through the snow. Silent but radiating spiritual energy, he surprised Luo Cheng and Jiang Li—a cultivator in his own right.

“Very well, Commander Kong. No offense intended,” said the lead guard. The twenty armored, masked riders spurred their horses, hooves kicking up crystalline snow. A wave of killing intent swept through the winter air.

“Haoran Sect, heir to the Master...” Kong Nanfei intoned, his disheveled demeanor giving way to solemnity. His Confucian robe billowed as an invisible aura surged from him. Reciting poetry with resonant cadence, his words rang like steel.

The cavalry charged, their weapons gleaming with spiritual energy. “Kill!” one roared.

Kong Nanfei’s recitation peaked in a booming laugh that shattered the falling snow. Raising a hand, he summoned the snow into a translucent palm. Another formed above, clapping down with force. Snow engulfed the cavalry, drowning out their horses’ whinnies.

Kong Nanfei turned, grabbing another jug. "Let's go. The Black Dragon Elite will be here soon," he said, hiccuping.

Jiang Li, holding the girl, frowned. "Brother Kong, what—"

Kong cut him off with a wave. "The Master fights on, while jesters prance in the palace. Laughable." He chuckled bitterly. "Haoran, let's move."

Leaving footprints in the snow, he vanished into the flurry. Jiang Li glanced back at the capital, thinking of the old soldiers who'd opened the gates. His fist clenched, but his face remained impassive. With a nod to Luo Cheng, they departed.

Soon after, the Black Dragon Elite arrived with more guards and Great Zhou soldiers. They found shattered, bloodied black dragon masks in the snow. Digging revealed the twenty guards' corpses, crushed instantly by immense force. "A high-level cultivator... likely Organ Tempering Realm," the elite leader said gravely, staring into the endless snowfield. Jiang Li had been rescued, and a storm was brewing for Great Zhou.

---

In the Imperial Garden, Yuwen Xiu stood by the pond, flanked by two black dragon guards. The black dragon thrashed in the water, its blood tainting the pond with a metallic stench. Snow fell around Yuwen Xiu as he stared at the dragon, the old eunuch at his side.

Dismissing the eunuch, he stood alone with the guards. This battle had revealed a truth: the black dragon wasn't strong enough.

The pond exploded as the dragon's head surged out, inches from Yuwen Xiu's face, water drenching him like rain. The guards drew their blades, but he waved them down.

"Weakness is a sin, inviting the world's scorn," Yuwen Xiu said, stroking the dragon's head, marked by the phoenix's claw scars. "You crave strength, don't you? From your frail beginnings to now, I feel your desire to break free."

The dragon's blood-red eyes shifted to the guards. Yuwen Xiu smiled, silent for a moment. "Go."

With a roar, the dragon lunged, seizing one guard in its claws. The other drew his weapon, but the dragon's tail sent him flying. The beast erupted from the pond, and after a brief commotion, silence fell.

Yuwen Xiu turned, walking away. On the ground lay a bloodied black dragon mask and broken armor. He scooped snow to bury the mask, then left the garden. Behind him, the sound of crunching echoed.

Outside, the old eunuch bowed. Yuwen Xiu gazed at the snow and distant gloom, smiling. "Have the garden cleaned later," he said, departing.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the eunuch replied, glancing back at the garden with an unreadable expression.

Was he finally turning on the cultivators?