

Starlit Path 199

Chapter 199: Can You Still Laugh, Your Majesty?

Luo Cheng trudged through the blizzard, carrying the white-robed girl on his back, each step bringing him closer to Beiluo City. Upon entering, city guards rushed to support him. Luo Yue, clad in battle armor, hurried from West Mountain, kicking up snow in his haste. Seeing Luo Cheng intact, without missing limbs, he breathed a sigh of relief. But his gaze soon shifted to the disheveled scholar and the spear-wielding youth trailing behind.

“This is Kong Nanfei, leader of the Haoran Sect,” Luo Cheng introduced, keeping it brief as he intended to take the girl to Beiluo Lake to find Lu.

Before he could take two steps, Lu’s voice echoed in his mind. On the snow-swept streets of Beiluo, Lu sat in his wheelchair, his white robes blending with the falling snow. Luo Cheng’s face lit up with excitement, a reaction that made Luo Yue, standing nearby, feel a twinge of jealousy. His son hadn’t been this thrilled to see his own father.

“Young Master, the girl stormed the imperial palace in the capital to rescue Jiang Li. She fought the black dragon and fell unconscious,” Luo Cheng reported urgently.

Lu’s sidelocks fluttered in the wind, his brows rising slightly. She had infiltrated the capital’s palace? The emperor’s Black Dragon Guards numbered nearly a thousand cultivators, and the black dragon, though flawed in its path, possessed Organ Tempering Realm strength. Yet she and Luo Cheng had escaped alive.

“The second transformation of the Nine Phoenix Art?” Lu mused, mildly surprised.

With a wave of his hand, the girl floated from Luo Cheng's back to hover before him. Lu pressed a finger to her brow, his spiritual sense probing her body before withdrawing. Her long lashes trembled, and her eyes fluttered open, still clouded with confusion. Seeing Lu, she jolted upright.

"Young... Young Master..." she stammered.

Lu nodded calmly. Her injuries weren't severe—just exhaustion from forcing a breakthrough. Rest would suffice.

In the distance, Kong Nanfei and his disciple Meng Haoran watched curiously. "Master, is that Beiluo's Young Master Lu?" Meng Haoran asked, tightening his grip on his silver spear.

Kong Nanfei brushed back his tangled hair and nodded. "They say Young Master Lu has a fierce temper, but he seems approachable enough," Meng Haoran remarked.

Kong Nanfei shot him a look. "It's an illusion."

The girl, now awake, remained cautious in Lu's presence, his enigmatic aura overwhelming her. "Focus on your cultivation," Lu said. "Your recent breakthrough left your foundation unstable. There's a tower on West Mountain—test yourself there."

He turned his wheelchair toward Beiluo Lake, the falling snow gradually obscuring his figure. The lakefront was quieter now, as most cultivators had flocked to West Mountain. Lu glided across the lake as if on solid ground, heading for Lakeheart Island. Little Yinglong poked its head from the water, flapping its wings and playfully splashing Lu. He patted its head, lingering briefly before ascending the island.

At the island's rear, Mo Tianyu sat before a simple tombstone, still keeping vigil. Lu, after a moment's thought, sent a message to Luo Yue to bring Kong Nanfei and his disciple to the island. Instead of heading to the White Jade Pavilion, Lu wheeled through the snow to a jade peach tree, its vibrant blossoms defying the winter chill.

Luo Yue led Kong Nanfei and Meng Haoran to the lake, where they boarded a small boat. Snow fell gently, lending the scene a serene charm. Meng Haoran's excitement was palpable—he was about to set foot on Lakeheart Island, the sacred heart of White Jade City, a pilgrimage site for cultivators.

The lake was shrouded in mist woven from spiritual energy, so dense it begged to be inhaled. "Sit and cultivate," Kong Nanfei instructed, rapping Meng Haoran's forehead. "Don't waste this rare environment."

Meng Haoran, who'd been gawking, clutched his head and sat cross-legged. Spiritual energy surged into him, startling Luo Yue. "This boy's talent is remarkable," Luo Yue remarked.

Kong Nanfei, leaning against the boat's side in his tattered robes, smiled faintly. "He's decent. A stray I picked up. His Qi Core holds eighteen strands."

Luo Yue froze. Eighteen strands? That was prodigious talent, a potential unmatched if he survived. As they reached the island, Meng Haoran peeked at the towering Dragon Gate above. "Is that the legendary Dragon Gate that ushered in the era of cultivators?" he whispered, face flushed with awe.

Kong Nanfei sighed at his disciple's wide-eyed wonder, though he couldn't deny the boy's inexperience. On the island, Meng Haoran marveled at the oversized, vibrant chrysanthemums and delicate peach blossoms. Luo Yue led them to Lu, who sat under the peach tree, toying with a blossom.

"Young Master," Luo Yue bowed.

Lu nodded, his gaze settling on Kong Nanfei. Once refined and courteous, the scholar was now disheveled, yet his carefree mindset had propelled his cultivation forward. "The Haoran Sect? Impressive," Lu said, twirling the peach blossom. Its emergence marked the beginning of a new era of contending schools.

His eyes shifted to Meng Haoran. "Eighteen strands in his Qi Core?" Lu's brows lifted. That was extraordinary—surpassing even the Overlord's fifteen and Li Sansi's sixteen. Still, Qi Core capacity meant little without breaking into Organ Tempering; otherwise, it was mere illusion.

Meng Haoran trembled under Lu's gaze, an invisible pressure making him unsteady. "Go. Mo Tianyu is at the island's rear," Lu said, dismissing them.

He plucked another blossom, rolling it between his fingers. Kong Nanfei, his eyes flickering with emotion, led the reluctant Meng Haoran away. After a few steps, Meng Haoran clutched his chest, panting. "Young Master Lu is terrifying, like a man-eating monster."

Under the peach tree, Lu's brow arched. He flicked the blossom, which vanished and reappeared above Meng Haoran, drifting down. A sudden force pressed Meng Haoran into the snow, face-first. Kong Nanfei's robes fluttered as he smirked. "Youth."

Meng Haoran scrambled up, silenced, and followed his master to the island's rear. The area was desolate, with Mo Tianyu sitting alone before a tombstone. "Tianyu," Kong Nanfei called.

Mo Tianyu, weathered by time, opened his eyes and froze at Kong Nanfei's transformed appearance. Kong Nanfei tapped Meng Haoran's head. "Call him Uncle-Master."

"Uncle-Master," Meng Haoran said promptly.

Mo Tianyu blinked, confused by the exchange. Kong Nanfei's gaze shifted to the Master's tomb, his expression complex. He knelt in the snow, silent, for a long time. Meng Haoran, unsure, mimicked him. The three sat in wordless stillness as snow fell, the wind's mournful howl weaving a somber elegy.

Jiang Li's alliance with Great Xuan sent ripples through the neutral factions. A military god, heir to the Soldier School's Bai Fengtian, Jiang Li had once led Great Zhou's elite to hold Yuan Chi City against North and West Counties. His joining Great Xuan was a game-changer, prompting wavering clans and powers to pledge allegiance.

In the Great Xuan camp, Dantai Xuan finally met Tang Xiansheng, who looked aged, as if half-stepping into the grave. "Greetings, King Beixuan," Tang said, rising with a smile and bowing.

Though Dantai Xuan disliked him, courtesy demanded he warmly assist the elderly man. "Prefect Tang, what brings you to our camp?" he asked.

Tang's weathered face creased with a smile. "Great Xuan's rise and march against Great Zhou—my congratulations, Your Majesty. May you triumph."

Dantai Xuan raised a brow but stayed silent. Tang was cunning, yet his intentions remained elusive. Initially wary, Dantai Xuan found Tang's visit lacked deceit. Tang pledged South County's support, offering a hundred South Manor troops, and discussed post-war arrangements for South County.

Dantai Xuan was bewildered. Tang seemed more confident in Great Xuan's victory than he was. After their talk, Tang bowed to leave. "Why?" Dantai Xuan called out, puzzled.

"Why?" Tang echoed, his face wistful. He recalled a rainy night when a cold youth had escorted him through the capital's streets, cutting a path to safety. Smiling, he shook his head. "Someone sought stability, so I must secure it for him."

Dantai Xuan watched as Tang's stooped figure coughed and boarded his carriage, vanishing into the snow. Had Tang been younger or not lost that battle, South County might have risen as a new state. But its defeat, Tang Baiyun's death, and Tang Xiansheng's near-fatal illness had sapped its ambition.

Dantai Xuan stood in the snow, exhaling deeply. A scout's shout broke the camp's calm. "Report!"

Generals emerged, Mo Ju and Jiang Li stepping out together. "Speak," Dantai Xuan commanded.

"Your Majesty, Xiliang's army has reached Wangtian and Tong'an Cities. The Overlord ordered an immediate assault on both!" the scout reported.

Gasps rippled through the generals. Mo Ju, in his crane-feather cloak, narrowed his eyes. Jiang Li shook his head, unsurprised. "That's the Overlord's way—swift and relentless."

Dantai Xuan burst into laughter. "That hothead Xiang Shaoyun never changes!"

Mo Ju stared, incredulous. "Your Majesty, can you still laugh? If the Overlord breaches the defensive cities and reaches the capital first, we lose the advantage. Clans and powers may defect, putting Great Xuan at a severe disadvantage."

Dantai Xuan's laughter faltered, replaced by an awkward cough. "The Overlord's been to White Jade City and knows its master well," Jiang Li said. "He's confident because White Jade City stays neutral unless Beiluo is attacked."

"So?" Mo Ju prompted.

"We race Xiliang," Jiang Li replied. "We compete to breach the defensive cities and reach the capital first."

The generals stirred, the falling snow feeling like sparks igniting their fervor. "Race?" Mo Ju repeated, his eyes gleaming.

“Race to outpace Xiliang, to capture the cities and claim the capital,” Jiang Li clarified. Though Great Xuan and Xiliang shared the goal of toppling Great Zhou, its collapse would split the realm between them. Whoever reached the capital first would hold the upper hand in the inevitable clash.