

Starlit Path 28

Chapter 28: Treading Over Lu Ping'an's Bones

Ning Zhao pursed her lips, a flicker of helplessness crossing her face, but she held back further protests. The young master's calm demeanor was a sure sign someone was about to regret crossing him. Still, she sharpened her vigilance. After the incident with Han Lianxiao, she'd adjusted her mindset. Unless she was dead, no one would lay a finger on the young master. His true strength remained a mystery to her, but as his guardian maid, his safety was her world.

At the edge of Beiluo Lake, a small dock harbored a few fishing boats. The lake teemed with plump, spotted bass, fetching up to two taels of silver for a fine catch—a delicacy prized by aristocratic families. At night, flower boats adorned with vibrant lanterns sailed from Drunken Dust Pavilion, transforming the lakeside into a lively hub of revelry and romance. By day, those boats docked at Lakeheart Island.

Ning Zhao secured a modest fishing boat, manned by an old boatman with a straw hat, his gap-toothed grin radiating simple honesty. The young master, seated in his wheelchair, was carefully lifted aboard by Ning Zhao and Nie Changqing. Once everyone was settled, the boatman plunged his slender pole into the water with a deft thrust, sending the boat gliding through the ripples.

Hooves thundered behind them. As the young master's boat drifted farther from shore, Chen Beixun, Liu Ye, and Zhu Yishan galloped up, reining in their horses to gaze at the departing vessel.

"He really went?" Liu Ye said, incredulous.

"With a first-rank grandmaster maid and a sixth-rank grandmaster charioteer, he's got the confidence," Chen Beixun replied, his beard fluttering in the breeze as he glanced at Liu Ye. Turning back to the misty lake, he stroked his beard thoughtfully. "But scholars thrive on romance. Those with titles but no prospects rely on Drunken Dust Pavilion to make their names through scandalous tales. Shutting it down will stir a hornet's nest. Even Lu Changkong would hesitate."

“As a scholar himself, if Lu Ping’an faces the wrath of Beiluo’s literati, he’ll be crushed—his spirit broken, his mind lost. A tragic fall into the lake would be... convenient. Even if Lu Changkong returns, he’d have no grounds to act.”

A sly smile curved beneath Chen Beixun’s beard, exuding calculated certainty. Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan’s eyes lit up. As heirs of aristocratic families, they were no fools.

“Brutal move, Beixun,” Zhu Yishan said with a grin. “With Lu Changkong gone to the capital, Lu Ping’an’s isolated. The scholars’ righteous indignation—our Confucian righteous qi—will overwhelm even grandmasters. Many of these scholars revere the Imperial Preceptor. If Lu Ping’an lets his grandmasters slaughter them, he’ll offend the Preceptor himself. It’s a no-win situation.”

“Scholars’ tongues cut deeper than swords,” Liu Ye added with a smirk.

Chen Beixun dismounted, gazing at the fog-shrouded lake. “Lu Ping’an’s grandmasters are no issue. The Sword Sect has its own. Lu Changkong thinks we won’t dare act, but he’s wrong. Times have changed. Today, we’ll step over Lu Ping’an’s corpse to show him...” He paused, his voice low. “The Sword Sect is ready to take the stage.”

With that, the trio boarded a small boat, its ripples trailing the young master’s vessel. They wouldn’t miss this spectacle.

The old boatman drove his pole into the water, startling fish beneath the surface. A cool, misty breeze swept over the lake, lifting the young master's hair in an elegant dance. Ni Yu, clutching the chessboard, clung to the boat's edge, tears and sniffles mixing as she fought seasickness, her dinner threatening to resurface.

Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao stood vigilant, hands on their weapons, scanning the misty lake. Their grandmaster instincts sensed danger lurking beneath the calm surface. The boatman, too, slowed his strokes, unease creeping into his weathered face.

"Keep going, old man," the young master said, propped on one hand, twirling a black chess piece in the other. "Double the silver."

The boatman hesitated, his wrinkled face torn. Then, flashing his gap-toothed grin, he said, "You're a straightforward lad." He resumed poling, breaking into a bold local folk song to steady his nerves, its melody echoing hauntingly across the lake.

The young master glanced at him, his thumb tapping the chess piece lightly. Lakeheart Island wasn't large, a circular disk roughly ten li in diameter, half-covered in blooming peach trees, their pink petals vibrant against the misty backdrop. Drunken Dust Pavilion stood alone, its six-story tower adorned with red walls, upturned eaves, and glazed tiles. Red lanterns hung from each floor, gauzy scarlet drapes fluttering, exuding decadent allure.

The young master squinted. His physical strength, now at 1, had sharpened his vision. He could make out the courtesans crowding each floor—some twirling handkerchiefs, others with painted faces, a few hiding behind round fans—giggling and jostling as they watched his approaching boat.

Nie Changqing remained stoic. Ning Zhao frowned, muttering, “Shameless.” Ni Yu, still seasick, could only groan.

The young master returned the chess piece to its box, interlacing his fingers over the wool blanket, his expression growing serious. Through the mist, one flower boat after another emerged—over twenty in all, nearly the pavilion’s entire fleet. His brow arched.

The boatman, alarmed, plunged his pole to halt the boat. Grand, ornate flower boats, far more lavish than their weathered vessel, cut through the fog. On each stood Confucian scholars in long robes and jade crowns, their expressions ranging from righteous fury to cold disdain as they glared at the young master’s party.

“Young Master Lu,” one called, “Liu and Zhu claim you intend to seize Drunken Dust Pavilion for yourself and dismiss its women. Is this true?”

“Lu Ping’an, we scholars act with justice in our hearts. What crime has the pavilion committed? Just because your legs fail you in matters of romance, you’d destroy it?”

“Righteousness prevails, and justice lies with the people. Even courtesans have dignity in their profession. Your actions would cast them out, ruin their lives—an act of villainy!”

“We won’t stand for it!”

From the boats, over a hundred scholars stood defiant, their voices ringing with conviction, stirring gulls into flight. Their collective glare bore down on the young master’s boat.

Miles behind, Chen Beixun, Liu Ye, and Zhu Yishan stood on their own boat, trailing at a distance, their eyes gleaming with anticipation. The sight of a hundred scholars confronting Lu Ping'an was the culmination of their overnight scheming, and it thrilled them. The humiliation they'd endured at the Lu manor felt avenged.

Chen Beixun stroked his beard, his smile smug. "These scholars, though titled, are frustrated men seeking fame through the pavilion's scandals. They know we're pulling the strings, yet they dive in willingly. Reputation is everything to them."

Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan grinned. Beiluo's broader power might have slipped from their families' grasp, but Lu Ping'an's audacity in targeting their assets would cost him dearly. They were eager to see how the crippled young master would respond.

On the fishing boat, facing the spectacle, the young master smiled. Nie Changqing's calloused hand rested on his butcher's knife—a blade that felled pigs and men alike, especially the unreasonable. Ning Zhao's face paled with anger. Scholars could be both irrational and eloquently unjust, she thought bitterly. The young master had ordered her to ensure the pavilion's women were cared for after its closure, yet these accusations twisted his intent.

She opened her mouth to retort but found herself speechless against the torrent of scholarly rhetoric. The young master patted her waist gently, his smile radiant. "Don't get mad," he said. "You know I'm good with people."

Turning to the scholars, his smile faded. "But with fools... that's another story."