

STARLIT PATH OF THE MYSTIC FORGE

Chapter 3: The Touch of Immortality

Lu's mischievous grin made Ning Zhao's cheeks flush, her breath quickening as if caught in a fleeting moment of romance.

"Ni Yu, close the door and stand guard," Lu said, taking a deep breath.

Ni Yu nodded, scurrying to the door. She shut it, bolted it, and pressed her small frame against it. Ning Zhao and the other maid, Yi Yue, exchanged puzzled glances at Lu's unusual request.

Lu's gaze settled on Ning Zhao, his expression turning serious, casting an inexplicable pressure over the three maids.

"My father says I can trust you," Lu said, tapping the armrest of his wheelchair.

Ning Zhao's face shifted. She set down the scroll she'd been rolling and replied earnestly, "Master entrusted us with your care and safety. Ning Zhao, Yi Yue, and Ni Yu are yours in life and death!"

Ni Yu, still pressed against the door, nodded vigorously, her face flushed with determination. Yi Yue, the fox-faced maid with a whip at her waist, echoed the sentiment with a nod.

Lu raised an eyebrow, surprised by their fervent response. He knew his father had rescued these maids from dire circumstances and raised them with unwavering loyalty. Smiling to lighten the mood, he said, "No need to be so serious. I just have a secret to share."

With a steadyng breath, he pushed himself out of the wheelchair, standing slowly. Ni Yu, who had already seen Lu wiggle his toes with flair, remained calm. But Ning Zhao and Yi Yue froze, stunned. Having tended to Lu daily, they were shocked to learn his legs had healed without their notice.

Lu stood briefly before his legs wobbled, and he sat back down. He slipped off his ornate boots and socks, revealing his feet, and wiggled them with a playful smile. Ni Yu's face reddened—she recognized this cheeky side of him.

“Master... your legs are healed?” Ning Zhao asked, her voice trembling with excitement as she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She was genuinely thrilled. Lu’s disability had haunted him, a shadow over his heart. Many nights, she’d heard his muffled sobs through the door.

“This stays between us and my father,” Lu said, slipping his boots back on with a smile. “You three are the only ones who know.”

Then, turning to Ning Zhao, he asked, “Sister Ning, do you practice martial arts?”

She nodded, unsurprised by the question. Lu’s father trusted her to protect him, implying her skill. “Master, do you wish to train in martial arts?” she asked, noting that his recovery might spark such an interest, though his age made mastery unlikely.

“How are martial arts ranked?” Lu pressed.

Ning Zhao explained, “In the Great Zhou Dynasty, martial arts are divided into three tiers, excluding untrained fighters: Second-Rate, First-Rate, and Grandmaster.”

Lu listened intently. The Five Phoenixes Continent, though a low-martial world, had its own structured system.

“Martial artists train from youth, specializing in external or internal techniques,” Ning Zhao continued. “External techniques forge a body of steel, ideal for battlefield generals. Internal techniques refine blood circulation, strengthening organs and stamina. Neither is superior—both can produce Grandmasters.”

She paused, seeing Lu’s rapt attention. “Second-Rate fighters can take on five opponents, First-Rate can handle ten, and Grandmasters… a hundred are no match.”

Yi Yue and Ni Yu listened, equally engrossed. Lu nodded, impressed by the system’s clarity despite the absence of spiritual energy.

“And you, Sister Ning? What’s your level?” he asked curiously.

Ning Zhao’s lips curved into a proud smile. “Under Master’s rigorous training, I’ve reached First-Rate,” she said, her humility betrayed by her confident tone. At twenty-four or twenty-five, her skill was remarkable for a maid.

Yi Yue, biting her lip, added, “I’m only Second-Rate, Master.”

Ni Yu, still guarding the door, offered no comment—her role was more mascot than martial artist.

Lu clapped, delighted. “Perfect.” This was the opportunity to test his Spiritual Energy Deployment ability.

Turning to Ning Zhao, he asked, “Sister Ning, have you heard of ‘spiritual energy’?”

She blinked, her expression puzzled. “Master, martial arts demand hard work, sweat, and talent—whether external or internal. Spiritual energy is a myth, a tale from ancient legends. We martial artists don’t believe in it.” She shook her head with a smile.

“Oh? You don’t believe?” Lu’s eyebrow arched. He turned to Yi Yue. “What about you?”

Yi Yue smiled softly and shook her head. “You’re teasing, Master.”

Lu’s lips twitched with amusement. He glanced at Ni Yu. “And you, Ni Yu? Do you believe in spiritual energy?”

Her eyes sparkled, her face like a ripe apple. “If Master says it exists, it does!” she declared.

Lu chuckled—Ni Yu’s enthusiasm was endearing, if a bit naive. Ning Zhao and Yi Yue exchanged exasperated looks.

His smile faded. “Aren’t you curious how my legs healed?”

The maids’ curiosity was palpable. A seventeen-year affliction vanishing defied reason.

“Sister Ning, come closer,” Lu said.

Ning Zhao stepped forward. Lu began, “This disability tormented me for seventeen years, a burden on my mind. But one day, in a dream, I wandered

vast realms and met an immortal. He said I was destined for greatness and blessed me.”

“The immortal touched my crown, infusing me with spiritual energy, clearing my blocked meridians, and healing my legs,” Lu said, his tone serene, almost believing his own tale. He gently took Ning Zhao’s calloused hand, evidence of her martial training.

Her cheeks flushed at his touch, but she dismissed his story as fanciful. Immortals? Pure fantasy.

Then, her expression froze. Yi Yue gasped, equally stunned.

Lu placed his palm over Ning Zhao’s, a faint blue glow shimmering between them. A breeze stirred, fluttering the room’s curtains.

“Activate Permission: [Spiritual Energy Deployment],” Lu thought. “Target: Ning Zhao.”

A hum resonated. Ning Zhao’s face flushed—not from embarrassment but from a strange force flowing from Lu’s palm into her body. Her pores opened,

her blood—honed by internal techniques—surged like boiling water, threatening to overwhelm her.

“Guide it with your mind, direct it to your dantian,” Lu said calmly, his hair swaying in the breeze.

Ning Zhao’s legs trembled, a soft gasp nearly escaping, but her eyes blazed with focus. Following his guidance, she tamed the serpentine energy, settling it into her dantian.

Lu released her hand. Ning Zhao stumbled back, the floor tiles cracking beneath her steps. Her blood roared, catalyzed by the energy, her body resonating with a sound like ringing bells.

Yi Yue’s jaw dropped. “Resonant body... a Grandmaster!”

Grandmasters were rare in the Great Zhou Dynasty. Yi Yue’s mind echoed with Lu’s words: *“The immortal touched my crown, infusing me with spiritual energy...”*

Could Lu truly have been touched by an immortal?

But Lu, having deployed a strand of spiritual energy, was distracted. A system prompt flashed before him:

“Congratulations, Host, for successfully deploying the first strand of spiritual energy, creating the first cultivator. [Missions] Permission unlocked. Transformation Reward granted...”