

## Starlit Path 301

Chapter 301: Nine-Zhang Dragon Qi, Emperor of Mortals

A gentle breeze stirred the air.

The Origin Lake hovered above North Luo Lake, its dense primal essence pulsing with mysterious ripples.

Lu sat enthroned on the Thousand-Blade Chair, one hand propping his chin, the other idly caressing a jade-smooth ring.

The sudden birth of a spatial ring had blindsided even him. He'd only meant to tinker with a teleportation array—yet stumbled into forging a storage artifact instead.

A happy accident.

Storage artifacts were priceless. No ordinary spirit tool could match their convenience or hidden value.

And the heart of any storage ring? Space.

For a first attempt, Lu's arrays were flawless in pattern yet fragile in stability. The pocket inside measured a modest thirty square feet—barely a small bedroom.

Hardly room for a dragon's hoard.

But space could be expanded, day by day, until the ring swallowed mountains.

Lu had even sealed his Bone Nether Flame inside. The ring now thrummed with newborn awareness.

"Let's call you... the Nether Profound Ring."

"System, grade it as a spirit tool."

A panel blossomed across his vision.

> Nether Profound Ring: Mid-grade Profound-tier

> Functions: Stores inanimate objects · Houses spirits · Expandable void · Upgradable...

Mid-grade Profound. The system didn't stint.

Lu had considered dropping the ring into the Nine Hells Secret Realm as rare loot.

He shelved the thought.

Even top Tianyuan powers lacked storage tools. One public explosion of such a treasure would spark continent-wide carnage. Nascent Soul tyrants would tear the earth apart to claim it.

Better to wait until the Five Phoenixes world leveled up. For now, the ring stayed on his thumb.

He drew a slow breath, attention sliding from the ring into the whirlpool of his soul.

The stele stood at the vortex's heart, blazing like a captive star.

“Third-sequence Intent...”

Lu's eyes glinted.

Overlord's Unyielding Intent, fused with Lu's own Soul-Shatter Intent—what would emerge?

Before, Soul-Shatter had swallowed every lesser Intent whole. But Unyielding outranked it. The fusion would birth something new.

Lu sank deeper. The stele's runes shifted.

> Lu · Third-sequence · Annihilation Intent

His brow furrowed.

Annihilation?

Soul-Shatter plus Unyielding equals Annihilation?

Why?

On White Jade Capital's tower, Lu closed his eyes.

Overlord had only just stepped into Heaven Lock.

Lu could fold Du Longyang like paper.

Same sequence, worlds-apart power.

Boom!

Little Yinglong, frolicking in the Origin Lake, froze. Dread crawled up his spine.

He poked his head above water and gaped at the sky.

Black clouds boiled. Violet lightning stitched the heavens, reeking of utter ruin.

The little dragon went rigid.

Lu sensed the terror, exhaled, and let the Intent dissolve.

Annihilation was strong—stronger than fourth-sequence—but dense with secrets. Mastering it would demand sweat and time.

Yet the upgrade sharpened his divine sense. Soul mass unchanged, soul quality transformed.

Best of all: Annihilation Intent accelerated his absorption of the Tianyuan essence he'd fused.

Lu glanced at the shivering dragonling and sighed.

He pinched the scruff of its neck, tossed it skyward.

The Dragon Gate yawned wide. Yinglong tumbled through like a rubber ball.

Beyond the gate, a graceful silhouette waited atop a peak. She dipped her head.

“Train him properly,” Lu called. “No more playtime.”

Zhu Long’s lashes fluttered; dimples bloomed.

Little Yinglong landed beside Big Sister and instantly felt the temperature plunge.

...

North County, Great Xuan.

Tan Taixuan stood alone on a mountain crest, hands clasped behind his back, gazing at the lantern-lit Xuan Academy below.

No guards. He had sent them away.

Mo Beike was lecturing inside.

The future of Great Xuan felt foggy.

Immortal encounters slipped through his fingers, yet he refused despair. He'd handed the Dao Tear to Mo Ju.

He trusted Mo Ju completely—never once doubted the man's loyalty. Employ the worthy, suspect no one.

He knew Mo Ju was the Teacher's hidden piece.

He simply didn't care. He admired the Teacher. Planting a mole so deep it became a confidant? That deserved respect.

Tan Taixuan believed Mo Ju would bleed for Great Xuan's tomorrow.

Wind teased his robes. Lanterns glowed. Children's voices drifted upward—bright, eager, alive.

The future.

Then the night shivered.

Tan Taixuan's head snapped south.

Gold mist surged across the dark, a living tide.

Inside the academy, Mo Beike's heavy lids lifted. Wrinkles rearranged into a grin.

Tan Taixuan's cheek twitched.

"Dynastic Dragon Qi?"

Aura exploded from his spine—imperial, absolute.

The golden tide answered, roaring down to merge with his own.

Nine zhang of dragon qi reared behind him, tail lashing the sky.

“Nine zhang... imperial dragon qi!”

Shock, then wonder.

“What happened to Overlord? Why did the dragon qi abandon him?”

Something seismic.

Tan Taixuan ducked into his wooden hut, lifted the broken Emperor Dragon Seal.

The jagged scar across its face... was knitting itself whole. New jade grew from thin air, seamless, mythical.

He stumbled outside, cradling the seal, and sat beneath the paling sky.

A ribbon of dawn-purple qi drifted from the east, slipped into the seal.

His soul ignited.

Boom!

Visions flooded:

Farmers bent over rice. Soldiers on frostbitten walls. Scholars chanting under lamps.

Then the flip side—refugees, drowning children, drought-cracked lips.

His skull threatened to burst.

Xuanwu Guards streaked through the night, drawn by the pressure.

Mo Beike hobbled uphill on his bamboo staff.

Tan Taixuan sat radiant. A five-clawed golden dragon coiled behind him, gazing down with sorrowful mercy.

The guards dropped to their knees, unable to draw nearer.

Mo Beike laughed until tears shone. He flung away his staff, robes flapping, and kowtowed.

“Long live Your Majesty.”

Two puzzled guards followed suit.

From this dawn forward, Tan Taixuan was no longer merely king.

He was Emperor of Mortals.

...

Overlord had renounced the throne.

He severed his dragon qi without hesitation and chose the lonely path of cultivation.

Losing the qi meant losing the mandate.

He felt no regret.

Dynastic qi was a chain. An emperor must carry every commoner's ache. How could a heart split between ten thousand sorrows and the Dao ever climb the summit?

So he cut the chain.

Wolong Ridge Secret Realm.

Overlord exhaled. Confidence flooded back into his face.

He sat before the stele, polishing his Intent.

Bones cracked like war drums.

Hours later he rose, strode out, and stood alone beneath the tribulation clouds.

Word spread. Crowds gathered at a safe distance.

This tribulation was spectacle.

Overlord reclaimed his old swagger.

Heaven Lock realm, yet he met lightning bare-chested.

First bolt—blood sprayed, flesh split.

Wounds sealed in heartbeats. He flipped the heavens the middle finger.

Second bolt—he still refused spirit qi, taking it on muscle and bone.

The ground cratered. Overlord stood in the pit, blood dripping, grinning.

Three bolts, all on raw meat.

Onlookers' jaws dropped.

Overlord had become a monster.

On the hillside, Liu Yuanhao's face darkened.

Fists clenched until knuckles popped.

No chance left.

A Heaven Lock Overlord was despair incarnate. Liu Yuanhao lingered in Body Storage—how could he compete?

Black Dragon Cult's schemes crumbled to dust.

Pressure crushed his chest.

He turned, fled to the Nine Hells gate, and stepped into the First Prison.

He would grow stronger.

His Intent gave him an edge. He would surpass them all.

Overlord bathed in origin feedback, fire tempering his spine.

Time dripped.

His aura swelled like a waking volcano.

Du Longyang and the Empress watched briefly, then returned to their own steles.

Third-sequence was merely the seed. They meant to force the bloom.

...

First Prison Gate.

Kong Nanfei materialized outside Qin Guang City.

The grim jailer stared down, iron collar floating.

“Back again.”

Kong Nanfei flashed a roguish grin, flicked his tattered robes, crooked a finger.

Ten heartbeats later the grin was gone.

Soul lashes flayed him—one after another—trying to rip spirit from flesh.

Agony refined him. His golden core condensed; divine sense sharpened.

“Eighty-nine!”

“Ninety!”

The jailer’s stone face twitched.

At ninety-nine, Kong Nanfei’s eyes rolled white.

Still he endured.

One hundredth lash—

The world flipped. Ice water closed over his head.

Chapter 302: Spirit Qi Fully Cashed In!

The soul-freezing cold was colder than any flesh could bear; it was pain carved straight into the spirit.

Kong Nanfei had no idea why Qin Guang City existed, or what those soul-lashes were meant to forge.

But one thing he knew for certain: every impact hammered his divine sense into steel. His very soul grew denser, tougher, brighter.

The plunge into that frozen pool had stolen time itself.

When the world finally thawed, Kong Nanfei snapped open his eyes and sucked down air like a drowning man.

He stood atop the city wall, one step from the stone-faced jailer.

“I... made it.”

A hundred lashes endured.

He had set foot inside the City of the Dead: Qin Guang City.

The triumph tasted like ash.

First gate of the Nine Hells, and already this brutal?

Then the palace gates deep inside the city yawned open.

A pressure thick as doom rolled out. Kong Nanfei's soul quivered.

Within the gloom, a ten-zhang titan sat enthroned. Every wandering soul looked like ants before him.

"Qin Guang King, Lord of this city," the jailer intoned with rare reverence.

The distant sovereign's gaze pinned Kong Nanfei. A voice like bronze bells tolled—words he couldn't parse.

A massive palm lifted. A violet crystal drifted forth, warm as heartbeat.

Kong Nanfei caught it. First purple spirit crystal ever awarded.

He bowed, palms clasped. “Many thanks, Your Majesty.”

The gates boomed shut. The mountain of pressure vanished.

Under the jailer’s guidance he entered the city proper.

At its heart rose a towering stele etched with names.

“Your rankings in the Nine Hells,” the jailer said. “First to reach Qin Guang City earns an extra prize.”

“Each challenger walks a private layer of hell; you rarely meet. Only here, inside the city, do paths converge.”

The jailer melted into shadow.

Compared to the ghost village, the city thrummed. Specters haggled, strutted, groveled—death had not erased class.

Kong Nanfei ignored the bustle, sat cross-legged, and studied the stele.

> Kong Nanfei — Progress: Complete — Rank 1

He grinned—then the list updated.

> Feng Yilou — Complete — Rank 2

> Zhong Nan — Complete — Rank 3

Two heartbeats later and he'd nearly been shoved to third.

Nie Changqing locked fourth; Condensing Zhao was overtaken by Xiao Yue'er.

The city gates thundered open.

Kong Nanfei squinted through tatters of scholar robes.

Figures poured in, each one a furnace of power.

A violet-robed spearman blazed like noon. Yang qi rolled off him, crushing the city's gloom.

Feng Yilou.

Next came a black-shirted knife-bearer, blade short, aura razor-long.

Zhong Nan, Absolute Blade Sect, top of the Tianyuan Human Roll.

Feng Yilou's lips curled. "I beat you here, knife-boy."

Zhong Nan's reply was a glance—cold, wordless—then his eyes slid to Kong Nanfei.

"First place yours?"

Kong Nanfei gave a lazy shrug.

Steel sang. Zhong Nan drew.

Invisible knife qi carved furrows across stone.

Feng Yilou stepped back, smiling like a spectator at a cockfight.

Before steel kissed flesh, jailers erupted from the ground, chains rattling.

“No fighting in the city.”

“Penalty: soul-branding.”

Zhong Nan snarled, “Scram!”

Eight-turn golden core flared. Knife light shattered chains into sparks.

He was strong—stronger than any jailer.

Then hooves of bone thundered.

A war chariot wreathed in ghost-blue flame charged, pulled by skeletal steeds.

The Warden-Captain had arrived.

Zhong Nan's scalp prickled. Nascent Soul pressure locked him like crosshairs.

Instead of fear, ecstasy lit his face.

He leveled his short blade and roared.

Spear met knife.

No contest.

The blue-flame lance punched through Zhong Nan's chest, pinned him to the street, dragged him three hundred meters through his own blood.

The Warden swept one indifferent glance and wheeled away.

Chains descended. Zhong Nan's screams echoed as his soul sizzled on invisible irons.

Feng Yilou and Kong Nanfei swallowed hard.

More challengers flooded in—Nie Changqing among them.

Kong Nanfei waved, relieved to see a friendly face.

Every newcomer was a stranger, and every stranger was golden-core terrifying.

“When did the world breed so many monsters?” Kong Nanfei muttered.

...

Lake-Heart Island, North Luo.

Lu propped his chin, lines of light dancing across his pupils.

He watched Qin Guang City’s drama unfold.

“They’re finally meeting... Five Phoenixes talents still lag behind Tianyuan’s prodigies.”

“But pressure forges diamonds.”

He had banned fighting in the city.

Now he changed the rule.

With a thought he sank into the Preaching Platform and sculpted a new zone: the Hell Pit.

Entry fee: one blue spirit crystal.

Death inside: all crystals confiscated, banished for three days, progress reset.

Cruel? Yes.

Effective? Absolutely.

Satisfied, Lu ignored the storm he'd unleashed and returned to the Thousand-Blade Chair.

Across from him hovered the black-robed Demon Lord, hair and cloak whipping in phantom wind.

Lu produced the Spirit Pressure Board from the Nether Profound Ring.

Black and white stones clacked.

Time slipped away like sand.

Outside, Du Longyang, the Empress, and the rest honed their Intent beneath the steles—each day stronger, each breath deeper.

Wolong Ridge had become the world's crucible.

Inside the Nine Hells, two camps crystallized: Tianyuan prodigies versus Five Phoenixes natives.

Peace lasted until a Tianyuan hotshot taunted Overlord.

They paid the fee, entered the Hell Pit, and fought.

Overlord—Dual-Pole Heaven Lock—beat a fifth-turn golden core to death with his bare fists.

The corpse vanished in light, crystals raining into the system's coffers.

Tianyuan's camp exploded.

War was declared without words.

No one rushed the second gate. Everyone wanted the purple-crystal prize for first entry.

When Kong Nanfei crushed his violet reward, a Dao stele crashed from the heavens, gifting him enlightenment time.

The city emptied in a stampede toward the Second Prison.

Two months blurred past.

Outside, the continent stayed quiet.

Xiliang and Great Xuan honored White Jade Capital's wager—no large wars, only border scuffles.

Great Xuan boomed under Tan Taixuan's nine-zhang dragon qi.

Xiliang held steady with Luo Mingsang's steady hand.

Body Storage cultivators multiplied; any power without them lost its voice.

But the greatest change belonged to White Jade Capital.

Spring rain fell like silk.

Ripples danced across the Origin Lake.

Lu sat atop the tower, two months of chess behind him.

Every game with the Demon Lord had scraped away impatience, leaving only calm.

The final stone fell—tengen.

A pebble dropped into the lake of his soul.

Ripples.

A golden line surfaced:

> Congratulations, Host.

> Early completion bonus triggered.

> Spirit Qi cashed in: 96,100 strands.

Chapter 303: The Silent System, Qi Refining Fifth Layer

A single line of gold pulsed before Lu's eyes.

He was calm.

His heart was a windless lake.

He had known this moment was coming. For two months he had played nothing but "Yin-Yang Endgames," forging his soul, mastering the Tianyuan essence he'd siphoned. Ten months of work—finished in sixty days.

Efficiency through the roof.

Lu leaned against the Thousand-Blade Chair, rain-soft wind kissing his face. He tucked the Spirit Pressure Board into the Nether Profound Ring and let the spring drizzle cool his skin.

With a thought, the system panel unfolded.

Host: Lu

Title: Qi Refiner (Permanent)

Qi Layer: 4 (Progress: 30,236 / 100,000 strands)

Soul Strength: 1,120 (1,000 available → Soul Sense +10)

Body Strength: 1,100 (1,010 available → Divine Demon Blood +8)

Strands: 21,793

Spirit Liquid: 3 drops

Condense Mind: 5

Pending Cash-In: 96,100 strands

World Tier: Five Phoenixes [Mid Martial]

Tools: Spirit Pressure Board, Phoenix Plume Swords ×5

Arts: Heaven-Toppling Gambit, Mind Condensing

Free Points: 2,083

“Cash in.”

The word left his lips like a pebble into still water.

Everything changed.

Spirit qi roared into him—tidal, molten, endless.

His dantian ballooned.

His mind thundered.

His soul screamed.

Pain.

First time in forever.

The Thousand-Blade Chair groaned beneath the pressure.

Far below, Wolong Ridge.

Four pairs of eyes snapped open.

Du Longyang's throat went dry.

“Land of immortals... is that Young Master Lu?”

Ye Shoudao swallowed. “Only one direction fits.”

They shot skyward, streaking toward North Luo City.

Ten thousand meters up, the Origin Lake churned. Energy thick enough to chew cloaked the island.

Lu ignored the onlookers.

He was busy not exploding.

Ninety-six thousand strands slammed home.

Crack—

Layer Four shattered.

Layer Five bloomed.

One hundred thousand strands.

A qualitative leap.

He exhaled.

The breath carved the air, split space, left a black fissure hissing with annihilation.

Du Longyang's group arrived just in time to feel their knees buckle.

"Above Infant Transformation?" the Empress whispered.

No one answered.

They couldn't.

The Origin Lake rose higher—fifteen thousand meters—until the air thinned and frost glittered on the rails.

Lu sat alone, white robes snapping, surveying the continent like a bored god.

Time to dust off an old quest.

“Make the world forget White Jade Capital.”

The Nine Hells Secret Realm would birth Nascent Souls by the dozen.

Crystal legacies—pill, weapon, divination—waited for lucky hands.

Tianyuan prodigies brought fire and new ideas.

Dao steles promised a ceiling higher than Tianyuan’s wildest dreams.

Everything was in place.

White Jade Capital had shepherded the age of cultivation.

Now it was a lid on the pot.

Time to vanish.

Let the world boil.

Lu lifted a hand.

Divine sense vanished from four Infant Transformation hearts; they couldn't even see his silhouette anymore.

Du Longyang's confidence curdled.

Four of them together?

One slap.

High above, thunder growled—yet the sky stayed blue.

Golden arcs danced between invisible clouds.

“Thunder tribulation... from beyond the world,” Lu murmured.

He had faced tribulation before—world-born, trivial.

This one came from outside the Five Phoenixes.

Unbound.

Unforgiving.

Boom!

A golden sun detonated overhead.

Across the continent, mortals looked up and saw a second sun blaze for half a day.

Space twisted.

Every bolt carried doomsday weight.

Du Longyang's group saw only intermittent solar flares.

Then—silence.

The lake stilled.

The island drifted in perfect calm.

Lu sat unchanged, as if he'd merely finished a quiet game.

"Still alive?" Ye Shoudao croaked.

"Alive and bored," Lu answered—though only the wind heard.

A slit tore open the firmament.

Radiance rained—not world-origin, something vaster.

It poured into his flesh, his soul, his marrow.

“System, what is this?”

No answer.

The system crouched, aura locked tight, playing dead.

Lu’s eyes flashed.

Hiding.

Afraid.

Afraid of the light—or what stood behind it.

A wild idea sparked.

If the light was precious...

Why not drink the tap dry?

His soul vortex spun.

Suction erupted.

The sky answered with greater force.

His soul stretched, yanked upward into starless void.

He rose, rose—until something vast and ancient noticed.

A wall slammed down.

His vortex gulped anyway, stealing mouthfuls of cosmic marrow.

One glimpse: jeweled mega-worlds, radiant, terrifying.

Then a boot to the soul.

He crash-landed in his body, lips smacking.

“Stingy.”

The rift sealed.

The system peeked out, trembling.

> Skyscrapers rise from flat ground.

> Congratulations, Host—Qi Refining Fifth Layer.

> Spirit Qi: 100,000 strands.

Lu rolled his eyes.

“Welcome back, coward.”

Chapter 304: Soaring Strength, Overjoyed Leviathan

> “Skyscrapers rise from flat ground. Congratulations, Host—Qi Refining Fifth Layer.

> Rewards: Phoenix Plume Swords ×3 · Random Spirit Plant Seed ×1 · Avatar Fruit ×1.”

> “Fifth Layer unlocked: Spirit Qi projection range expanded · Passive recovery boosted (Qi, soul, body) · Offensive Art: Stele-Suppressing Palm.”

The system babbled like a kid who’d just escaped the principal’s office.

Lu reclined against the Thousand-Blade Chair, half-listening.

His mind was elsewhere—on the sudden clarity behind his eyes, on the way one strand of new Qi now weighed as much as ten old ones.

He curled a fist.

Air folded like paper, space dented translucent.

Raw flesh alone matched his former blood-empowered peak.

He exhaled a needle-thin strand.

It hung before him—heavy mercury, humming with ruin.

One flick and the void moaned.

“Strong,” he tasted the word, grinning.

If the High Martial Buddha showed up now, a single strand would pin its will to the floor.

Rewards? Routine.

Phoenix Plume Swords—now eight.

He summoned them.

Eight crimson streaks overlapped mid-heaven, phoenix cries shaking clouds, until they locked into a single broken blade—two feet eight inches, tip missing.

One or two more and the set would be whole.

The half-sword thrummed; space tore like silk at its edge.

Earth-tier, easy.

He flicked the blade.

It sang, flame-forged, then slid home into the chair's armrests—silver chair now ribboned with living scarlet.

Next, the seed.

One lonely pine cone, glassy, pulsing.

He brushed the island.

A mountain erupted beneath White Jade Capital—raw, bald, ugly.

Sky-Reaching Chrysanthemums shrank.

Blue Luan Peaches blushed and folded.

“Share the dirt,” Lu said.

Flowers bobbed.

Peach petals unfurled—yes, sir.

The pine cone arced, buried itself halfway up the slope.

Grass raced outward, wildflowers bloomed, the island exhaled green.

A tender pine twisted skyward, claiming the hillside in hours.

Lu flashed beneath it, conjured a stone go board, laid out the River-and-Mountains Game, then left the last stone hovering—unfinished, eternal.

Lake-Heart Island was alive.

Only then did he weigh the final prize.

Avatar Fruit: High Martial wonder.

Born beneath the Ten-Thousand-Year Treasure Tree.

One bite—one real second self.

Independent will, separate fate, another lifetime of cultivation.

The fruit looked like a sleeping infant carved from dawn.

Lu heard phantom giggles.

“Finally, a jackpot.”

...

Tianyuan Continent, Demon Domain—once glorious, now ossuary.

Lion Demon King sat on sun-bleached rock, ribs showing, mane dull.

Behind him, great demons reduced to house-cat size.

Heaven Demon Pagoda—cracked, ordinary, empty.

He shuffled inside, chains crumbling to rust.

Lay on cold stone.

Alone.

Memories of chasing humans across skies.

Laughter.

Roars.

Soon he'd devolve into a regular lion and be eaten by wolves.

A breeze stirred dead fur.

Human Qi!

He bolted upright, eyes blazing.

Above—starless black—a continent the size of heaven itself descended, slow, inevitable.

A bald monk in vermilion robes stepped off the edge, smiling kindly, golden staff chiming.

“Amitabha.

A withered world, yet one old lion clings to life.

Good karma.

Be my mount.”

Lion Demon King roared, emaciated frame exploding with leftover pride.

“Shove your karma, bald donkey!

Your kind ruined me!”

He lunged.

The staff fell.

Crack—skull split, blood painted the monk’s grin.

Golden rings sang, bound the lion, dragged him skyward.

The wandering continent rolled on, crushing lesser worlds like bubbles.

...

Lake-Heart Island.

Lu sipped plum wine, wind teasing white sleeves.

Time to vanish White Jade Capital.

Key asset: one cowardly whale.

He glanced at Zhu Long and Little Yinglong meditating below, at the four Infant Transformation cultivators tiptoeing onto the island like guilty cats.

Ignored them.

Closed his eyes.

Thirty thousand meters down, East Sea.

The leviathan hugged darkness, pretending to sleep.

Human call? What call?

Lu smiled—gentle, terrifying.

Fingers tapped the armrest.

Eight phoenix swords shot eastward.

**BOOM!**

A mountain of water exploded.

A continent-sized whale breached, tail wagging like a golden retriever, rocketing inland.

Joyful song echoed for a thousand li.

Only the eight crimson swords kissing its belly kept the smile honest.

Chapter 305: Three Spirits Realm, Island-Bearing Immortal Whale

A lazy breeze combed the Origin Lake into silver ripples.

Lake-Heart Island drifted half-veiled in mist, as though it might dissolve into the sky at any moment.

Du Longyang's group stepped onto fresh grass, blinking.

Yesterday the ground had been naked stone; today it looked like spring had exploded overnight.

High on White Jade Capital's tower, Lu rolled down the ramp in his chair, white robes fluttering.

"Young Master Lu."

"Brother Lu!"

The four voices overlapped—respect, awe, and a touch of nerves.

Du Longyang couldn't hold it in. "Did you... break through Infant Transformation?"

Leaf Blade added gravely, "What lies above?"

Lu's smile was gentle, almost sleepy.

He didn't deny it.

Four hearts skipped.

They had clawed their way past despair for this exact threshold—yet here stood the trailblazer.

Du Longyang bowed so low his forehead nearly kissed the grass.

“Please, Young Master—tell us the realm beyond.”

Lu tapped the armrest.

The whale would take another minute.

He had time to invent a future.

He had already invented most of the cultivation ladder—Qi Condensation, Body Storage, Heaven Lock, Nascent Soul.

Now he sketched the next three rungs with the same casual certainty.

“After Infant Transformation, you no longer polish flesh.

You polish the spirit.

Three stages—Three Spirits Realm.”

He spoke, and the air itself listened.

1. Yin Spirit: a nine-petaled lotus blooming in the soul’s depths.

2. Yang Spirit: a golden sprite that can leave the body and slay souls unseen.

3. Origin Spirit: nine steps across lotus petals, Yin and Yang fused into one immortal core.

He conjured illusions with a wave—lotus, sprite, fused light—then let them fade.

“Balance three corners: divine sense, blood-qi, Dao Intent.

Tip one and you stall forever.”

Silence swallowed the island.

Zhu Long opened her eyes, aura deeper.

Little Yinglong tried to spray Big Sister; one slap later he sat very, very still.

Lu paid them no mind.

His gaze drifted east.

Boom!

The sea split three provinces away.

A living continent of whale breached, eclipsing the sun.

East Sun Prefecture plunged into twilight; the governor aged ten years in ten seconds.

The whale rocketed inland, tail wagging, eight crimson swords pricking its belly like polite reminders.

Cities screamed, pigeons raced, cultivators sprinted atop rooftops.

Wolong Ridge cultivators gaped skyward.

“That thing’s heading for North Luo!”

North Luo’s walls shook.

Luo Cheng leapt, blade flashing—sparks on whale hide, not a scratch.

Dragon Blood Army roared and charged the sky anyway.

Lu Changkong galloped home, boots never touching ground, and landed beside his son.

“Fan’er... that?”

“House-trained,” Lu said. “Mostly.”

Father stared at the leviathan, then at the island.

“Why?”

Lu stepped onto the whale’s back—flat as a parade ground—and gestured for his father to follow.

“Tell me, Dad—what do you see when you look at the cultivation world?”

“Flourishing,” Lu Changkong said after a pause. “Steady.”

“Steady is the problem.

No sparks, no collisions.

We need a wildfire.”

Lu Changkong’s breath caught.

“You mean...”

“White Jade Capital has been everyone’s ceiling.

Time to remove the lid.”

The old general’s lips went dry.

“You’re... leaving?”

“Relocating,” Lu corrected. “Same continent, different zip code.”

He flashed ten thousand meters up.

Hands folded seals.

The Origin Lake uprooted itself, water and all, and drifted down like a falling moon.

CRASH!

The lake slapped perfectly onto the whale's back, island nested inside.

The whale shuddered in bliss, blowing a rainbow fountain.

Rock flowed from Lu's sleeves, plating the whale in stone armor.

Grass sprouted between the cracks.

White Jade Capital now sat on a flying island on a cosmic whale.

Du Longyang's group snapped out of their trance and shot upward, hovering beside Lu.

"Young Master... you're taking the whole island?"

"Road trip," Lu said.

The whale mooed—half song, half apology—and turned west, tail swishing like a puppy.

North Luo's citizens watched their guardian mountain drift away on a leviathan's back.

Someone dropped to their knees.

Someone else started laughing.

The age of White Jade Capital was over.

The age of whatever came next had already begun.

Chapter 306: He Ended the Age of White Jade Capital with His Own Hands

The whale bore an immortal island on its back.

A living continent of flesh and song, draped in mist and rainbow.

Every breath it took showered the earth with spirit rain; every tail-swing painted a bridge of seven colors across the sky.

Beautiful enough to stop hearts.

Terrifying enough to start them again.

North Luo City.

Citizens flooded the streets, necks craned, mouths open.

“Our White Jade Capital... is leaving?”

“Young Master Lu is taking the whole island on a trip?”

“Will it come back?”

Whispers became wails.

Cultivators felt the chill first.

Luo Cheng stood atop the wall, sword at hip, staring at the familiar island now sailing away on a mountain of whale.

His chest hurt like someone had punched it.

A Dragon Blood captain bellowed, voice cracking:

“From this day forth—North Luo has no White Jade Capital!”

The words struck like a funeral bell.

Knees hit stone.

Foreheads kissed dirt.

“Young Master Lu, don’t go!”

“North Luo can’t live without you!”

“Stay... please...”

Tens of thousands chased the whale down ten-li boulevards, out the gates, up North Luo Peak.

They ran until lungs burned and tears froze on cheeks.

On the whale's back, Lake-Heart Island.

Lu Changkong watched the tiny figures shrink.

"Your popularity outstrips this old governor's by a mile, kid."

Lu's white sleeves fluttered.

He said nothing, but the wind carried salt.

Du Longyang's group hovered nearby, stunned silent.

The Overlord of the Eastern Sea—reduced to a moving van.

Lu glanced at them.

"I gave you the map past Infant Transformation.

Cultivate.

Or the next generation will slap your faces off.”

The Empress twirled a lock of hair.

“Brother Lu, any openings for maids?”

“Taken.”

Lu Changkong coughed into his sleeve.

My boy’s aiming for monkhood?

Little Ni Yu’s voice cracked across the sky.

She and Ning Zhao had rocketed up on a paper-thin sword, piggy-back.

“Young Master!”

Ni Yu's eyes were red. "You're abandoning me?!"

Lu sighed, flicked a finger.

The two girls tumbled onto the grass, panting.

"I sent you to the Secret Realm to train, not to cling."

"White Jade Capital may vanish for ten, a hundred, a thousand years.

Still want to follow?"

Ni Yu wiped snot with her sleeve.

"Wherever Young Master goes, I go.

No regrets!"

Ning Zhao simply knelt, forehead to grass—answer enough.

Lu's laugh was soft.

"Fine.

But daily drills double.

If White Jade Capital returns and my maids can't flatten continents, I'll be embarrassed."

Far below, Nie Changqing roared upward, spine glowing, knife qi tearing clouds.

He met an invisible wall and cratered.

Jing Yue stabbed the sky until his sword split space—still bounced.

Lu's voice drifted into every loyal ear:

"White Jade Capital retreats; you enter the world.

When the time is ripe, I'll call you home."

Onlookers—Overlord, Sima Qingshan, Mo Tianyu, Kong Nanfei—bowed in unison.

Tang Xiansheng smiled at the horizon.

“Little Tang, remember this day.”

“Why hide, Master?”

“Because no one else could kill White Jade Capital.

So Lu Ping’an killed it himself.”

Wolong Ridge.

Lv Dongxuan clutched his gold chain, eyes wet.

Gongsun Yu’s feathers trembled.

“Farewell, Young Master.”

Lv Mu hammered his chest, spat blood, and wrote in crimson ink:

Let the world know—

the immortal island has sailed beyond the sun.

Jiang Li, Sima Qingshan, every cultivator on the ridge, every soul beneath the sky—

they bowed toward the vanishing rainbow.

They were not merely bidding farewell to a man.

They were burying an era

that only its creator had the courage to bury.

High above, the whale sang.

The island rose until it kissed the clouds.

White Jade Capital was gone.

And the world, for the first time in years,

remembered how to breathe fire.

Chapter 307: A Legend Still Worth Fearing

The whale carried its own sky.

Origin Lake lay cupped on its back like a second sea; mist rose from the water, wrapped the island, turned every breath into incense.

Sunlight struck the surface and shattered into a million gold coins.

Lu sat in the Thousand-Blade Chair, white sleeves snapping.

Behind him, Ning Zhao's hair fluttered like black banners.

Ni Yu stood on tiptoe, black pot on her back, Little Yinglong draped over her head like a sleepy cat.

Below, the continent unrolled—rivers glinting, mountains bowing.

From the ridge came one last shout, thin as thread:

“Farewell, Young Master.”

Then silence.

The whale veered south.

Every village it passed spilled people into the fields.

Farmers dropped hoes, shaded eyes, fell to their knees.

“Immortals!” they cried, begging next year’s harvest.

Cultivators balanced on rooftops or treetops, staring until necks ached.

Lu closed his eyes.

Divine sense spilled down like warm rain, tasting every sorrow, every hope.

His heart grew still as deep water.

Du Longyang whispered, "He's growing again—right in front of us."

Leaf Blade nodded. "A single view of the world, and his Dao ripens. Monster."

Terminus South Mountain.

Hua Dongliu stepped from his hut, blood-inked pigeon note in hand.

Every Sword Pavilion disciple sheathed their blades and bowed toward the drifting island.

Heaven-Sway Mountain.

Xie Yunling triggered every array on Star-Plucking Peak.

Runes detonated into silent fireworks that painted the sky in farewell.

East Sun Prefecture—again.

The governor clutched the battlements.

First the whale alone had nearly killed him with fright; now it returned wearing White Jade Capital like a crown.

A pigeon landed.

He read, bowed, said nothing.

Ten thousand soldiers behind him bowed in perfect silence.

CRASH.

The whale dove.

Fifty-meter waves slapped the reef where Lu Changkong waited.

“If seclusion bores you, come home,” the old general said, clapping his son’s shoulder.

Then he leapt, robes snapping, and walked across the sea until the horizon swallowed him.

Du Longyang cupped fists. “See you on the other side of Yin Spirit.”

The Empress opened crimson lips, closed them, sighed.

Four streaks of light shot away—four Infant Transformation tyrants racing the wind.

Zhu Long’s lashes trembled.

Lu touched her brow; light poured in.

She bowed, vanished.

Little Yinglong tried to follow.

Lu flicked his tail. "You stay. Boot camp starts now."

The dragonet squirted a nervous jet of water.

"Walk," Lu told the whale.

It sang—one pillar of rainbow water—then turned and swam.

The island floated behind it like a dream on a leash.

Clouds closed.

The sea erased every ripple.

White Jade Capital was gone.

...

Word spread faster than fire in dry grass.

“First holy land—vanished.”

“No more White Jade Capital. My heart feels hollow.”

“Maybe... this era belongs to us now?”

Wolong Ridge.

Nie Changqing sat with Dragon-Slayer across his knees, staring east.

Jing Yue lay on his back, sword pointed at the sky, lost.

Tang Xiansheng patted Tang Yimo’s shoulder.

“Keep climbing the Hells. Don’t die.”

Then he marched the Southern Legion home.

Overlord dove back into the Secret Realm, laughing.

The mountain on his chest had rolled away; suddenly the air tasted like freedom.

Black Dragon Cult's Liu Yuanhao clenched sweat-slick fists.

The dragon coiled in his gut roared awake.

Tianyuan prodigies shrugged.

"Some sect hid? Whatever."

Zhong Nan hugged his knife. "Hiding means falling behind. Falling behind means getting cut."

Feng Yilou rolled his eyes. "You understand nothing."

They stormed the second Hell Gate harder than before.

North Luo Lake—Dragon Gate.

Two black robes burst from the portal.

Yi Yue's hood fell; lake wind slapped her pale face.

The island was gone.

She sank to her knees on the water, empty sky reflecting in her eyes.

Mo Liuqi pulled his own hood back.

"Only one cure for grief," he said quietly.

"Become strong enough that he can't leave you behind twice."

...

Great Xuan, Ask-Heaven Peak.

Dawn bled across the ridge.

Tan Taixuan joined Mo Beike on the summit, robes whipping.

“White Jade Capital retires to legend,” the emperor said.

“Your thoughts, Giant?”

Mo Beike’s wrinkled lids lifted.

“I admire the boy.”

“Confucius once told me: rivers, courts, even the world—these are not Lu Ping’an’s stage.

His stage is the entire cultivation realm’s growth.”

Tan Taixuan listened, still as stone.

“Today the tiger leaves the forest.

Beasts will fight to be king.

Great Xuan is merely one of those beasts—strong, but not strongest.”

Tan Taixuan’s eyes narrowed. “Chaos coming?”

Mo Beike smiled without humor.

“Chaos or opportunity—same wind, different sails.

Our sail is the Academy.

Train them.

The wager with Xiliang is still three months away.”

Tan Taixuan blinked. “White Jade Capital is gone. Does the bet matter?”

Mo Beike’s gaze cut like winter.

“Gone, not dead.

A legend that once crushed continents does not need to be present to be feared.”

Far below, the Academy banners snapped crimson and gold.

Tan Taixuan threw back his head and laughed at the sunrise.

“Giant,” he declared, “small goal first—”

Mo Beike raised a brow.

“Let Great Xuan Academy become the second White Jade Capital!”

Mo Beike’s ancient face twitched.

Your Majesty, you who can’t even sense Qi...

where exactly does this confidence come from?

Chapter 308: One Academy, Two Nations, Three Sects, Four Pavilions

The sea had no edge.

White Jade Capital drifted like a cloud that had forgotten how to rain.

No route, no anchor—just horizon in every direction.

Lu rolled along the island's spine, wind teasing his hair.

Ning Zhao walked three paces behind, silent and lethal.

Ni Yu trotted beside the chair, black pot clanking, Little Yinglong snoring on her head.

“Young Master,” Ni Yu finally burst, “what now?”

We're literally in the middle of nowhere.

I've counted every blade of grass. Twice.”

Lu tapped the armrest.

Bored maids were dangerous maids.

A thought—soul light flared.

A miniature Dao Stele rose from the grass, three feet tall, humming with the same pressure that once crushed continents.

Ni Yu squeaked. “That’s the real one?!”

“Close enough.”

Lu flicked two beams of jade script into their foreheads.

Stele-Suppressing Palm—four tiers: Entry, Minor, Major, Perfection.

A Xuan-tier slaughter art that could pretend to be Earth-tier when angry.

“Daily schedule,” Lu announced.

Ni Yu:

- 3 hours Dao Stele

- 2 hours Palm drills

- 5 hours ten new pill recipes (Qi Condensation to Heaven Lock, no training wheels)

Ning Zhao:

- 4 hours Stele

- 2 hours Palm

- 5 hours sword until the sea splits

Little Yinglong:

- Get beaten until scales shine

Ni Yu wilted like over-boiled cabbage.

“Young Master, are you the devil?”

The dragonet giggled—then whimpered when Lu’s gaze landed.

Lu ignored the drama.

He sank into the Preaching Platform, palm glowing milk-white.

Slap—air caved into spiderweb cracks. Minor.

Slap—phantom stele crushed the void. Major.

He stopped there; Perfection needed blood, not math.

Exiting, he checked the quest log.

Still silent.

“Make the world forget White Jade Capital” required more than three months of hiding.

Fine. Legends fermented slowly.

He summoned the baby-shaped Avatar Fruit.

One bite = one spare life.

He rolled it across his knuckles like a coin.

...

\*Day 1\* after vanishing:

The world held its breath.

\*Day 5:\*

Scouts poured into North Luo.

Empty lake.

Everyone agreed: gone for real.

\*Month 1:\*

Spirit-stone mines became battlegrounds.

New sects sprouted overnight, copying White Jade Capital's homework.

\*Month 2:\*

The map redrew itself.

- \*One Academy:\* Great Xuan Academy, banners screaming "Next White Jade Capital!"

- \*Two Nations:\* Xiliang (Overlord's iron fist) vs Great Xuan (scholar-soldiers)

- \*Three Sects:\*

- Painting Sect (Sima Qingshan + brush)

- Body Sect (Tang Yimo + fists)

- Haoran Sect (Kong Nanfei + righteous fury)

- \*Four Pavilions:\*

- Dao Pavilion

- Sword Pavilion

- Heavenly Secret Pavilion

- Ink Pavilion—assassins for hire, bounty board topped by “Overlord, price: bragging rights”

\*Month 3:\*

Tianyuan's four giants landed in East Sun Prefecture:

Martial Emperor City, Heavenly Void Palace, Absolute Blade Sect, Royal Qian Palace.

Native sects sharpened swords.

Wolong Ridge turned toll road.

Entry fee: one spirit stone.

Jackpot for whoever opens the Ninth Hell Gate.

...

\*Second Hell—Chu River City\*

Overlord floated above the rebirth pool, four crimson crystals exploding into dust.

Four-Pole Heaven Lock—bones singing like dragons.

Leaderboard:

- Zhong Nan: 190 li (2nd city visible)

- Feng Yilou: 190 li

- Nie Changqing: 190 li

- Kong Nanfei: 180 li

“Still too slow,” Overlord growled.

“Purple crystals in the third gate... that’s the express lane.”

He cracked his neck and charged again.

...

\*Imperial Capital — Black Dragon Cult\*

Liu Yuanhao sat on a frozen throne, frost-flame dancing on his palm.

“One Academy, Two Nations, Three Sects, Four Pavilions...”

He crushed the flame; ice shards rained.

“A chicken girl gets a sect. We get nothing. Why?”

The hall knelt in silence.

“Three months. The world’s still tiptoeing.”

He leaned forward, smile sharp as winter.

“Time to light the fuse.”

To Black Dragon Guard One:

“Tail the Overlord. Intercept every pigeon.

If he leaves Wolong Ridge—scream.”

To the cult:

“Contact Ink Pavilion. They hate him too.

And I’ve hired a Tianyuan gold-badge assassin—rank ten on their list.”

A cautious elder: “My lord, if Overlord goes berserk—”

Liu Yuanhao laughed, tea cup freezing solid in his grip.

“Then we’ll learn how loud a dragon roars when the tiger’s asleep.”

He stood, frost-flame cloak billowing.

“White Jade Capital hid.

Someone has to remind the world how to bleed.”

Outside, storm clouds gathered over the capital—

the first real thunder since the immortal island vanished.

Chapter 309: Refining the Avatar Fruit, the World Ignites

\*Terminus South Mountain – Sword Pavilion Hut\*

Bamboo leaves hissed in the wind.

Three old men sat around a wicker table: one gold chain, one wine pot, one plate of peanuts.

Lv Dongxuan slapped the table. “Fill ’er up!”

Xie Yunling poured.

Hua Dongliu speared a peanut like a sword.

“Months since the Young Master vanished,” Lv Dongxuan slurped. “Some dogs are already off the leash.”

Xie Yunling laughed. “Of course. White Jade Capital was the lid on the pot. Lid gone—boil.”

“Resources breed war,” Hua Dongliu said, chewing. “Spirit veins, Secret Realm, stones. Fists speak loudest.”

They toasted the coming storm, three retired pavilion masters with nothing left to prove.

...

\*North Luo – Dawn Departure\*

Lu Changkong in plain hemp, one satchel of seeds and scrolls.

Luo Yue cupped fists. “Lord, the world’s twitching. Travel safe.”

Lu Changkong waved once, stepped through the gate, and never looked back.

Behind him, father and son stared at the empty road.

Luo Yue sighed. “Little Cheng, storm the Hells. North Luo needs a Heaven Lock.”

...

\*Lake-Heart Island – Timeless\*

The whale drifted.

Sometimes a fisherman swore he saw an island riding a rainbow; next blink—nothing.

On the island:

Ni Yu crouched over her cauldron, Heaven Mystflame roaring scarlet.

Ten new recipes danced inside the black pot like angry fireflies.

Ning Zhao's sword qi carved the air into ribbons; every stroke etched a new lock into her spine.

Little Yinglong floated belly-up in Origin Lake, bruises blooming purple lotuses.

Tomorrow: more bruises.

Lu sat beneath White Jade Tower, the baby-shaped fruit spinning above his palm.

He had studied it for ninety-nine days.

Today he bit.

No—today he refined.

Mist swallowed the tower.

Arrays spun—thousands of runes, each a heartbeat.

A strand of divine sense peeled from his brow, thin as starlight, thick as fate.

It slipped into the fruit's tiny mouth.

Spirit Qi condensed into liquid, drip... drip...

A jade lotus bud formed, nine petals sealed.

Lu flicked a drop of god-demon blood.

The bud drank, flushed crimson.

Splash.

It sank into Origin Lake, bobbing like a cradle.

When nine petals open, a second Lu will step out—flesh, bone, memory, ambition.

A spare life to walk every realm Lu himself had only drawn on paper.

...

\*Imperial Capital – Spring Glow Tower, Ninth Floor\*

Liu Yuanhao stood at the rail, frost-flame licking his fingers.

Below, the palace glittered like a sleeping dragon.

A carriage thundered up.

Zhou Liu—gold-core seventh revolution, Tianyuan lone wolf—stepped out.

“Bold,” Zhou Liu said, accepting wine. “Break the balance and every sect will bite.”

Liu Yuanhao smiled. “Chaos is the only honest broker.”

Pigeons flew.

Night fell.

Black Dragon Cult's web tightened.

Underground tunnels opened like black veins.

Thousands of masked cultivators poured into the streets.

Torches.

Blades.

Screams.

East district—flames painted the sky red.

Purple-Gold Palace.

Luo Mingsang's eyelid twitched harder.

She had calculated everything except audacity.

Trumpets howled.

Xiliang barracks scrambled.

But the first gate fell before the horns finished.

Black Dragon Cult had waited three months for the world to blink.

Tonight the world opened its eyes to fire.

...

*\*Somewhere in the Cascading Sea\**

The lotus bud pulsed—one petal shivered, half-unfurled.

Lu opened his eyes on the island, smiled at the night.

“Almost time, little me.”

Far away, capitals burned, sects marched, and the first true war since White Jade Capital vanished roared awake.

The age of legends was over.

The age of teeth had begun.

Chapter 310: Nine Petals Ring Like Blades, the Avatar is Born

\*Imperial Capital – Night of the Black Dragon\*

The first guard died with a finger-sized hole frozen between his eyes.

Liu Yuanhao’s frost-flame finger still smoked.

The wall fell.

Gates yawned.

Black Dragon banners poured in like ink.

Inside the palace, torches painted gold walls red.

Luo Mingsang ran barefoot across marble, silk hem soaked in someone else's blood.

Behind her, a Body Storage captain knelt.

"Lady, Dragon Gate—now!"

She didn't argue.

One hundred veterans formed a square around the garden portal.

"Gate stays ours," their captain said.

"Dead men don't lose gates."

Luo Mingsang's last sight: three Heaven Locks drawing swords under lantern light.

Then the portal swallowed her.

...

**\*Imperial Garden – Last Stand\***

One hundred vs ten thousand.

Black Dragon cultivators flooded the moonlit paths.

Two black-robed veterans—old enemies—unleashed dragon-scale auras.

Steel rang.

Qi exploded.

Limbs flew.

Liu Yuanhao stepped over corpses, frost-flame curling like cigarette smoke.

“Still breathing?” he asked the pinned captain.

The captain spat blood and laughed.

“Glory’s heavier than your ice.”

Liu Yuanhao raised his hand.

Frost-fire roared.

...

\*Wolong Ridge – Second Hell Gate\*

Overlord stood beneath the ghost city’s walls.

The yin official tipped his cup.

One hundred drops of Grievous Water fell—each a dying man’s scream made liquid.

Seventy drops crushed Overlord to one knee, soul creaking.

He retreated, sweating.

A bleeding soldier crashed through the portal.

“My king—Imperial Capital burns!”

Black Dragon Guard One tried to flee.

Overlord’s fist arrived first.

One punch—crater, silence.

“Black. Dragon. Cult.”

The name left his lips like a death sentence.

He vanished west, earth cracking behind him.

Every spy in Wolong Ridge sent pigeons skyward.

War had a name now.

...

\*Lake-Heart Island – Timeless Sea\*

Lu played chess against himself.

Black stone—white stone—soul sparks.

Ni Yu and Ning Zhao knelt before the mini stele, foreheads shining with intent runes.

Little Yinglong floated belly-up, dreaming of the days before daily beatings.

The lotus bud drifted over.

Yinglong poked it—soft, unbreakable.

Clang.

First petal fell, ringing like a sword drawn across steel.

Yinglong flapped backward, claws up: Not me!

Clang. Clang.

Petal two, three, four...

Nine blades of gold light unfolded.

At the heart sat a boy in cyan lotus robes, legs crossed, eyes shut.

Lu laid down his final stone.

The boy's eyes opened—curious, newborn, ancient.

Lu smiled from the tower.

“Nine petals, nine chimes.

Your name is Lu Jiulian.”

The boy tilted his head, repeated the sound like tasting new wine.

“Lu... Jiulian.”

His voice was Lu's voice, but lighter—like wind chimes instead of thunder.

He stood on the blooming lotus.

Bare feet touched water; ripples turned to glass.

Little Yinglong hid behind Ni Yu.

Ni Yu whispered, “Young Master cloned himself... and made him prettier?”

Ning Zhao’s sword hand twitched—equal parts awe and wariness.

Lu wheeled to the edge.

“Same soul, different roads.

You will walk the realms I drew on paper.

Qi Condensation to Three Spirits—live them, break them, bring me the receipts.”

Lu Jiulian cupped fists, lotus sleeves rustling.

“Order received.”

He stepped off the lake.

The moment his sole left the lotus, the flower folded into a cyan sword sheath at his waist.

One step—grass.

Second step—sky.

By the third step he was a cyan streak vanishing beyond the horizon.

Little Yinglong peeked out.

“...Do I still get beaten tomorrow?”

Lu’s laugh drifted down like warm rain.

“Double.”

...

Far away, capitals burned, dragons roared, and a boy in lotus robes walked into the first flames of the new era—carrying Lu Fan’s curiosity in his pocket and a blank cultivation scroll in his heart.

The chessboard was set.

The spare player had entered the game.