

Starlit Path 32

Chapter 32: Planting Chrysanthemums, Withering Half an Island of Peach Blossoms

The fishing boat swayed gently as the gap-toothed old boatman emerged from the cabin, gripping the pole to guide the young master and his retinue to Lakeheart Island. The wooden wheels of the young master's chair rolled onto the island's青砖 (green brick) surface. He looked up, his gaze falling on a misty peach blossom grove, its pink petals vibrant and blooming, their beauty mirrored in the faces of onlookers. Deep within the grove, the elegant tower of Drunken Dust Pavilion loomed, half-hidden, with the faint laughter of courtesans drifting out.

The island was steeped in the fragrance of peach blossoms. A breeze stirred the trees, sending pink petals fluttering down, adding a touch of delicate allure. In the distance, behind the pavilion's carved wooden doors, graceful figures appeared in droves. The courtesans, led by their madam, emerged with coy smiles, clutching round paper fans, draped in sheer gauze that revealed glimpses of fair skin, their faces adorned with meticulous makeup. They spilled from the tower, eager to greet the young master—the future owner of Drunken Dust Pavilion, and perhaps their own.

For these women, fallen into the world of pleasure, winning the young master's favor could secure a lifetime of comfort. A city lord's wife was a distant dream, but a concubine's role would suffice for a life of luxury. The fleeting romances of sour-smelling scholars? Let them scatter with the wind.

Nie Changqing's expression flickered oddly as he glanced at the composed young master. Stepping forward, he brandished his butcher's knife, pointing it at the courtesans whose eyes gleamed with untold stories. His action halted them, their steps faltering as they lingered at a distance, wary of approaching.

"Ning, push me over," the young master said, rubbing his fingers, ignoring the women.

Ning Zhao nodded, her delicate hands guiding the wheelchair forward, its wheels crushing fallen peach petals as they moved toward the pavilion.

“Oh, Little Ni,” the young master called, turning to Ni Yu, who looked gaunt from seasickness. “Here are ten seeds. Find spots on the island, dig ten holes, and plant them.”

He handed her the ten Skyward Spirit Chrysanthemum seeds, system rewards. Ni Yu, accepting them, blinked in surprise. Each seed was smooth and jade-like, exuding a faint fragrance. To her hungry eyes, they resembled... roasted broad beans. Her empty stomach growled, and she swallowed hard.

“Young Master...” Her emaciated face lit with longing.

“Hm?” He raised a brow.

“Can... can I eat these beans?” she asked, a glimmer of drool at her lips.

His face darkened, and he barely restrained himself from leaping out of the wheelchair to kick the gluttonous girl. “They’re chrysanthemum seeds, not beans!”

Ni Yu’s face fell, full of regret.

“Don’t eat them—remember that! You’ll regret it if you do!” he warned, glaring at her. “If you sneak a bite, I’ll have the old man row you to the lake’s center for spins!”

The threat hit hard. Ni Yu's heart clenched—more spins would empty her stomach entirely. With a mix of fear and lingering regret, she slung the chessboard over her back, clutched the seeds, and scurried off to dig holes.

At the island's edge, among the swaying peach trees, a petite figure darted under the sunlight, the oversized chessboard bouncing on her back. Ni Yu held the ten Skyward Spirit Chrysanthemum seeds, her mood light. She relished this easy, pressure-free task. The Young Master still favors me—no blood and guts for me! she thought, pleased.

Finding a gap between two towering peach trees, she picked up a branch and, humming, dug a small hole. Carefully placing a seed inside, she covered it, tamped the soil with her feet, and poured water from a small gourd. On the nearby tree trunk, she carved "Chrysanthemum One" with a dagger to mark the first seed's spot. Then, she trotted along the shoreline, planting the remaining seeds at intervals, naming them "Chrysanthemum Two" through "Ten," spacing them perfectly.

Sweaty and flushed, Ni Yu stood proudly, hands on hips, marveling at her work. She turned to admire her efforts and report to the young master, but her chubby face froze, her smile fading.

The island's half covered in peach trees had been a vision of beauty—pink blossoms swaying, their fragrance intoxicating, petals falling like rain. But now, everything changed. The peach trees around "Chrysanthemum One" withered visibly, their moisture and vitality drained as if scorched by a relentless sun. Petals shriveled, branches decayed, transforming paradise into a desolate purgatory.

From “Chrysanthemum One” to “Ten,” the groves wilted in sequence, like lights snuffed out. Ni Yu’s lashes trembled as she stared at the seed sites. The freshly buried seeds had sprouted, their emerald stems swaying as if alive, gleaming like jade under the sun. Her legs wobbled, her face paling.

She stood in the peach grove as a lake breeze swept through, rustling the trees. A shockwave seemed to ripple, and every peach blossom crumbled like ash, scattering in a lifeless snowfall. Ni Yu was stunned. So were the courtesans, cowed by Nie Changqing’s earlier display, now collapsing in terror. They knew the island’s peach groves well, yet in an instant, half the island’s blossoms had withered, as if a demon haunted the place, chilling them to the bone. The unknown always bred fear.

Ni Yu’s gaze locked on the ten budding chrysanthemums, their vibrant stems swaying. Faint streams of energy seemed to flow from all directions, drawn into the plants. The peach trees’ life force had been siphoned to fuel the chrysanthemums’ growth. Her legs shook, her face ashen. The Young Master was right—these seeds are trouble!

Her flat chest heaved with relief. Thank goodness I didn’t eat them.