

Starlit Path 49

Chapter 49: The Lake's Enigma and the Master's Refusal

By the shores of Beiluo Lake, a carriage rolled slowly, the gentle breeze stirring the reeds and saplings along the water's edge. Nie Changqing coiled his whip and leapt down, approaching the carriage to lower its ramp. Lu, seated in a wheelchair, glided smoothly onto the ground. Ning Zhao's delicate hand rested on the chair's handle, her gauze skirt fluttering in the lake's breeze. Yi Yue held an umbrella, her gaze drifting toward the lake with anticipation. She had heard Ning Zhao speak of Lu's faction, White Jade Capital, but had yet to see it. Today, she would finally set foot on the island.

Ni Yu, carrying a chessboard on her back, stared at the rippling lake with a hint of dread, her face on the verge of tears. Another boat ride?! Nie Shuang, led by his father's hand, gazed at the lake with quiet curiosity. Lu, clad in a pristine white robe, lips red and teeth gleaming, with strands of hair dancing lightly across their forehead, exuded an air of refined elegance. Their eyes flicked toward the bustling fishing boats at the dock, brow arching slightly.

"No need to ban the fishing boats on Beiluo Lake," Lu said, hand resting on the wheelchair's armrest, gazing at the misty, ethereal lake. "But clear out all those garish pleasure boats."

Nie Changqing's weathered face grew solemn. "Yes, sir," he replied, his hand resting on the butcher's knife at his waist, his aura sharpening.

"Old Nie, you're in charge of guarding Lake Island. No one outside White Jade Capital sets foot there without my approval. Trespassers are to be dealt with—permanently."

"Understood," Nie Changqing said, his voice steady.

Lu softened their tone. “Where’s that old fisherman from the other day?”

“Likely fishing on the lake,” Nie Changqing replied after a moment’s thought.

“We’ll need his boat to tour the lake and reach the island,” Lu said with a smile.

“Young Master, I’ve already arranged a proper vessel for your trips to and from the island,” Ning Zhao said, bowing slightly, her dark hair falling forward as her lips parted.

Lu blinked, then waved a hand dismissively. “No, I want that old man’s fishing boat.”

The words carried a playful stubbornness. Ning Zhao froze, puzzled. The boat she’d prepared was spacious and luxurious—far superior to a rickety fishing skiff. Did the Young Master have a peculiar fondness for humble boats?

“Shall I send someone to find him on the lake?” she asked, resigned to indulging Lu’s whims.

“No need. He’s here,” Lu said, leaning back in the wheelchair, a faint smile playing on their lips as they propped their face on curled fingers.

Ning Zhao looked up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, and peered across the misty lake. A lone skiff emerged from the fog, swaying gently. At its helm stood an old man in a conical hat and straw raincoat, guiding the boat with a pole.

The skiff docked at the pier. “Young Master, care for a ride?” the old man called, lifting his hat to reveal a wrinkled face and a gap-toothed grin, his enthusiasm infectious.

“Much obliged,” Lu replied, their smile widening as they studied the old man.

Nie Changqing’s gaze sharpened, scrutinizing the fisherman with a furrowed brow, as if piecing together a puzzle. The group boarded, Lu’s wheelchair positioned at the boat’s center. Ni Yu, true to form, found her usual spot to cling to, bracing for seasickness. Nie Shuang, curious, darted glances around the skiff. Ning Zhao and Yi Yue flanked Lu, while Nie Changqing sat at the stern, hand on his knife, eyeing the old man.

With a push of the pole against the stone pier, the boat glided out, ripples trailing in its wake. A mile or two from the dock, a plump perch broke the surface, spitting bubbles before vanishing with a swirl. A wicker basket on the boat brimmed with lively fish, their tails slapping rhythmically.

“Fine catch,” Lu remarked, squinting against the fresh lake breeze, listening to the fish thrash.

The old man, pushing the pole, flashed his gap-toothed smile. “It’s just late summer—fish aren’t at their fattest yet. Come deep autumn or early winter, that’s when they’re truly plump. Slice three cuts on each side, rub in some rice wine, sprinkle ginger and mushrooms, then steam. Tender, not greasy—pure delight.”

His vivid description of steamed perch even roused Ni Yu, who’d been retching over the side, her spirits lifting slightly. Lu chuckled. “If you want fish, Young Master, I’ll rise early tomorrow and catch you a few,” the old man offered.

Lu waved a hand, the lake breeze tousling their hair. “No need for fishing... but what about catching people? Could you help with that?”

The light laugh lingered over the lake, and the boat fell silent. Ning Zhao’s eyes flicked to the old man, a spark of wariness igniting as she caught the hidden meaning in Lu’s words. At the stern, Nie Changqing drew his butcher’s knife, wiping it slowly with a cloth, the scraping sound chilling. A tense aura spread.

The old man’s smile froze under his hat. “Young Master, I’m no killer! I’m just an honest fisherman!” he cried, tossing the pole aside and dropping to his knees, tears and snot streaking his face.

“I do love honest folk,” Lu said, their smile enigmatic. They exhaled softly. “But I’m curious—why linger here? Curiosity killed the cat, you know... and it can kill people too. What are you so curious about?”

Their tone grew flat, cold. Ning Zhao’s face hardened, her hand slapping the wheelchair’s armrest. Her Cicada Wing Sword sprang free, gripped tightly. Nie Changqing stood, his Blade Control Technique at the ready. The air grew thick with menace.

The old man trembled, still sniveling. “Young Master, don’t make me laugh with all this crying,” Lu said, fingers tapping the armrest. “The more you cry, the more I want to smile.”

The old man’s sobs halted. He removed his hat, wiping away tears and snot. If Lu claimed a good temper, it meant danger—pretending further was pointless. Shedding his raincoat, he revealed a pristine white robe, a necklace of three copper coins strung on gold thread, and a polished turtle shell in his hand. He snapped the boat pole, drawing a five-foot jade-green bamboo staff from within.

His demeanor transformed, the humble fisherman now a figure of profound mystery. Holding the staff and turtle shell, he smiled at Lu, bowing slightly. "Lü Mudui of the Tianji School, at your service, Young Master Lu."

At the city gate, the carriage curtain lifted, and a white-haired elder stepped out, his face wreathed in a kindly smile. He raised Lu Changkong from his bow. "No need for formalities, City Lord."

"I'm here for a complicated matter," the Imperial Preceptor said, shaking his head with a wry smile. "Partly to apologize on behalf of my wayward disciple, but mainly to see Ping'an."

Lu Changkong gave a bitter smile. "My son's been plagued by his leg ailment, and it's made him stubborn. He doesn't even listen to me, his father. I'm sorry for the trouble he's caused Master Mo..."

After exchanging pleasantries, they entered Beiluo City on foot. The Imperial Preceptor surveyed the bustling streets. After Lu's ruthless purge, the city hadn't declined—it thrived. With major merchants toppled, smaller ones seized opportunities, and minor families, once suppressed by the three great clans, rose to prominence. Beiluo pulsed with newfound vitality.

The Preceptor's eyes flickered with surprise, stroking his white beard thoughtfully. "City Lord, I'd like to see Ping'an first. Where is he?" he asked, pausing on the main thoroughfare.

Lu Changkong, who'd been leading him toward the manor to "pull weeds" (deal with Mo Tianyu), faltered. What? No rush to free Mo Tianyu?

"Master, perhaps we should first..." Lu Changkong ventured hesitantly.

"No hurry," the Preceptor said with a light cough, waving dismissively.

Lu Changkong's face twitched. Is Mo Tianyu even his real disciple?