

Starlit Path 50

Chapter 50: Chrysanthemums of Spirit, Awakening the World

The Imperial Preceptor was in no rush. In fact, he thought a bit of suffering might do Mo Tianyu good. The young man's arrogance—calling himself the “Madman Mo,” looking down on all—had landed him in this mess. Sent to summon Lu, Mo Tianyu had not only failed but also scaled a wall in the dead of night, only to be caught and buried like a weed in the ground. He had brought this upon himself.

From the intelligence he'd gathered, the Preceptor deduced that Lu was likely a heaven-blessed individual, like Emperor Yuwen Xiu, gifted with immortal fate. The Preceptor called such people “heaven-blessed.” From Yuwen Xiu's account, he even pieced together the likely identity of another heaven-blessed, though he kept it from the emperor.

Proud, unyielding, kneeling only to the common people, not to immortals or the heavens—such a figure was rare in Great Zhou. Yuwen Xiu might not have guessed, but the Preceptor, well-versed in the kingdom's affairs and the temperaments of its people, narrowed it down to three candidates.

First, Jiang Li, the City Lord of Drunken Dragon City. Rising from the martial world to prominence in the imperial court, he was the late emperor's most trusted blade, now guarding the kingdom's frontier. Second, Xiang Shaoyun, the Overlord of Western County and master of Xiliang. Third... Mo Tianyu, though the Preceptor dismissed him with a wry cough.

If Jiang Li were heaven-blessed, it could benefit Great Zhou. But Xiang Shaoyun? His alliance with the powerful Mohist School complicated matters. Even with top-tier grandmaster martial prowess, Xiang Shaoyun was no match for the Mohists—unless he, too, was heaven-blessed. That would make the kingdom's future even more unpredictable.

The Preceptor's visit to Beiluo had two purposes: to free Mo Tianyu and to meet Lu, another suspected heaven-blessed. Since the Preceptor showed no urgency to “pull the weed,” Lu Changkong couldn't

force him. Learning that Lu had gone to the lake island—a former pleasure house seized from the three great families—Lu Changkong arranged a carriage to take the Preceptor there.

On Lake Island, a gentle breeze rippled the water's surface. Aboard the fishing boat, the white-robed elder, Lü Mudui, gripped his jade-green bamboo staff, his deep eyes fixed on the glossy turtle shell in his hand, drawing attention.

"The Tianji School?" Lu's brow arched slightly from the wheelchair.

Among the Hundred Schools, the Tianji School was enigmatic, renowned for its divination, strategy, and foresight. "Interesting," Lu said, toying with a black chess piece, basking in the lake breeze. "The Daoist Sect and Sword Sect sent people to Beiluo, and I killed them all. Their bodies lie at the bottom of this lake. So why haven't you left?"

Nie Changqing summoned spiritual energy from his dantian, letting it coil around his butcher's knife, his gaze cold. Ning Zhao mirrored his readiness, while Yi Yue's hand rested on the whip at her waist, alert. Ni Yu, clinging to the boat's edge, retched, slightly ruining the tension.

"Young Master Lu, no need for such hostility," Lü Mudui said, flashing his gap-toothed grin. "The Tianji School stays out of court politics and martial disputes. Surely you've no reason to kill an old man like me?"

"Your smile's hideous. Is that reason enough?" Lu replied, rolling the chess piece in their palm, voice calm.

Lü Mudui's grin faltered, and he instinctively hid his missing tooth. Lu continued, "I won't kill you yet. Come to the island—we have things to discuss. Answer well, and you live. Old Nie, set sail."

"Yes," Nie Changqing replied, his face stern. Leaning back, his vital energy surged as he pushed off, propelling the boat swiftly toward Lake Island. The skiff sliced through the green water, startling fish and sending egrets and herons soaring from the shores.

Soon, they reached the island. Lu disembarked, Ning Zhao pushing the wheelchair along a stone path. Yi Yue hauled a listless Ni Yu, drained from vomiting. Lü Mudui, tapping his bamboo staff, stepped off the boat but froze, his body trembling.

Something about the island felt extraordinary. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes. A faint current, like a darting fish, moved through the air. His eyes snapped open, filled with awe and disbelief. Scanning the surroundings, he noticed the island's grass, trees, and flowers had withered, replaced by ten peculiar plants.

Chrysanthemums. Three-foot-tall chrysanthemums, their stems as thick as a maiden's wrist. Lü Mudui's expression was a mix of shock and wonder. The strange current seemed to emanate from these flowers, stirring an intense longing within him. What was this energy?

It wasn't just Lü Mudui. Ning Zhao, pushing the wheelchair, and Nie Changqing, holding Nie Shuang's hand, felt their hearts roil. Having tasted spiritual energy before, they recognized it instantly. This darting, fish-like energy was none other than precious spiritual energy. The heavens and earth held spiritual energy now?

No—Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao realized in unison—it came from the ten chrysanthemums Lu had planted. Once thought eerie, these flowers now sparked wild joy. With spiritual energy in the air, could they absorb it to cultivate and break through their limits?

“The flowers bloomed?” Lu’s eyes lit up with surprise, gazing at the ten Spirit Chrysanthemums exhaling wisps of energy. A smile spread across their face. Having absorbed the essence of the island’s peach blossoms, the chrysanthemums hadn’t gone to waste. Each produced one wisp of spiritual energy every three days, maintaining that output unless consumed, then regenerating another wisp within three days. Lu had expected them to take longer to bloom—an unexpected delight.

Without lingering on the chrysanthemums, Lu directed Ning Zhao to wheel them into the White Jade Capital pavilion. “Please,” Nie Changqing said, his face impassive as he gestured to Lü Mudui with his butcher’s knife.

Lü Mudui reluctantly tore his gaze from the chrysanthemums, swallowing hard, his mind reeling. Lu’s mysteries only deepened. Tapping his bamboo staff, he ascended the stone steps to the pavilion. But as he approached, he froze, his attention caught by an unremarkable couplet flanking the entrance, its words drawing him in.