

## Starlit Path 51

### Chapter 51: Playing Chess with Immortals

“The heavens as the board, the stars as pieces.

The earth as a lute, its paths as strings.”

Lü Mudui, fixated on the couplet inscribed on the black iron plaques flanking the pavilion’s entrance, couldn’t help but recite it aloud. His heart trembled, his weathered face alight with awe. A terrifying pressure surged from the plaques, forcing him to stagger back two or three steps, each one cracking the stone tiles beneath his feet. He slammed his bamboo staff into the ground, eyes shut tight, steadying himself. After a long moment, he exhaled slowly, turning his face away, not daring to look at the couplet again—or to ask about it.

Nie Changqing, standing to the side with his butcher’s knife in hand, glanced at him impassively. Lü Mudui’s willpower surpassed his own.

The sound of wooden wheels rolling over stone broke the silence. Ning Zhao pushed Lu out from the White Jade Capital pavilion. “A pity,” Lu said, one hand propping their chin. “You couldn’t withstand the pressure of the couplet at my pavilion’s gate. You’re not fit to enter.”

Lü Mudui gave a wry smile and clasped his hands. “I’ve disappointed you, Young Master Lu.”

Lu waved dismissively. “No matter. If you can’t enter, we’ll talk here.”

Lü Mudui straightened his robes, his expression solemn. “Please, Young Master Lu, speak.”

Lu smoothed the wrinkles from the wool blanket draped over their lap. “I hear the Tianji School can divine the affairs of the world. I have a matter for you to calculate.”

Lü Mudui’s gaze sharpened. Lu didn’t waste words, flipping their hand to reveal a milky-white jade token. Lü Mudui stared, puzzled.

“This is a Heavenly Qi Token,” Lu said slowly. “There are five, along with five Earthly Qi Tokens. These are the keys to entering the Wolong Ridge secret realm, where immortal fate awaits. Only those holding a Heavenly or Earthly Qi Token may enter and seize the realm’s opportunities.”

The words hung in the air, stealing the breath of everyone present. Nie Changqing’s pupils constricted, a deep shock flickering in his eyes. The Wolong Ridge secret realm? He recalled kneeling before the immortal in the Land of Immortals, earning the promise of fate at Wolong Ridge. The Young Master had clearly received the same guidance. As for the tokens, Nie Changqing had been unaware until now.

Lü Mudui trembled. Immortal fate? Heavenly and Earthly Qi Tokens? The words struck him like thunder. Five years ago, the Tianji School’s elders had divined a great opportunity in Beiluo and sent him here. He hadn’t taken it seriously—detached from court and martial conflicts, what use was opportunity to the Tianji School? Even becoming a martial master like Xiang Shaoyun meant nothing; in a century, all would return to dust.

But he was wrong. Posing as a humble fisherman in Beiluo, he’d witnessed the unimaginable: Nie Changqing slaying Confucian scholars with a blade from afar, Lu elegantly crushing a swordmaster with a single chess move across ten miles of streets, and now, spirit chrysanthemums exhaling immortal energy across the island. Something extraordinary was afoot.

After meeting Lu in person, the feeling intensified. The Young Master, dismissed by the world as a frail, gloomy invalid, had fooled everyone. At Beiluo's moment of crisis, Lu had bared ferocious fangs. Lü Mudui had tried to divine Lu's fate but stopped halfway, chilled by its terrifying weight. Only the Tianji School's elders could glimpse such a destiny. Lu's fate was beyond his reach.

Now he understood the elders' "great opportunity"—not martial prowess, but immortal fate. The promise of eternal life, the ultimate pursuit of the Tianji School and Lü Mudui himself.

"Young Master Lu... what can I do for you?" Lü Mudui asked, his throat dry, his usual composure shattered.

Lu, sensing his shift in mood, knew he'd grasped the stakes. "My request is simple," Lu said, lazily eyeing him while toying with the Heavenly Qi Token. "Tell me where the remaining nine tokens are."

A glint of anticipation flickered in Lu's eyes. The tokens' rules were Lu's creation, scattered randomly across Great Zhou. To transform this low-martial world into a mid- or high-martial one, people's perceptions had to change, starting with accepting spiritual energy's resurgence. The tokens were the key to unveiling that era.

Lü Mudui's face stiffened. He plucked the three copper coins from his neck, holding them in a practiced grip, and closed his eyes. After a moment, he opened them, forcing a gap-toothed smile. "Young Master Lu... can I calculate it?"

Lu paused their toying with the token. "Can you?"

“No... I cannot,” Lü Mudui admitted, swallowing hard, clutching the coins.

Lu raised their head. “No exact locations needed—just the general area within a hundred miles.”

Lü Mudui’s heart quaked. “Still... I cannot.”

Lu’s brow arched, and they sighed. “Fine. Can you at least divine when the Wolong Ridge secret realm will open?”

Lü Mudui’s legs nearly gave out, his grip tightening on the bamboo staff. “Young Master Lu, this old man... cannot do it.”

With a clatter, he tossed the staff aside and collapsed to the ground, wailing. He’d been confident, the prized disciple of the Tianji School’s elders, yet Lu’s three questions left him utterly defeated. He’d stayed to impress Lu, to show off his skills, only to crumble.

Lu blinked, bewildered by the old man’s tears. Crying again? “Alright, alright,” Lu said, chuckling. “It’s normal to fail. If you could divine immortal fate so easily, the immortals would need to rethink their existence.”

Sobering, Lu continued, “Spread the word of the Wolong Ridge secret realm and the purpose of the Heavenly and Earthly Qi Tokens. That, you can do, right?”

Lü Mudui stopped crying, wiping his face, stunned. “Young Master Lu, you want to announce the immortal fate to the world?”

He couldn’t fathom why. Wouldn’t that intensify competition? Unbeknownst to him, Lu wanted to stir the pot.

“You think immortal fate is easy to claim?” Lu said, fingers tapping the wheelchair’s armrest. “Since ancient times, treasures are guarded by spiritual beings. This immortal fate is no different. I’m not keen on being the first to test the waters—if I fall, it’s over. Better to let others scout the dangers first. As for the final prize...” Lu’s lips curved, their gaze piercing forward. “White Jade Capital will claim it.”

Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao straightened, their blood surging with pride as members of White Jade Capital. Lü Mudui’s eyes narrowed. White Jade Capital, Lu’s faction.

Lu studied the Heavenly Qi Token, their gaze deepening. “The immortals want those with tokens to vie for the fate. Their purpose eludes me, so I’ll muddy the waters and see what surfaces. Challenging immortals? That’s where the real fun lies.”

Lü Mudui inhaled sharply, struck by Lu’s audacity. To challenge immortals—who in the world would dare? “Rest assured, Young Master Lu, I’ll handle it,” he said solemnly.

“Go. If you succeed, I’ll share a wisp of immortal fate with you,” Lu said, waving a hand. Ning Zhao pushed the wheelchair into the pavilion’s depths, vanishing from sight.

Nie Changqing, expressionless, gestured for Lü Mudui to leave.

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“Young Master, can you trust him? What if he harbors ill intentions?” Ning Zhao asked, frowning as she pushed the wheelchair.

Lu, eyes closed, clad in snow-white robes, smiled. “No worries. The Tianji School’s martial prowess is weak—their strength lies in divination. If they rally others, their lack of combat power means they might survive by avoiding danger, but they’ll never hold onto immortal fate. Cooperation with us is their best bet, and if they can divine, they’ll see it.”

Ning Zhao nodded, half-understanding. Then, her eyes gleamed with concern. “Young Master, are you really challenging immortals? Isn’t that dangerous?”

Lu’s eyes opened, lips curving. “Dangerous? Not at all. It’s perfectly safe. White Jade Capital’s creed is to challenge immortals—and find endless joy in it.”

Lu laughed softly, leaving Ning Zhao puzzled. Abruptly, Lu’s laughter stopped, sensing something. Their fingers tapped lightly. “Ning, go greet our distinguished guest. Yi Yue, brew some plum wine. Ni Yu, light sandalwood incense and set up the chessboard.”

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On Beiluo Lake, ripples danced across the green water. A luxurious wooden boat carried the Imperial Preceptor, hands tucked into wide sleeves, leaning lazily at the bow, squinting at the misty silhouette of the island. Lu Changkong and Luo Yue stood beside him, savoring the lake breeze.

Suddenly, the fog parted, and a lone skiff approached, Lü Mudui in white robes at its helm, bamboo staff in hand. Lu Changkong and Luo Yue's eyes sharpened. The Preceptor stroked his white beard, smiling. "Lü Mudui of the Tianji School..."

Lü Mudui, spotting the Preceptor, stood and offered a disciple's bow, but no words passed between them. The boats glided past—one toward the island, one away.

The Preceptor's gaze lingered briefly before returning to the lake. The wooden boat plunged through the mist, but as it broke through, a burly man stood ahead, clutching a butcher's knife, balanced on a piece of driftwood floating on the water. His presence was a barrier none could pass.

Seeing the boat, he raised his head, exhaling slowly. "By the Young Master's command, none but White Jade Capital disciples may set foot on the island."