

## Starlit Path 53

### Chapter 53: A Heart Untouched by Ambition

Along the stone-paved path by Beiluo Lake, a dilapidated donkey cart rattled forward, its weathered wooden frame groaning as if on the verge of collapse. A young man in a dark blue robe lounged atop it, legs crossed, dangling a carrot on a string before the donkey. The beast snorted, chasing the bait with steady steps, pulling the cart along.

The youth gazed idly at the lake's shimmering surface. "What a fine spot," he murmured. "Perfect for settling down in old age. I heard Beiluo's Drunken Dust Pavilion had exceptional girls with unmatched skills—wonder if it's true." His legs jiggled, a dreamy look crossing his face. "Pity that overbearing Young Master Lu seized it. Great Zhou's lost another slice of heaven."

He shook his head with mock regret, adjusting the carrot to guide the donkey's path. "Truth be told, I didn't want to come to Beiluo. This city's... eerie," he muttered, his face twisting in reluctance. "But with the Preceptor leaving the capital, it's a rare opportunity. Why's it always me, though? Stoneface is the world's top assassin—he'd be perfect for this. I'm just a donkey driver." His voice dripped with complaints, but the task was unavoidable.

He gave the donkey a light kick, urging it faster. The rickety cart creaked along the lakeside path, the donkey's huffing echoing in the air.

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Lü Mudui sped out of Beiluo, his carriage galloping across the plains. Inside, clad in a white robe, he rubbed the copper coins around his neck, his gaze deep and thoughtful. "Is Young Master Lu telling the truth? Can the Heavenly and Earthly Qi Tokens unlock an immortal relic? Did the elders send me to Beiluo because they foresaw this immortal fate?"

His frail frame leaned against the carriage wall, but his eyes shone brightly. "If it's real, why does Lu trust me so? Isn't he afraid I'll rally the Hundred Schools to seize the secret realm?" He squinted, then sighed in defeat. He lacked the leverage to negotiate with the Hundred Schools. Even with Lu's information, he couldn't barter on equal terms. The tokens would eventually draw attention, and Lu likely wasn't the only one guided by immortals. With no bargaining power, cooperating with Lu was his best shot at a share—otherwise, he'd be left with nothing.

He'd also seen the Confucian sage's arrival before leaving. If Lu was aligning with the Confucian School, betraying him for other factions would be sheer folly. The carriage was quiet, save for the rumble of wheels. After a long pause, Lü Mudui tapped his jade-green bamboo staff on the floor. "No rush to return to Donglong Temple. Head to Wolong Ridge first."

"You got it!" the driver called, cracking the whip. The carriage surged forward.

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On Lake Island, the atmosphere was tense. The Preceptor's smile summoned a righteous aura, while Lu's chess piece unleashed spiritual pressure—a clash of sage-level forces. As a Confucian sage, the Preceptor had once subdued the Hundred Schools, his righteous aura overpowering even martial grandmasters. Though untrained in martial arts, his presence was formidable.

Yet Lu faced this aura with effortless calm, astonishing those present. Lu Changkong watched his son with a mix of complexity and pride. He hadn't anticipated Lu's rapid growth, now rivaling a sage. Feeling the spiritual energy within him, he drew a deep breath.

Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao's eyes gleamed with excitement. They'd never known Lu's true strength until now—a sage-level power, capable of matching a Confucian master, among the Hundred Schools' elite. Lu's claim that White Jade Capital would rise above the Hundred Schools was no idle boast.

The wind stilled, and the oppressive air dissipated. The righteous aura vanished, as did Lu's spiritual pressure. "Haha, truly a prodigy!" the Preceptor laughed, stroking his beard. "Changkong, you've raised a fine son."

Lu Changkong smiled, his pride evident. "Master, please," Lu said, smiling. "Knowing your fondness for wine, I've had plum wine prepared."

The Preceptor, hands clasped behind him, stepped forward. His gaze lingered on the pavilion's White Jade Capital sign, murmuring the name before smiling. "A fine name." He sensed Lu's immortal fate far exceeded Emperor Yuwen Xiu's. If Yuwen Xiu was a novice heaven-blessed, Lu was a master—the gap was stark.

The Preceptor ascended the stone steps, Lu Changkong and Luo Yue following. His gaze was drawn to the couplet on the iron plaques, his smile fading to solemnity. He stared for half an incense stick's time before recovering, a flicker of shock in his cloudy eyes.

"Did you write this couplet, Ping'an?" he asked calmly, unlike Nie Changqing and Lü Mudui's intense reactions.

"No, my mentor did," Lu replied, their wheelchair turning toward the pavilion. They suspected the Preceptor had gleaned something from the couplet but didn't press, as he showed no reaction. The Preceptor stiffened briefly, then relaxed.

Lu Changkong, bolstered by spiritual energy, withstood the couplet's pressure with a few steps back. Luo Yue, a mere first-rate martial artist, wasn't so fortunate. Reciting the couplet, he was hurled back, collapsing to one knee, coughing blood, his face pale with lingering fear.

Lu Changkong opted not to enter the pavilion, sensing private matters between Lu and the Preceptor. He wandered the island, intrigued by the ten sunlit chrysanthemums. The Preceptor ascended to the second-floor balcony, where Yi Yue rose after brewing the wine. Ni Yu and Nie Shuang watched curiously from the railing.

The chessboard was set, black and white pieces ready. The Preceptor sat, stroking his beard, while Lu leaned back in their wheelchair. Yi Yue poured steaming plum wine, its tart aroma mingling with the heat.

"Master, shall we play a game?" Lu asked, smiling.

The Preceptor sipped the wine, eyes crinkling with delight. Wine and chess—he savored the moment. The crisp clack of pieces filled the air as they played, sipped, and chatted idly. Sandalwood incense wafted, calming the mind.

The game ended, the board crowded. Lu tossed a black piece back into the box, sighing. "Your chess skills are masterful, Master. I concede."

Despite studying Heavenly Strategy, Lu's practice was brief, no match for a national master like the Preceptor. Ni Yu's eyes widened—when had the Young Master's chess grown so strong?

The Preceptor, holding his cooled wine, coughed, his frail frame exuding an air of fading vitality. Yi Yue offered to warm more, but he waved her off. Setting the cup down, he tucked his hands into his sleeves, his gaze deep and cloudy. "Ping'an, I have a few questions. If I don't ask now, I may not get another chance."

His tone was melancholic, his age spots more pronounced. Lu's brow arched, smoothing the blanket over their lap. "What troubles you, Master?"

The Preceptor smiled, his gaze piercing through the pavilion to the island's darting energies. "Building a faction, destroying noble families, killing Hundred Schools disciples—what's your aim? Great Zhou teeters on collapse, with heroes rising in courts and rivers. Ping'an, do you have designs on this world?"

The question was direct, probing Lu's ambitions as a mature heaven-blessed. Nie Changqing, Ning Zhao, and Yi Yue held their breath. Lu met the Preceptor's gaze silently, their eyes clashing in the air.

Amid the lingering incense, Lu's refined voice broke the quiet. "I built a faction for a comfortable retirement. I crushed noble families and killed Hundred Schools disciples because they provoked me. If they leave me be, the rivers, the courts, the world—what are they to me? After all, I, Lu Ping'an, am known for my good temper."