

## Starlit Path 54

### Chapter 54: A Hundred Layers of Qi, Within Reach

Lu's refined voice lingered on the balcony. The Imperial Preceptor squinted, studying Lu intently. After a long pause, his wrinkled face softened into a kindly smile. "Good. Very good," he said, before erupting into a fit of coughing, his cheeks flushing faintly. He raised a wide sleeve, patting his chest until the coughing eased.

A gentle breeze swept through, and the Preceptor gazed out at the island, his expression one of quiet enjoyment. "What a pleasant place. Once I've helped His Majesty quell the rebellion, I'll settle here for my twilight years. No grand estate—just a thatched hut by the lake's edge. In storms, I'll sip warm wine inside. On clear days, I'll drift on a skiff, fishing."

His cloudy eyes shimmered with hope and longing. Lu smiled. "When the time comes, I'll play chess with you, Master. We'll live the good life."

The Preceptor laughed heartily, joy spilling over. "I hope you keep your word, Ping'an. The greater one's power, the grander their ambitions often become. It's rare to sense no such ambition in you."

Lu, stroking the wool blanket over their lap, said nothing. It wasn't a lack of ambition—merely that the Preceptor's notions of rivers, courts, and the world didn't encompass Lu's vision. Great Zhou was but a corner of the Five Phoenixes Continent. Lu's gaze stretched to reshaping the entire continent, and perhaps beyond. In that sense, the Preceptor wasn't wrong to say Lu lacked ambition.

"Master, you could rest," Lu said, looking at him. "The world, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. You may hold the present, but the future is another matter."

The Preceptor rose, standing shakily at the balcony's railing, hands clasped behind him, white hair cascading as he gazed at the tranquil lake. "When the late emperor passed, he entrusted me with his son. Having made that promise, how can I abandon His Majesty to face the wolves alone? I don't seek to secure the future—just to give His Majesty hope in this desperate moment."

His voice carried a deep weariness. Turning, he fixed Lu with a hopeful gaze. "Ping'an, if I asked you to aid His Majesty, would you?"

Lu plucked a black chess piece from the box, placing it gently on the board, fingers brushing it lightly. "I would not," they replied, their refusal blunt and uncompromising.

The Preceptor wasn't surprised, clearly expecting the answer. "I've prattled on long enough. Time to head to the Lu Manor to pull that weed," he said, stepping toward the wooden stairs.

Lu blinked, startled. "The weed... Mo Tianyu hasn't been freed yet?" They'd assumed the Preceptor had already rescued his disciple. Is Mo Tianyu really his disciple?

"That boy's too arrogant, thinking himself above all. A little humbling won't hurt," the Preceptor said, waving a hand dismissively.

Pausing at the stairs, he turned to Lu, his demeanor solemn. His wide sleeves swept upward, hands clasped before him, a powerful righteous aura surging forth. "Confucian School, Kong Xiu."

Lu's eyes flickered. The wheelchair turned to face him, hands clasping in return. "Beiluo, Lu Ping'an."

They bowed slightly to each other. The Preceptor's self-introduction was an acknowledgment of Lu's sage-level strength. With a hearty laugh, he descended the stairs.

"Ning," Lu called softly.

"Yes," Ning Zhao replied, stepping behind the wheelchair to push it after the Preceptor. Ni Yu slung the chessboard over her back. Nie Changqing, clutching his butcher's knife, glared at Nie Shuang, who was about to follow. "Twenty laps around the island in half an hour. Fail, and you'll hold a horse stance for two hours."

Nie Shuang's face paled. Father, you've changed! Ni Yu patted his shoulder sympathetically before scurrying after Lu.

By the lakeside, Lu Changkong sat cross-legged beneath a massive chrysanthemum, his mind calm, spiritual energy surging within him. He sensed the wisp of energy the chrysanthemum exhaled. Focusing, he tried to seize it, to "pluck qi from the chrysanthemum's mouth."

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open. His vital energy erupted in a series of resounding bursts, and he performed the Earth's Origin Scripture on the spot, steam rising from his body. Locking onto the chrysanthemum's wisp of energy, he drew it toward his dantian, his face flushed with effort, as if wrestling with the flower itself.

Yet the energy, heavy as a mountain, wouldn't budge. Emerging from the pavilion, Lu sensed Lu Changkong's struggle and raised an eyebrow, impressed. Not bad—Father has some cultivation talent. But the unrefined Earth's Origin Scripture, not processed through the Myriad Laws Furnace, couldn't harness spiritual energy.

As Ning Zhao pushed the wheelchair, Lu softly recited the Earth's Hidden Scripture, derived from the Furnace. With their immense soul strength, they projected the words across the distance to Lu Changkong's ears.

Lu Changkong trembled, glancing toward the pavilion in disbelief at Lu's technique. Composing himself, he followed the Earth's Hidden Scripture's method, channeling the energy. His dantian surged with a powerful pull, yanking the chrysanthemum's wisp free. It coursed through his limbs, cleansing his body, and flowed into his dantian.

Joy spread across his face as he sat, clothes fluttering without wind, settling into cultivation. He broke through to the second stage of the Qi Core Realm.

A system prompt appeared: Detected: Lu Changkong (Identity: Beiluo City Lord) has reached the second stage of the Qi Core Realm. 1 wisp of spiritual energy can be claimed. Claim now?

Lu's lips curved. The Myriad Laws Furnace was tied to the Preaching Platform, and the Earth's Hidden Scripture stemmed from the Furnace. Any cultivator tied to the Platform who gained spiritual energy allowed Lu to claim a share. Thus, Lu Changkong's breakthrough granted Lu a wisp.

Without hesitation, Lu claimed it. Their spiritual energy cap rose to 102 wisps. A thought struck—since the Wolong Ridge secret realm was also built via the Platform, any energy gained there would yield Lu a share. Their heart quickened with anticipation. Refining Qi to a hundred layers... maybe it's not so hard after all.

Lu Changkong's breakthrough transformed his aura. The Preceptor glanced at him, surprise flickering in his eyes, but he said nothing. Instead, he smiled at Lu. "Those chrysanthemums are remarkable, Ping'an. Could you part with one for an old man?"

Lu, head bowed, fingers tracing their hand, replied flatly, "No." Another blunt refusal.

The Preceptor didn't press, merely casting an envious glance at the chrysanthemums. The group boarded the luxurious boat, the journey back harmonious compared to the tense arrival. They glided across the lake, admiring its beauty, and soon reached the dock.

Lu Changkong helped the Preceptor ashore, while Ning Zhao and Nie Changqing lifted Lu's wheelchair onto the stone path. From a distance, hoofbeats and frantic donkey brays—"Hee-haw! Hee-haw!"—grew louder.

On the lakeside path, a rickety donkey cart approached. The group paid it little mind, assuming it was a local traveler. The cart rolled past, its driver—a young man in a dark blue robe—flashing a simple, honest smile.

Suddenly, the string on his pole snapped, and the carrot fell, rolling across the ground. The donkey snorted, rearing up, nearly tipping the cart. The youth, looking panicked, tumbled off, crying out in distress.

The group glanced over, assuming an accident. The youth rolled, then sprang up like a coiled spring, transforming into a blur of black shadow hurtling toward the frail Preceptor. From his sleeve slid a silver pair of scissors, glinting coldly in the sunlight.

The Soul-Piercing Scissors strike unseen; the Blood-Slaying Path leaves no trace.

The youth's honest demeanor vanished, replaced by the cold confidence of the world's second greatest assassin. His creed: strike when the target is unaware, kill in one blow.

The air turned sharp and deadly.