

Starlit Path 58

Chapter 58: A Game Too Trivial for My Hand

The moon hung high, casting a cold, silvery glow, intermittently veiled by drifting clouds. Lü Mudui emerged from Wolong Ridge, his white robes tattered and speckled with blood, leaning heavily on his jade-green bamboo staff as he staggered forward. Behind him, the dense forest echoed with the cries of night crows taking flight.

The waiting carriage driver, seeing Lü Mudui's disheveled state, rushed to his side in alarm. "Sir, did you encounter a wild beast? I saw a villager flee in panic—there must be some monster in the ridge!"

Lü Mudui waved him off, his exhaustion overshadowed by an inexplicable excitement. Settling into the carriage, his body trembled uncontrollably. "To the capital!" he ordered.

The driver, though puzzled, asked no questions. With a crack of the whip, the horses neighed, and the carriage thundered toward the capital.

In the capital, the dead of night cloaked the bustling city, yet a teahouse in the heart of the market glowed with candlelight. At the counter, a young girl with a bun hairstyle lazily tallied accounts. Inside, a servant draped in white cloth swept the floor, chairs upturned on tables.

A soft knock came from the door. The girl snapped alert. "Who's there? We're closed—no tea at this hour!"

A hoarse voice replied, “The mysteries of heaven transcend; no need for divination to sway the masses.”

Her eyes lit up at the code phrase. She scurried from the counter, unbolted the door, and found a weary old man in white, clutching a bamboo staff—Lü Mudui. “Uncle-Master!” she exclaimed.

“Shh.” Lü Mudui pressed a trembling finger to his lips. The girl shut the door as footsteps descended from upstairs. Lü Mudui sank into a chair, exhaling deeply.

A woman in ornate brocade, her hair elegantly pinned, descended gracefully. “Old Lü, why the rush? The Master ordered you to stay in Beiluo. Why are you here?”

The servant poured hot tea. Lü Mudui gulped it down, scalding his throat, then fixed his gaze on the woman, tossing his three copper coins. She caught them deftly, her brows furrowing. The coins were blackened, cracked. “What did you do?” she asked, her voice sharp.

“I went to Wolong Ridge and saw something terrifying...” Lü Mudui grinned, revealing a gap-toothed smile.

“Why go there?” she demanded, tossing the coins back.

“An immortal fate has emerged in Wolong Ridge—a secret realm that could change the world,” he said, his excitement giving way to gravity. “Junior Sister Qianqian, may I borrow a Heavenly Mechanism Pigeon?”

The woman studied him. "Is this true?"

"Absolutely," Lü Mudui replied.

"Using the pigeons will shake the world. Are you sure? Can you bear the consequences if this goes wrong?"

"I'll take full responsibility," he said firmly.

She nodded. They ascended to a secret chamber on the top floor. Lü Mudui took a sheet of dark yellow paper, coughed blood onto it, and began writing:

*"Ten Heavenly and Earthly Qi Tokens, Wolong births gods and spirits.

Spiritual energy awakens the cosmos, cultivation grasps eternal life.

...

Heavenly Mechanism School, Lü Mudui, written in blood."*

The woman read over his shoulder, her pupils shrinking in shock. If true, this would upheaval the world. "Is this... real?" she asked again.

"If I lie, may lightning strike me," Lü Mudui said, wiping blood from his lips. He copied the letter several times, tucked them into the pigeons' canisters, and opened the cage. With a flurry of wings, the white pigeons soared from the capital, scattering in all directions.

Lü Mudui watched them fly, a relieved smile spreading across his face. The woman, frowning, ignored him and sent riders to Wolong Ridge.

The Heavenly Mechanism Pigeons were the school's means of broadcasting urgent news. As they flew, cities under the night sky received the messages. Leaders of the Heavenly Mechanism School read the letters in disbelief. Spiritual energy resurgence? Immortal fate in Wolong Ridge? Qi Tokens grant entry? Nonsense, yet the pigeons' use signaled undeniable truth.

Strong warriors were dispatched, galloping to Wolong Ridge, dust rising in their wake. At dawn, as sunlight bathed the land, figures gathered outside the ridge's glowing, translucent dome, its five-colored radiance confirming the truth. The immortal fate is real. Messages flew back to the cities, and more pigeons took flight across Great Zhou.

In North County, at the Tantai Manor, Tantai Xuan sat grimly in his high chair, while his advisor, Mo Ju, clad in a long robe and scholar's cap, studied the letter. "An immortal fate in Wolong Ridge, promising longevity..." Mo Ju mused.

The Heavenly Mechanism School's pigeons ensured the news had spread everywhere. It was likely true—such a move was reserved for earth-shaking revelations. "Mo Ju, is this credible?" Tantai Xuan asked, frowning.

"Ninety percent certain," Mo Ju replied, fanning himself lightly. "Recall the battle at Beiluo?"

Tantai Xuan's face darkened. With fifty thousand troops, victory had seemed assured, yet they were routed. Since then, misfortune plagued him—his assault on Drunken Dragon City was crushed by Jiang Li's lone spear, shattering his army's morale.

"That extraordinary woman, Lu Ping'an's maid, wielded the powers of a cultivator blessed by immortal fate," Mo Ju said, eyes gleaming. "Without her, we wouldn't have lost. Cultivators are the variable. The world's tides are shifting, Lord. The immortal fate could alter the balance. We must seize it, train cultivators, or even if Great Zhou falls, we'll be fish on another's chopping block. I know Xiang Shaoyun of West County has gained an immortal fate, his strength now unfathomable—one man against armies."

Tantai Xuan's eyes narrowed. Xiang Shaoyun was already terrifying; with an immortal fate, who could stop him? "Send troops to Wolong Ridge! Seize the immortal fate!" he roared, slamming the armrest.

In West County, in a military camp, Xiang Shaoyun's towering frame dominated a high seat, his eyes burning as he read the letter. Below, an elderly man, white-haired and hunched, seemed on the verge of collapse—Mo Beike, head of the Mohist School, a rival to the Confucian Preceptor.

“Shaoyun, you must go to Wolong Ridge. This immortal fate could reshape the world,” Mo Beike said. “I've ordered the collection of the Heavenly and Earthly Qi Tokens. Prepare yourself—Shougui will accompany you.”

“No need,” Xiang Shaoyun said, glancing at him. “I'm enough.”

His tone was brash. Mo Beike paused, then said, “The immortal fate belongs to the destined. You alone can't claim it all.”

In the capital's study hall, the Preceptor held the letter, gazing at the dawn. “Immortal fate... Heavenly and Earthly Qi Tokens...” He recalled the emperor's words and took a deep breath. Wolong Ridge's secret realm was now known to all. “Why did the Heavenly Mechanism School broadcast this so boldly? Is someone stirring the waters, orchestrating it all?” A glint of suspicion flickered in his cloudy eyes.

That day, news of Wolong Ridge's immortal fate swept through Great Zhou's counties. The world trembled. Heavenly and Earthly Qi Tokens were uncovered by heroes far and wide.

In Beiluo, at the Lu Manor, morning light bathed the courtyard. Lu rose lazily, attended by Yi Yue and Ni Yu, beginning another indulgent day. They had passed the Earth's Hidden Scripture to Ning Zhao, who was sent to Lake Island to cultivate overnight.

Yi Yue pushed the wheelchair from the courtyard. Jing Yue, with his pearwood sword case, greeted Lu with a fawning smile. "Morning, Young Master!"

Lu glanced at him, nodding slightly. "Let's see yesterday's assassin," they said, stretching lazily.

"Yes," Yi Yue replied softly.

Suddenly, Lu Changkong appeared, clad in dark armor, his face etched with urgency. "Fan'er," he called, holding a dark yellow letter.

Lu scanned it, a knowing smile tugging at their lips. Lü Mudui's making his move. "Wolong Ridge holds an immortal fate, and the Heavenly Mechanism School has spread the news everywhere," Lu Changkong said. "Scouts report the Hundred Schools and at least five county lords are marching here. Beiluo must be fortified. Fan'er, is this immortal fate real?"

Lu set the letter down, smiling faintly. "It's real."

“Then I’ll grant you ten thousand troops to seize it!” Lu Changkong declared, resolute.

Lu chuckled, touched but dismissive. “No need for ten thousand troops. I’ll send Old Nie and Ning Zhao.”

“You’re not going yourself?” Lu Changkong asked, stunned.

A breeze stirred Lu’s hair as they smiled. “The immortal fate is too small. I can’t be bothered.”