

Starlit Path 67

Chapter 67: Clearing the First Secret Realm

Ning Zhao's fleeting glance was like a bolt of lightning piercing the eternal night, leaving an indelible mark on Mo Ju's heart.

Though she didn't smile, the moment etched itself vividly in his mind.

He clutched his chest, fanning himself lightly.

"Who are they?"

Dantai Xuan rose slowly, his eyes bloodshot, his breathing ragged.

"Lu Ping'an of North Luo's maid and coachman," Mo Ju replied, his intelligence reports having detailed these two.

"How can they enter the immortal palace without spirit tokens?" Dantai Xuan rasped, staring at the sealed gate.

"Perhaps it's tied to the power behind them... or their status as cultivators," Mo Ju said, his gaze deepening.

Their backing might rival—or even surpass—the hundred schools.

But he kept that thought to himself.

Dantai Xuan closed his eyes, a bitter laugh escaping him.

“Cultivators... can they truly ascend to the level of immortals?”

He turned to Mo Ju. “Twelve entered the palace. Send men to keep watch. When someone emerges, find out what destinies lie within. Also, scour the land for spirit tokens and train loyal warriors to enter the palace.”

“The tokens scatter each time the palace opens, meaning it’s not a one-time opportunity. This place may become a crucible for the world’s powers to forge cultivators.”

“The tides of the world are shifting. In the past, grandmasters were the trump card. In the future, cultivators—capable of facing thousands alone—will be the true power in the hands of rulers.”

His bloodshot eyes gleamed with resolve.

Mo Ju, fanning himself, was surprised. Despite the crushing defeat, Dantai Xuan hadn't crumbled—he'd awakened.

A spark of excitement flickered in Mo Ju's heart. What strategist didn't dream of serving a rising dragon?

"Yes, my lord," he said, bowing.

Dantai Xuan turned, his crimson cape billowing, and strode away.

Immortal Palace

The chamber shuddered violently.

Xiang Shaoyun's shield, crafted by the Mo Clan's master smiths, crumpled under the impact, sending him flying.

Blood sprayed from his mouth.

He'd hoped to harness the spiritual energy from slaying the lieutenant fiend to defeat the withered Taoist.

But the Taoist, as if reading his intent, absorbed the chamber's remaining fiends, his power surging.

Xiang Shaoyun was battered.

Wearing the toughest armor, he took the heaviest blows.

Never had he been so humiliated, so despairing.

The Taoist's oppressive presence was overwhelming.

A flick of his hand, a wave, and Xiang Shaoyun was sent flying, unable to close the distance.

Compared to the Taoist's versatile use of spiritual energy—forming palms, projecting pressure—Xiang Shaoyun's crude method of amplifying vital energy with qi was laughably weak.

The Taoist's myriad techniques left him temperless.

Never had he felt so powerless.

A prodigy who could crush masters at six, he'd never taken other warriors seriously.

Proud, arrogant, the invincible Overlord of West County, wielding axe and shield.

Yet, against a true cultivator, he was utterly outmatched.

Li Sansi, gripping his wooden sword, leaned against the stone wall, his white robes stained crimson. Each breath brought sharp pain.

"Cultivators... the world is changing," he murmured.

Mo Shugui and Kong Nanfei, pale and exhausted, had no strength left to fight.

As masters, they were still human, still prone to fatigue.

Xiang Shaoyun was a monster, rising after being knocked back dozens of times, charging relentlessly with his axe.

Even Mo Shugui had to admit his strength.

But today... even he might fall in this palace.

Pfft!

Xiang Shaoyun coughed blood, staggering back, his spine straight, axe dangling in one hand.

With a roar, he dragged the axe, its blade scraping the ground with a metallic screech.

The floating Taoist, Jiang Chao, glanced at him with glowing green eyes.

His hand rose, and an invisible spiritual pressure formed a phantom palm, striking Xiang Shaoyun's chest.

Like a faint shadow, it hit lightly, but his chest bones cracked, blood and sweat on his skin trembling like stars in the night, shattering into mist.

He slid back, feet grinding against the floor.

Suddenly, two icy gusts—one black, one white—whistled past his cheeks, slicing a strand of his hair.

Xiang Shaoyun's eyes flared as he focused.

A black, heavy butcher's knife and a thin, cicada-wing sword streaked from outside the chamber, like meteors in the night, trailing radiant arcs.

Buzz...

The Taoist flipped his palm, spiritual pressure surging, halting the weapons inches from his face.

Two white-clad figures glided into the chamber with flawless lightness skills, as if stepping on snow.

Xiang Shaoyun panted heavily.

The figures shot past him.

Li Sansi's eyes gleamed, locking onto the newcomers.

Mo Shugui's gaze tightened.

“Who are they?”

Kong Nanfei, lips cracked but eyes shining like stars, spoke.

“The Master visited North Luo recently. Upon returning, he learned of the secret realm at Wolong Ridge and sent me here. Before I left, he spoke highly of someone: ‘Cooking plum wine in the lakeheart pavilion, linking qi through chess moves. Laughing over mountains and rivers, Lu Ping’an of North Luo.’”

Kong Nanfei paused, taking a deep breath. Such praise from the Master was rare.

“These two are Lu Ping’an’s maid and coachman.”

“Or rather... disciples of his White Jade Capital.”

Li Sansi and Mo Shugui inhaled sharply, their hearts shaken.

“Maid and coachman?”

This guy’s got style!

Nie Changqing activated the Daoist Spirit Channeling Art, while Ning Zhao wielded the Earth Treasury Sutra.

Spiritual energy surged from their qi cores, enveloping them in pressure.

They faced the withered Taoist.

The air crackled as their cultivator-born spiritual pressures clashed.

Nie Changqing raised his hand, his knife-control technique sending the butcher's knife spinning toward the Taoist's head.

The cicada-wing sword snapped back to Ning Zhao's hand. She gripped it, white dress billowing, spiritual energy coating the blade as she unleashed a torrent of sword qi.

Xiang Shaoyun watched, eyes narrowed.

He noticed Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao were unaffected by the Taoist's spiritual pressure, trading blows evenly.

Their raw strength was comparable to his, yet their mastery of spiritual pressure achieved what he couldn't.

"Is this pressure from spiritual energy the divide between cultivators and ordinary warriors?!"

A realization dawned.

He mobilized the five wisps of spiritual energy in his qi core, clumsily circulating them to form pressure around himself.

This was spiritual pressure—the chasm separating cultivators from warriors!

If Ning Zhao could master it, so could he, with his prodigious talent. Observing their fight, he formed his own pressure.

Ecstasy surged within him, a breakthrough he hadn't felt in ages.

Gripping his axe, he stepped forward, his spiritual pressure reducing the Taoist's oppression, though his weak mastery couldn't fully negate it.

Still, he could fight now!

Joining the fray, he increased the pressure on the Taoist.

Compared to Nie Changqing's knife control and Ning Zhao's agile grace, Xiang Shaoyun took a beating but grew more excited with each blow.

He sensed the Taoist's power waning.

A glimmer of hope, like the morning star, lit his heart.

Finally...

Nie Changqing's knife, guided by his white robes, slashed the Taoist's neck, cutting two inches into flesh.

Ning Zhao, spinning with her sword, pierced through floating dust, driving her blade into the Taoist's chest, pinning him to the wall.

Xiang Shaoyun roared, gripping his axe with both hands and leaping forward.

Suddenly, the pinned Taoist opened his mouth, unleashing a soul-shaking screech.

“I, Jiang Chao, swear to guard the emperor’s glory with my withered body!”

His green eyes blazed.

His body swelled and exploded.

The blast injured everyone in the chamber.

Hundreds of wisps of spiritual energy swirled, forming a storm.

Xiang Shaoyun, caught mid-leap, was blasted back, his chest torn and bloody, sliding across the floor, coughing blood.

Nie Changqing caught his knife, blood trickling from his mouth. Ning Zhao, pale, stepped back, her sword hand bleeding.

Sensing the swirling spiritual energy, they recognized the opportunity. Sitting cross-legged, they activated their techniques, absorbing the energy into their qi cores.

Xiang Shaoyun staggered up, joining them, drawing the energy into his dantian.

The Taoist, the palace's grand entity, left behind energy far richer and easier to refine than that of the fiends or lieutenants.

Li Sansi and the others, stabilizing their injuries from the blast, sat eagerly, absorbing the energy.

North Luo, Lakeheart Island

Lu's eyes, alive with shifting patterns, fixed on the chessboard, where the image of the defiant, self-destructing Jiang Chao lingered. He sighed.

This was his first secret realm boss, imbued with emotion and a physical form.

Yet, Jiang Chao's fate was sealed from the start, doomed to cycle through self-destruction.

The first secret realm had been cleared.

As Jiang Chao exploded, a system prompt flashed before Lu's eyes:

“Congratulations, Host, for constructing the ‘Wolong Ridge Immortal Palace’ secret realm and guiding the world’s exploration...”