

STARLIT PATH OF THE MYSTIC FORGE

Chapter 8: Qi Core Realm Cultivator

Atop the Northern Prefecture's observation platform, Tantai Xuan's face was grim, his vital energy surging, his red cape billowing behind him. Beiluo's gates, which should have remained sealed, had opened just enough for Lu Changkong, under siege by four Grandmasters, to slip through and escape.

"Useless!" Tantai Xuan spat coldly, his composure returning.

The three major clans within Beiluo had failed him spectacularly. "There was only one chance. Now that Lu Changkong's back inside, he'll turtle up. Catching him off-guard again is near impossible," he said, exhaling heavily. The best opportunity to seize Beiluo had slipped through his fingers.

Beside him stood a scholarly man in a blue robe and silk cap, his demeanor refined. "With Lu Changkong absent and no Grandmaster in the city, how could the three clans fail?" he mused, shaking his head.

"I care for results, not excuses," Tantai Xuan snapped, ignoring the scholar's muttering. Drawing his sword, he pointed it skyward and issued his command. "Attack! While Beiluo's in disarray, storm the city!"

The Northern Prefecture's fifty thousand troops began their slow, oppressive advance.

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Atop Beiluo's walls, the atmosphere was tense and strange. Luo Yue, Lu Changkong's loyal general, stared at Lu, mouth agape. Though a seasoned subordinate, he rarely interacted with the young lord. *Is the young master this reckless?* he wondered. How could a frail youth with no martial strength dare back a Grandmaster against four others?

"Young Lord, the City Lord's returned. We shouldn't act now—better to strategize with him. Four Grandmasters await below. Even if Ning Zhao's reached Grandmaster level, facing four at once is a losing battle," Luo Yue urged.

Lu sat in his wheelchair, Ni Yu dutifully holding the umbrella to shield him from the glaring sun. He nodded solemnly at Luo Yue's words, his finger tapping his cheek thoughtfully. "Uncle Luo, you make sense. But... I've been crippled

since childhood, my mindset warped. I'm petty and can't stand insults. My father never insulted me—how dare that brute below?"

With that, he patted Ning Zhao's slender waist again. "Sister Ning, go. Your master's got your back. I keep my word."

Ning Zhao flashed a charming smile, rolling her eyes—whether at his touch or his claim of being short-tempered after boasting about his calm demeanor. *Men*, she thought, recalling his earlier insistence that his temper was "just fine." Luo Yue was speechless, convinced Lu was sending Ning Zhao to her death.

With a surge of vital energy, Ning Zhao leaped from the walls, her feet tapping the thick bricks as her white skirt billowed, dancing like gossamer. She descended from the fifteen-meter height like a celestial maiden, stunning the Northern Prefecture's army. Her breathtaking grace, cold as eternal ice, captivated all who saw her.

Gripping her cicada-wing blade, Ning Zhao locked onto Feng Shi, her killing intent palpable. This man who insulted her master deserved to be torn apart—only Lu's order for him alive stayed her hand. *He's suffered enough, yet they dare mock him? Death is too kind.*

Her blade swept out, a faint blue strand of spiritual energy drawn from her dantian, amplifying her surging vital energy. Landing lightly, she fixed her gaze on Feng Shi. Her red lips parted, her voice cold and commanding. “Qi Core Realm cultivator, Ning Zhao. By my master’s order, I claim your wretched life.”

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Behind Beiluo’s gates, Lu Changkong tore his gaze from his fallen subordinate’s body, his eyes bloodshot. Suddenly, his bare skin prickled as a powerful force erupted outside. “What strange vital energy... who’s fighting?” he muttered, frowning.

Yi Yue, pale and slumped on the ground, brightened. “My lord, it’s Sister Ning.”

Lu Changkong froze. “Nonsense. Ning Zhao’s only First-Rate. How could she wield such energy? Isn’t she guarding Fan’er?”

Yi Yue, intimidated but resolute, replied, “My lord, it’s true. Sister Ning received the young master’s immortal blessing—spiritual energy—and broke through to Grandmaster. I opened the gate on his orders.”

Lu Changkong was stunned. *Immortal blessing? Spiritual energy?* “Martial artists trust in blood and fists, not fairy tales,” he scoffed, yet fell silent as Ning Zhao’s commanding voice echoed from beyond the walls.

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On the observation platform, Tantai Xuan’s eyes narrowed at the sight of Ning Zhao’s ethereal descent. “Who is she?” he breathed, her image searing into his mind.

His generals, including his trusted advisor, the blue-robed scholar Mo Ju, were at a loss. Even Mo Ju couldn’t match her to any known Grandmaster. “Beiluo has another Grandmaster, and you didn’t know?” Tantai Xuan snapped, his anger laced with bitter amusement.

No wonder Lu Changkong dared leave the city—he had a Grandmaster in reserve. The clans’ failure made sense now. Had Tantai Xuan known, he’d have planned differently. *Lu Changkong, you cunning fox.*

But the scholar smiled. “Governor, don’t worry. We have four Grandmasters to their two. The advantage is ours.”

Tantai Xuan steadied himself. The attack had to proceed.

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“Hah! You think you can kill me, wench? I’m General Feng Shi, under Governor Tantai!” Feng Shi roared, glaring at Ning Zhao with a savage grin. A Grandmaster? He was the Northern Prefecture’s fiercest general.

He yanked his reins, his horse rearing with a piercing whinny. But instead of charging, he wheeled around and fled, survival instinct overriding bravado. *Respect the threat first.*

The four Grandmasters exchanged wary glances. “Qi Core Realm? What’s that?”

“She calls herself a cultivator? What’s a cultivator?”

As pinnacle Grandmasters, their knowledge was vast, yet this term was alien. “Hmph, probably just nonsense to rattle us,” Tantai Xuan’s Grandmaster general sneered, spurring his horse toward Ning Zhao. The three sect Grandmasters followed, charging with booming vital energy, determined to redeem their failure to stop Lu Changkong by crushing her.

Ning Zhao’s gaze remained fixed on the fleeing Feng Shi, ignoring the four Grandmasters entirely.

Atop the walls, Lu spoke softly. “Little Ni, take me to the parapet.”

Ni Yu, face red, started to fold her umbrella, but Luo Yue stepped in, pushing the wheelchair to the wall’s edge. Lu gazed at the Northern Prefecture’s fifty thousand troops advancing like a dark cloud. His eyes shifted to the battle below. It had to end quickly—against an army, even a Grandmaster would fall.

Though reluctant to use more spiritual energy, Lu now had the *Mystical Qi Refining Manual* to replenish it. He could afford to be lavish. Under Luo Yue’s puzzled stare, Lu raised his hand, fingers poised like a flower. Ning Zhao had to win. If one strand wasn’t enough, he’d give another.

Sensing the lock on Ning Zhao, Lu's lips curved, and with a flick of his fingers, he deployed another strand.