

Starlit Path 81

Chapter 81: The Final Mission

Lu finished his porridge and was basking in the courtyard sun, arranging a game of Mountains and Rivers chess, when Ni Yu's excited shout echoed from outside.

"Dragon sunflower, angelica, plantain, iris, poria... Young Master, I've gathered all the herbs you asked for!"

The courtyard gate swung open. Ni Yu burst in, lugging a large black pot on her back and carrying a basket brimming with medicinal herbs, panting as she jogged over.

Lu raised an eyebrow, continuing to place his chess pieces. Ni Yu dropped the pot with a clang and caught her breath. "Young Master, the herbs and this pot cost two taels and three qian of silver," she said, wiping sweat from her forehead.

He smiled. "Not bad, you're quick." As expected, the promise of food was the ultimate motivator for her.

"Alright, let's head to Lakeheart Island," he said. "Didn't you want to cultivate while eating? I'll teach you."

"Yes, sir!" Ni Yu's eyes sparkled. Hoisting the pot and herbs, she huffed and puffed her way out of the manor toward Lakeheart Island.

Hooves thundered. Clad in armor, the city lord stood on Beiluo's walls, his brow furrowing. In the distance, a lone rider galloped from the plains, kicking up dust.

As the rider reached the city gates, they called out, "City Lord Lu, I come bearing His Majesty's decree!"

The city lord didn't dare delay. The gates opened, and the rider, an old eunuch in tight-fitting attire, entered with a scroll in hand, bowing to the city lord atop the wall. Recognizing him as Emperor Yuwen Xiu's trusted confidant, a martial expert, the city lord descended to meet him.

"City Lord Lu, where is your son? His Majesty's decree is for him to receive," the eunuch said with a smile, his tone devoid of arrogance despite his imperial status.

"My son's legs are frail, and he resides on Lakeheart Island to recuperate. Please, join me to the island to meet him," the city lord replied.

"I'd be grateful for your guidance," the eunuch said, his voice sharp with a chuckle.

The city lord left Luo Yue to guard the walls, summoned Luo Cheng, and led the eunuch toward Lakeheart Island.

Drunken Dragon City.

Jiang Li, in silver armor, solemnly received the imperial decree. "Yuanchi and Tong'an have fallen?" he sighed.

"His Majesty places great trust in you, City Lord Jiang. Do not disappoint him," the eunuch said.

Jiang Li bowed, offering the eunuch some silver and arranging for his rest. As the eunuch departed, a woman with a graceful figure appeared, standing respectfully behind him.

"My lord, latest reports: the Warlord has returned alive to Xi County and is rallying his army to raze the Mohist Mechanism City at East Lake," she said.

Jiang Li, hands clasped behind his back, narrowed his eyes. "The Mohist Leader calculated everything, but misjudged the Warlord. Or perhaps something unexpected altered the Warlord's fate."

The woman, her striking face registering shock, said, "My lord, if the Mohist Leader planned everything, could your mission to hold Yuanchi and Tong'an also be part of his scheme?"

Jiang Li gave a cold smile. "This is a game between the Mohist Leader and the National Advisor. Who can say? But the Mohist Leader is one of the few who knows my weakness. Chilian, protect Qingniao."

The woman, Chilian, her fiery beauty resolute, vowed, "I'll guard her with my life."

*Beiluo, Lakeheart Island.

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A gentle lake breeze stirred, and ten Skyward Chrysanthemums swayed, absorbing spiritual energy. Beneath them, Mo Liuqi opened his eyes.

In the distance, Lu's fox-like maid, Yi Yue, sat hugging her knees, staring at the shimmering lake, her face streaked with tears. She had sensed the "qi" Lu spoke of, reaching the Qi Core stage with a strand of spiritual energy—meeting his standard.

"Father... Mother... Yi Yue has grown stronger," she whispered, her lips trembling.

Mo Liuqi said nothing. He'd seen many driven by vengeance. Standing, he stretched, noticing Jing Yue, the sword sect disciple, still glaring at him. Mo Liuqi chuckled inwardly—such dedication. But he had no intention of fleeing, nor the courage. Young Master Lu's unfathomable, godlike power left him no room for escape, a presence even more enigmatic than the Mohist Leader.

In the distance, Ning Zhao and Nie Changqing rose. Ripples spread across the lake as fish darted and birds scattered, startled by an approaching wooden boat.

Lu, still in his wheelchair, floated onto the island. "Young Master," Nie Changqing, Ni Yu, Jing Yue, and Yi Yue bowed. Mo Liuqi hesitated, then bowed slightly.

Lu's smile was warm, like a spring breeze. "Ning, help me... ugh," came Ni Yu's feeble voice from the boat.

Ning Zhao, amused, leapt aboard and found Ni Yu slumped over the upside-down black pot, looking aggrieved. With a fond smile, she pulled Ni Yu ashore, setting the pot and herbs down.

Lu turned to Mo Liuqi. "Impressive. Three-stage Qi Core in a single day. Truly worthy of one who 'controls scissors with intent.'"

Ning Zhao and Nie Changqing exchanged stunned glances. Three-stage Qi Core in a day? That talent was monstrous.

"Young Master, does your promise still hold?" Mo Liuqi asked, his eyes sharp.

"My word is my bond. Go, say farewell to that 'Azhu,'" Lu replied, leaning back in his wheelchair, fingers tapping lightly. "You're not suited to be an assassin. Persist, and you'll meet a grim end."

His words were blunt. Assassins should be heartless, but Mo Liuqi burned with passion—too much for his own good.

Mo Liuqi fell silent, then stepped back and knelt, pressing his forehead to the ground. “I, Mo Liuqi, know gratitude and grudges. I failed my mission and should have died, but you spared me, granting me a second life. My life is yours.”

Lu waved dismissively. “Go. Also, when you reach shore, head to the Lu Manor for your donkey. Someone will give it to you.”

Mo Liuqi, thinking of his stubborn donkey, scratched his head sheepishly. A failed assassination and leaving his donkey for others to tend—what kind of assassin was he?

He boarded a small boat and vanished into the misty lake.

“Young Master, you’re letting him go? Aren’t you afraid he’ll flee?” Nie Changqing frowned.

Jing Yue nodded. “Should I keep an eye on him?”

“No need,” Lu said calmly. “He won’t dare.”

He flicked a finger toward a Skyward Chrysanthemum, a petal peeling off and floating to his palm. His gaze shifted to the black pot and herbs. Ni Yu choosing a pot for alchemy—only a foodie would think of that. While alchemy typically required a specialized furnace, there was no rule against using a pot.

Might as well try refining a batch of qi-gathering pills in it.

East Lake, Mohist Territory.

At the edge of Xi County, atop a towering mountain, a lake cradled the famed Mohist Mechanism City, a stronghold built by the Mohists and Mechanism School. Waterfalls cascaded like a galaxy, forming a natural barrier.

A narrow corridor, carved with ornate railings and tiled with green, stretched between the waterfalls, poetic in its elegance. At its center stood a tall, impassive man, a slender sword at his waist, his hair loose with two strands framing his cold, emotionless face.

Footsteps echoed, drowned by the waterfall's roar. He turned to see a woman in red, her face half-covered by a silver mask, her lips a vivid scarlet.

"Another mission, Azhu?" he asked, his voice flat, devoid of feeling.

She stood beside him, her height reaching his shoulder, her hair dancing in the waterfall's gusts. Her masked eyes flickered. "Liuqi took that mission. He's not coming back," she said, her tone distant.

The man said nothing. The roar of the falls filled the awkward silence.

"The Leader says this is the final mission. You can't avoid it," she continued softly. "Complete it, and if you survive, you're free."

At the word "freedom," the corner of his mouth twitched faintly. "Fine. The mission?"

She gazed at the cascading falls, as if seeing the youth who always grinned foolishly at her. Closing her eyes, she whispered, "Defend the Mechanism City to the death."