

Starlit Path 84

Chapter 84: Half a Shattered Smiling Mask

Beiluo City.

The city lord personally escorted the old eunuch out of the city. Lu's refusal of the imperial decree didn't surprise him. With Lu's enigmatic, godlike cultivation, worldly imperial authority held little sway over him.

"Fan'er's temperament is volatile due to his leg condition. Please convey to His Majesty not to take offense," the city lord said, bowing to the eunuch.

The eunuch, still shaken from witnessing a true cultivator's might, returned the gesture. He had scoffed at the National Advisor's claims about cultivators' power, but today, his heart trembled. When the decree had hovered, poised to pierce his skull, his legs had nearly given out.

"City Lord, it was I who disturbed Young Master Lu," the eunuch said, his emotions complex. "The Hundred Schools, allied with North County's Governor Tantai Xuan, have breached Yuanchi and Tong'an. His Majesty issued two decrees—one to Drunken Dragon, one to Beiluo. With Beiluo's delivered, I must return to the capital swiftly."

The city lord's eyes sharpened, confirming his suspicions. The attack on Beiluo had been mirrored across the other five guardian cities. The emergence of cultivators from Wolong Ridge's Immortal Palace had rattled the Mohists, who thought they held all the cards.

"Safe travels," the city lord said.

The eunuch bowed, spurred his horse, and galloped away. The city lord watched his retreating figure, eyes narrowing, then turned toward Lakeheart Island.

Beiluo, Lakeheart Island.

Lu handed the spirit-endowed pot to Ni Yu. Having eaten the failed qi-gathering pill, she had effortlessly broken through to the third stage of the Qi Core realm and was now gleefully celebrating—though the pill’s mild toxins caused her to fart incessantly, the sound echoing across the island.

Lu ascended to the second-floor terrace of White Jade Pavilion. Ning Zhao brought plum wine, and a gentle breeze stirred as he played chess, exuding calm elegance. Suddenly, his senses stirred, his vision transforming into shifting lines, zooming toward the distant Mechanism City, where blades flashed and shadows clashed.

Yuanchi City.

Ten li outside the city, Jiang Li, in silver armor, stood with Great Zhou’s elite troops sent from the capital. Wooden barricades and trenches faced North County’s army within Yuanchi. His hand rested on the sheathed, rusted sword at his waist as he gazed at the city.

On the ramparts, three figures stood: the hunched Mohist Leader, North County Governor Tantai Xuan, and his strategist, Mo Ju. Mo Ju, once a Mohist but long independent, hadn't expected to align with them again. Yet, he harbored no objections—North County's alliance with the Mohists was their best path.

Originally, the Mohists backed Xi County's Warlord. If Great Zhou fell, the world would fracture, and the strongest contenders would be Xi County's Warlord, North County's Tantai, and South County's Tang family. With the Mohists now allied with North County, Tantai's chances of seizing the capital soared.

Jiang Li's gaze lingered, then withdrew coldly. North County's army hadn't moved, and he knew why—they were waiting for his weakness to be exploited. His hand caressed his sword, pain flickering within. He had wanted to shield her from the world's filth, letting her live peacefully as a chicken farmer. But fate had other plans.

East Lake, Mohist Mechanism City.

Torrential rain fueled the bloody slaughter. Xi Liang warriors, braving the city's crossbow bolts, finally scaled the eighty-one iron chains. But the city's walls whirred, gears turning as countless spikes shot out, piercing even first-rate warriors, sending them plummeting into the abyss.

Waterfalls and rain merged, washing away the blood. The deaths of his men pained Xiang Shaoyun, his iron heart twitching. In the army, a bare-chested warrior pounded a drum, scattering raindrops.

Xiang Shaoyun stepped from his chariot, boots splashing water two feet high. The Mechanism City lived up to its reputation as the world's toughest fortress. He saw the busy Mohist disciples and Azhu's fiery figure, like a mandala flower.

To breach the city, brute force was needed to crack its defenses. Once a shield was pierced, cracks would spread. He closed his eyes, visions of Wolong Ridge flashing—his men, bloodied and defiant, cut down by five thousand soldiers. The sound of Mingsang's mournful flute echoed, drowning out the rain.

His eyes snapped open, cold and merciless. "Kill!" he roared, shattering the rain before him. Wielding his axe and shield, he leapt onto an iron chain, charging steadily across.

His move ignited the Xi Liang warriors' blood, their faith ablaze. They swung their weapons, undeterred by the downpour, their fervor unquenched.

On the city walls, Azhu's masked eyes narrowed. "Slay the Warlord!" she ordered. Crossbow carts swiveled, firing bolts that shattered raindrops, spiraling toward Xiang Shaoyun's towering frame.

He stood firm on the chain, swinging his shield. The bolts, capable of repelling multiple men, had no effect. Azhu, unfazed, signaled again. The wall split, and an eighteen-segment mechanical centipede, a masterpiece of Mohist and Mechanism Schools, slithered onto the chain, its steel blades shredding warriors in its path. Blood soaked the rain.

Xiang Shaoyun roared, charging the centipede fearlessly. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed. Two meters to his side, a raindrop split in half, sliced by a sharp aura. His wet hair whipped as he swung his axe, blood qi erupting in nine resounding bursts.

A smiling mask appeared before him, a sword flashing like a ripple, shattering raindrops, aimed at his throat for a fatal strike. Swift as a colt, traceless as a mark—Mo Yihen, the world's top assassin.

Azhu, her red robes billowing, leapt from the wall, sword in hand, a drop of red ink in water. Mohist rangers followed, weapons drawn, diving toward Xiang Shaoyun. Killing him would break the Xi Liang army, securing the city. The best defense was offense.

Bolts whistled, warriors roared, all targeting Xiang Shaoyun. Mo Yihen's sword struck, piercing his dark armor at the chest—but only an inch deep. Axe wind surged, and Mo Yihen, hair flying, withdrew his sword, spinning on the chain, shedding rain.

He struck dozens of times, each hitting the same spot on Xiang Shaoyun's axe. The force pushed him back along the chain. The world fell silent. Xiang Shaoyun stood, his cape shattering raindrops. Mo Yihen panted.

"Nine-resonance grandmaster assassin, Mechanism School sages, crossbows, mechanical centipede... Is this the Mohist Leader's confidence?" Xiang Shaoyun said, his gaze piercing Mo Yihen's mask.

The centipede loomed like a tiger. Mohist rangers charged. Xi Liang warriors fell into the abyss, fearless. War drums clashed with the rain's roar.

Xiang Shaoyun smiled coldly. "Then I'll crush that confidence myself."

Demonic qi surged from his qi core, spreading from his skin, a terrifying pressure. He raised a hand, and the rain seemed to freeze, droplets suspended. Mo Yihen's pupils shrank, fear gripping him, but he didn't flee. He leveled his sword.

Xiang Shaoyun swung his axe lightly. It shattered Mo Yihen's sword, fragments scattering. The demonic axe qi tore through him. His hair loosened, his body falling backward off the chain into the roaring waterfall. The smiling mask broke, revealing his impassive face. Raindrops loomed in his eyes, reflecting his dull, fleeting life.

He was free.

Rain poured, the mountain path slick with mud. Mo Liuqi, riding his donkey, looked anxious. Black figures plummeted from the cliffs like dumplings, caught in wind and rain.

His heart stirred. A shadow fell, smashing into the ground, splashing mud a foot high. In the mire, Mo Liuqi saw it—half a shattered smiling mask.