

STARLIT PATH OF THE MYSTIC FORGE

Chapter 9: Departing with a Flourish

****Host**:** Lu

****Title**:** Qi Refiner (Permanent)

****Qi Refinement Level**:** 1

****Soul Strength**:** 0.5

****Physical Strength**:** 0.5

****Spiritual Energy**:** 8 Strands

****Transformation Reward**:** *Mystical Qi Refining Manual*

World Rating: Five Phoenixes Continent [Low-Martial]

Permissions: [Missions], [Preaching Platform], [Spiritual Energy Deployment]

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Lu's flower-pinching gesture triggered the system panel, showing his spiritual energy reduced to eight strands. "Activate Permission: Spiritual Energy Deployment. Target: Ning Zhao," he commanded silently.

The world dimmed, transforming into a translucent map of lines, as if viewed from a divine perspective. Lu's mind zoomed in, focusing on Ning Zhao's translucent form. In her dantian, a faint blue strand of spiritual energy burned—the one he'd previously granted. With a flick of his will, another strand, like a spark, shot toward her.

A hum resonated. Ning Zhao's dantian flared as a second strand joined the first. Lu snapped out of the mystical state, the translucent map reverting to reality. Pain stabbed his head, and he clutched his face, hair slipping through his fingers. The system panel showed his soul strength halved from 1 to 0.5, now matching his physical strength.

“Remote spiritual energy deployment consumes soul strength. Got a bit carried away,” Lu muttered, shaking his head with a wry smile. His first deployment, done by touch, hadn’t cost him. But this distance transfer did. A chilling thought struck: if his soul strength hit zero, would he become a fool? Even with the system, he couldn’t be reckless. Zeal was an attitude, but not worth losing his mind over.

Exhaling, Lu refocused, peering through the parapet’s gap. With two strands of spiritual energy, Ning Zhao’s strength should surge, even if her mastery was incomplete. He was curious to see how powerful she’d become.

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Below, Beiluo’s weathered gates opened. Lu Changkong, bare-chested and gripping his halberd, charged out on horseback, his face stern. He couldn’t let Ning Zhao face four Grandmasters alone. With him, two against four might hold, allowing a retreat to Beiluo. In the distance, Feng Shi, fleeing on horseback, paused to watch the battle, unwilling to miss a Grandmaster clash. The Northern Prefecture’s army advanced, and Tantai Xuan, cape billowing on his moving platform, observed intently.

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Facing four Grandmasters alone, even with one strand of spiritual energy, Ning Zhao lacked confidence. But Lu's promise to back her gave her faith. Her master, touched by an immortal, was destined to reshape this world.

The four Grandmasters charged—three from martial sects and one from Tantai Xuan's ranks. External Grandmasters roared like beasts; internal ones surged like floods. Ning Zhao gripped her cicada-wing blade, poised for battle.

Suddenly, her face flushed, her cold beauty softening. A warm current descended, enveloping her. Her head tilted back, hair streaming, her gossamer skirt dancing. *That familiar sensation!* Lu had sent another strand of spiritual energy from afar—a divine feat!

Her excitement was indescribable. With a delicate cry, her dantian flared like a furnace, her soul feeling elevated, as if breaking a minor barrier. "Second-stage Qi Core Realm?" she murmured, cheeks red, lashes trembling.

The four Grandmasters closed in, their oppressive aura once freezing her blood. Now, it melted away. Her blade swept out, two strands of spiritual energy spiraling like twin dragons from her dantian. Spinning gracefully, her skirt flared like a celestial maiden's descent.

A sickening *splat* echoed. The Grandmasters' faces twisted in horror. One clash sent them reeling, their hands bloodied, spitting blood as they were flung from their horses, skidding across the ground. One sword had subdued four Grandmasters.

The battlefield fell silent, all eyes on the woman with the cicada-wing blade, her ethereal presence commanding awe. Lu Changkong, galloping from the gates, froze in disbelief. *That's Ning Zhao? My son's maid? This fierce?*

Atop the walls, Luo Yue's jaw dropped. "She... she won?" Ning Zhao had crushed four Grandmasters single-handedly. Glancing at Lu, pale but composed as if unsurprised, Luo Yue sensed Ning Zhao's transformation was tied to the young lord.

Ning Zhao landed lightly, ignoring the fallen Grandmasters. Her gaze locked onto Feng Shi, who jolted awake, terror gripping him. *Damn it!* He spurred his horse, fleeing toward the Northern Prefecture's army, regretting his pause to spectate.

On the walls, Lu slouched, hand covering his face. "Sister Ning, I'm tired. Finish this quickly," he said weakly.

His voice was soft, but Ning Zhao's keen ears caught it. Her body shot forward, faster than a galloping horse. Feng Shi's heart raced, his steed's speed offering no comfort. Glancing back, he saw Tantai Xuan's army and roared, "My lord, save me!"

Tantai Xuan and Mo Ju squinted. But before Feng Shi could react, Ning Zhao appeared atop his horse, looming over him. His blood ran cold. "You..." Two swift slashes severed his legs, blood gushing. Her blade flicked, cutting his tendons, and she hoisted him by the collar, leaping off the horse with poetic grace.

Facing Tantai Xuan's fifty thousand troops, she spared them a glance before retreating with Feng Shi. Though she'd crushed four Grandmasters, facing an army alone was beyond her. Lu's spiritual energy had elevated her, but only above ordinary Grandmasters. To face ten thousand, she'd need a realm beyond Qi Core.

Lu Changkong, snapping out of his daze, seized the stunned Grandmasters, dragging them into the city. Ning Zhao followed, hauling Feng Shi. Beiluo's ancient gates slammed shut.

"Enemy attack! Prepare for battle!"

“Defend to the death!”

“Uphold Great Zhou’s honor!”

Lu Changkong’s roar rallied the defenders as he brandished his halberd. Ning Zhao, carrying the despairing Feng Shi, ascended the walls. The defenders gazed at her in awe—she was terrifying.

“This is the cur who insulted you, Master. I’ve brought him. Kill or carve, your choice,” Ning Zhao said with a radiant smile, tossing Feng Shi before Lu.

Seeing Lu’s pale face, her smile faded, guilt gnawing at her. His weakness was likely tied to her, she feared. Lu, rubbing his hands with interest, glanced at the feigning-dead Feng Shi, suddenly bored.

A system prompt flashed: *“Congratulations, Host, for completing [Side Mission]. Reward: 2 assignable attribute points. [Preaching Platform] permission unlocked. Mission Evaluation: B-grade (Passable).”*

Lu frowned. Only B-grade? Ning Zhao's dominance hadn't been enough. But with the mission complete, the Northern Prefecture's siege shouldn't threaten Beiluo further. His fatigue, from depleted soul strength, and his eagerness to study the rewards urged him to leave.

"Father, deal with this fool," Lu said to Lu Changkong, now on the walls. "Skin him, chop him, steam or boil—whatever you like." His words veered oddly, and he waved dismissively. Feng Shi, playing dead, trembled, terror flooding him. *This kid's a devil!*

"Sister Ning, take me back," Lu said. Mission done, it was time to depart with flair.

"Fan'er, are you frightened? Rest well," Lu Changkong said, pained by Lu's pallor. He dismissed Yi Yue's talk of immortal blessings as nonsense—martial artists trusted blood and fists, not fairy tales.

Ning Zhao, silent, felt her master's frailty was her fault, her heart aching. She carried Lu's wheelchair down the walls. At the base, Yi Yue, pale but respectful, rejoined them. Ni Yu, clutching her umbrella, followed closely.

On the walls, soldiers bustled to defend the city. Below, Lu rested his hands on the blanket, eyes half-closed, dozing as his maids wheeled him away,

leaving as quietly as they came, like clouds drifting off. The setting sun cast long shadows of the master and maids along the road.