

Starlit Path 94

Chapter 94: A Realm Forged in Mist and a Throne Besieged by Words

This was the Young Lord's first time in seclusion. For a full day and night, he immersed himself in the [Preaching Platform], crafting a new secret realm and weaving it seamlessly with the "Dragon-Rearing Grounds." It was an ambitious undertaking, demanding precision and care. If the Wolong Ridge immortal palace was a mere trial run, this new realm was a grand masterpiece. The Young Lord envisioned its completion yielding cultivators capable of stepping into the Body-Tempering Realm. For now, the realm remained stored within the [Preaching Platform], awaiting the perfect moment for release.

Opening his eyes, he felt a gentle breeze stir his white robes. Exhaling softly, he rubbed his temples. Constructing such a vast realm had drained his soul's strength, leaving his mind foggy. With a casual gesture, a bronze wine cup floated from the carved rosewood table. The wine within had long gone cold—Ning Zhao, ever dutiful, had not dared disturb his seclusion to warm it. He downed the chilled, tart liquid in one gulp, the sharp taste clearing his mind slightly.

His senses stirred, catching whispers carried on the wind from beyond the island. His brow arched. Below the White Jade Pavilion, Nie Changqing stood resolute, his saber radiating restrained killing intent, guarding the pavilion against any who dared approach. Ning Zhao and Yi Yue mirrored his vigilance. In the distance, Ni Yu sat on a stone slab, munching on sugar-coated Qi Gathering Pills from a bulging pouch, treating them like candies. The Young Lord had told her to eat while cultivating, and she had taken it quite literally. Nearby, Jing Yue, carrying his pearwood sword case, stared at her pills with a mix of envy and resentment. Having consumed a Qi Gathering Pill himself, he'd broken through to the Qi Core Realm, an exhilarating sensation he couldn't forget.

Suddenly, the oppressive pressure blanketing the island dissipated. All eyes turned to the second floor of the pavilion, where the Young Lord leaned against the railing, his white robes catching the breeze as he offered a faint smile. "The Young Lord has emerged!" Ning Zhao and Yi Yue exchanged glances, relief flooding their hearts. Any longer, and Beiluo City might have descended into chaos.

Ning Zhao, her white skirt fluttering, glided to the second floor and wheeled the Young Lord down. "Young Lord, the emperor left the capital to meet you but was turned away. He now waits in Beiluo City," she reported.

The Young Lord, elbow resting on his wheelchair's armrest, massaged his temple. "I know," he replied calmly.

Ning Zhao blinked, caught off guard. "Ning, fetch me a fishing rod," he added abruptly.

Nie Changqing, his saber at his side, raised an eyebrow. "Fishing, Young Lord?"

The Young Lord nodded, gazing at the shimmering waters of Beiluo Lake, where gentle ripples danced in the breeze. Beiluo Lake was his chosen site for the first "Dragon-Rearing Ground." "Very well," Ning Zhao said, asking no further questions as she went to retrieve a rod.

"Young Lord, the emperor awaits. Will you not see him?" Nie Changqing pressed, his white robes swaying.

Rubbing his temple, the Young Lord closed his eyes briefly. "After I've handled my priorities."

Nie Changqing fell silent. The air grew still, broken only by the rustle of wind through the skyward chrysanthemums. A faint crunch, crunch interrupted the quiet. The Young Lord's gaze shifted to its source. Ni Yu, wide-eyed, fished another sugar-coated Qi Gathering Pill from her pouch, popping it into her mouth with a crisp snap, as if savoring a sweet. She froze under his stare, her hand trembling as she pulled out another pill. "Y-Young Lord... want one?"

His mouth twitched, and he waved her off. “Keep eating. Eat plenty. When you’re done, find a quiet spot.” Ni Yu blinked, confused.

Soon, Ning Zhao returned with a fishing rod—an ordinary one. The Young Lord took it, inspecting the sharp, curved hook. With a press of his pale fingers, he bent it straight. Ning Zhao frowned. “Young Lord, how can you fish with a straight hook?”

He only smiled, saying nothing. Boarding a small boat alone, he sat at the bow in his wheelchair, casting the line. The hook splashed into the water, sending ripples outward. Nie Changqing, Ning Zhao, and Yi Yue watched from another boat, observing as he fished with his peculiar hook.

By Beiluo Lake’s shore, chaos reigned. Lu Changkong’s face was cold, while behind him, Luo Cheng glared at the kneeling officials, his eyes flashing with barely restrained fury. Calling who a demon? The emperor’s carriage remained silent.

“Mind your words,” Lu Changkong said icily to the weeping, chest-thumping ministers. The old eunuch by the carriage let out a soft huff.

“The realm cannot be without its ruler for a day. His Majesty has lingered in Beiluo for two days while the capital descends into chaos,” a portly, richly dressed official wailed, tears streaming down his face. “With rebels retreating and Great Zhou in need of rebuilding, how can His Majesty wait here for a sorcerer?”

“Who is Lu Ping’an to make His Majesty wait?” another official cried. “He may have merits, but he is a subject, and His Majesty is the sovereign. The order of lord and vassal must not be disrupted!”

More officials poured into Beiluo, their carriages kicking up dust, each eager to persuade the emperor to return and earn a place in history. Yet the emperor remained unmoved, the carriage’s faint trembling the only sign of his unrest, noticed solely by the old eunuch.

Thirty miles from Yuan Chi City, in the military camp, Mo Beike clutched a letter, his heavy eyelids twitching. “Lu Ping’an is in seclusion, the emperor waits by Beiluo Lake, and ministers flock to Beiluo, weeping and begging him to return...” A faint sneer escaped him.

Tantai Xuan, seated in the high seat, smirked as Mo Ju fanned himself, chuckling. “Great Zhou’s officials are a pack of pedantic fools, skilled at scheming but clueless about matters of state,” Mo Ju said scathingly.

Tantai Xuan leaned back, a grin tugging at his lips. “This is a race against time. If the Overlord’s army marches from the Western County, but we seize the capital and its six fortified cities first, we’ll be untouchable—even the Western Liang cavalry, Great Zhou’s finest, will be powerless.”

Mo Beike nodded. “The capital is a pot of boiling porridge, ready to explode. Even if the emperor enlists Lu Ping’an, it changes nothing. The tide of the world cannot be reversed.”

The Dragon-Rearing Ground, as its name implied, was a place to nurture celestial dragons. As the heart of White Jade Pavilion, Lakeheart Island was infused with spiritual energy by the Young Lord, its influence seeping into Beiluo Lake. If any place in the world could be called divinely blessed, Beiluo Lake claimed that title. As a Dragon-Rearing Ground, it could also guard the island—a perfect arrangement.

Mist swirled over the lake's surface. As the Young Lord's mind stirred, countless fish swarmed beneath his boat, thrashing eagerly. All things possessed spirit, and these fish sensed something extraordinary. They chased his straight hook, despite its lack of bait, as if it were the most enticing prize. The Young Lord remained calm, one hand arranging a game of mountains and rivers on a board, the other steadying the rod. No matter how the fish pursued, the rod stayed still.

The mist thickened, obscuring his figure and the boat. Ning Zhao, Nie Changqing, and Yi Yue could no longer see him clearly. After a time, the fish quieted. His faint voice drifted through the fog. "Ning, summon the emperor."

Ning Zhao's hair fluttered in the wind. Tucking a strand behind her ear, she replied, "As you command." Stepping lightly, her white embroidered shoes rippled the lake's surface as she walked across the water toward the shore.

After she left, the Young Lord paused, then spoke again. "Old Nie, Yi Yue."

"Here," Yi Yue replied, bowing. Nie Changqing clasped his hands, his saber at his side.

“Beiluo isn’t the capital. They can’t run their mouths here. But I’m a reasonable man—let them keep talking.”

His voice, accompanied by the soft clack of a game piece, carried a faint edge. Yi Yue and Nie Changqing’s eyes narrowed. They boarded a boat and set off.

Only the Young Lord’s solitary boat remained, drifting gently on the lake.

By Beiluo Lake, Ning Zhao appeared, stepping across the water like an immortal. The officials’ curses faltered, their eyes wide with awe. “Your Majesty, the Young Lord invites you,” she said, bowing slightly.

In the carriage, Yuwen Xiu flung back the curtain, excitement flashing in his eyes. The old eunuch helped him disembark, and they boarded a waiting boat. “Your Majesty, no!” the officials wailed. “Don’t fall for the demon’s tricks! He’ll ruin the realm!”

“Lu Ping’an is despicable! He’s leading the nation to ruin!” they cried, pounding the ground.

Ning Zhao watched impassively. On the boat, Yuwen Xiu clenched his fists, his face flushed. The old eunuch’s expression darkened, his whisk twitching. These men, sensing the emperor’s youth, grew bolder, pushing their luck.

Suddenly, a boat sliced through the misty lake, kicking up white waves like a coiling serpent. Nie Changqing and Yi Yue leaped ashore, landing before the kneeling officials. Yuwen Xiu, boarding the boat, turned back. The old eunuch's whisk trembled—murderous intent hung in the air.

Nie Changqing's white robes swayed in the breeze. His butcher's knife shot forth, a black streak too swift to follow, slicing past an official mid-rant about demons. Blood sprayed, and the man's cries stopped cold. The dripping blade sent chills through the crowd.

Nie Changqing spun the knife slowly, a faint smile on his lips. "The Young Lord is reasonable. He bids you speak on."