

Starlit Path 95

Chapter 95: Blood on the Shore and a Divine Encounter on the Lake

Lü Mu staggered out of Beiluo City, his mind in a daze. Seated in a swaying carriage, the wheels crunching over gravel, he was bound for Wangtian City. The driver urged the horses onward, racing toward their destination. Wangtian City, reeling from a recent assassination attempt by the Yin-Yang School, was on edge, its streets thick with tension. Unlike the renowned city lords of Zuolong (Jiang Li) or Beiluo (Lu Changkong), Wangtian's lord was a figure of little note. Among the six fortified cities, Wangtian had always been unremarkable, weaker even than Yuan Chi or Tong'an, both now fallen. Yet Wangtian held firm.

Lü Mu's carriage passed the city guards' inspection and rolled into the city. It stopped before an old, weathered teahouse in the bustling market district. "Red Dust Teahouse," the driver read aloud, squinting at the sign before turning to the carriage. "My lord, we've arrived."

Lü Mu, snapping out of his stupor, lifted the curtain and handed the driver a few silver pieces. "Wait outside," he instructed. The driver, grinning at the generous tip—enough to buy his wife a fine dress—nodded eagerly.

Lü Mu entered the Red Dust Teahouse, the clandestine hub of the mysterious Tianji School. Though the building was aged, its decor was refined, exuding a quiet elegance. On a delicate wooden stage, a graceful young woman strummed a pipa, her slender fingers coaxing notes that fell like pearls on a jade plate, soothing the soul. Below, Wangtian's elite sat in wooden chairs, sipping fragrant tea and savoring the music, their eyes half-closed in leisure.

Lü Mu waited. An elderly man in lavish robes, his face a map of wrinkles, excused himself from the nobles with a smile and approached. "You're back?" Lü Dongxuan, a master of the Tianji School, said warmly.

“Master...” Lü Mu’s expression was complex, his words caught in his throat. How could he confess that he’d inadvertently sold out the Tianji School?

Despite his wealthy appearance, Lü Dongxuan was no mere merchant but a revered figure in the school. “Your spirit’s troubled. Something weighs on you,” he observed, signaling a maid to bring a steaming teapot. He poured a cup of emerald tea, its aroma swirling, and slid it toward Lü Mu. “Speak. The Tianji Pigeon spreading news of the immortal palace—was that your doing?”

Lü Mu bowed respectfully. “Master, Beiluo’s Young Lord is as you said—his power is unfathomable. He used our Tianji Pigeon to broadcast the immortal fate to the world, stirring chaos in the secret realm. The immortals laid their plans, but he disrupted them, saying, ‘To challenge immortals is endless delight.’”

Lü Dongxuan’s eyes deepened, and he sighed. “To challenge immortals... what a remarkable man.” He sipped his tea, its sweetness unfolding in three distinct waves. “Go on.”

Lü Mu hesitated, then mumbled, “Master... the Young Lord wishes to absorb the Tianji School. I... may have accidentally pledged us to him.”

Lü Dongxuan froze, his expression blank. Tea sprayed from his mouth, drenching Lü Mu’s face. “Say that again?”

Lü Mu wiped his sodden beard, heart sinking. “I...”

Before he could finish, Lü Dongxuan leaped up, exhilarated, and clapped his hands. “Why didn’t you say sooner?” Striding to the stage, he interrupted the pipa’s melody. “Old men, clear out! The teahouse is closed today. Go home to your concubines!”

The nobles grumbled but filed out. The pipa-playing girl, Mingyue, looked bewildered. “Mingyue, pack up. We’re performing elsewhere,” Lü Dongxuan said. She nodded, gathering her instrument and bowing. Lü Dongxuan packed his finest teas, and Mingyue collected her belongings, trailing behind him. To Lü Mu’s astonishment, Lü Dongxuan even yanked the “Red Dust Teahouse” sign from the wall, tossing it into the carriage under the driver’s stunned gaze.

“To Beiluo City!” Lü Dongxuan declared, gold chains glinting around his neck as he climbed aboard, brimming with enthusiasm. Lü Mu stood dumbfounded.

By Beiluo Lake, the air reeked of blood. The officials stood petrified, a black butcher’s knife hovering midair, dripping crimson as it spun lazily. “Keep talking,” Nie Changqing said, his hoarse voice laced with menace. “My Young Lord is a demon, you say? A traitor to the realm?”

Emperor Yuwen Xiu, aboard the boat, took a deep breath. “Your Majesty, we’re off,” the old eunuch said, a glint in his eye. Yuwen Xiu nodded, steadying himself as the boat glided from the dock, guided by Ning Zhao, who walked across the water. They vanished into the misty lake.

On the shore, the officials trembled. “You fiend! We are pillars of Great Zhou—how dare you kill us!” the portly minister roared, pointing a shaking finger at Nie Changqing.

Nie Changqing glanced at Yi Yue. “What would the Young Lord do?”

Yi Yue, her fox-like face impassive, let her whip uncoil. “The Young Lord is merciful,” she said, then cracked the whip with a thunderous snap, splitting the minister’s flesh. He howled. “He’d forgive them and let them speak—until they drop dead.”

The officials paled. A martial general, enraged, leaped up, his vital energy booming as a top-tier first-rate warrior. Hope flickered in the ministers’ eyes, but in an instant, Nie Changqing’s knife flashed, and the general’s head soared, blood raining down.

Lu Changkong watched calmly, unsurprised. He knew his son’s temperament well. Luo Cheng, gripping his sword, vibrated with excitement. These corrupt dogs! While General Jiang Li spilled blood on the frontlines, these officials schemed in the capital. They deserved death.

An official wailed toward the emperor’s departing boat, but Yi Yue’s whip lashed out, flaying his skin. “Lord Lu, as a minister of the court, how can you let these brutes murder us?” another cried.

Lu Changkong drew his blade, a flash of steel, and sheathed it as the man fell in a pool of blood. “I am a city lord, but also a father,” he said coldly. “Slander my son, and you die.”

Yi Yue’s whip danced, leaving bloody welts. Nie Changqing’s knife, meant for pigs, proved just as adept at killing men. “I was wrong! The Young Lord is noble and great, a pillar of Great Zhou!” one official sobbed. “Spare me, Young Lord! I was misled by rumors, blind and foolish!”

Blood stained the lakeside, bodies strewn about, but many officials, whipped and broken, knelt begging for mercy. Blinded by ambition for fame, they hadn't wanted death. "Lock them in the dungeon," Lu Changkong ordered.

On Beiluo's main road, officials arriving from the capital learned of the lakeside massacre and paled. They ordered their drivers to turn back, fleeing in a cloud of dust. Word reached the capital, and the city erupted in shock.

The small boat rocked gently. Yuwen Xiu sat, gazing at the misty lake, his nerves taut. The old eunuch, even more anxious, sweated profusely. The Young Lord's unpredictable power could spell doom for the emperor, and he'd be powerless to stop it. "Relax," Ning Zhao said, turning with a radiant smile. "The Young Lord is quite kind."

Yuwen Xiu's grip tightened on the boat's edge. Kind? The officials' screams still echoed in his ears.

The mist parted, revealing a lone boat at the lake's center. A striking young man in white robes sat in a wheelchair, one hand placing a piece on a chessboard, the other holding a fishing rod. A small fish clung to the line, thrashing its tail. Yuwen Xiu stared—this was his first glimpse of the fabled Young Lord of Beiluo. The old eunuch's sweat rolled down as an overwhelming pressure choked him, a seventh-resonance grandmaster rendered breathless.

The fish floated before the Young Lord. Beneath his boat, countless others gathered, their eyes fixed on the lone fish with what Yuwen Xiu swore was envy. The Young Lord gently removed the straight hook from its mouth. "When I fish, only the fated take the bait," he said with a warm smile.

“Young Lord, the emperor has arrived,” Ning Zhao announced, bowing.

The Young Lord nodded. Raising his right hand, his index finger glowed a dazzling gold, like a blazing sun. He touched the fish’s body, and what followed was a sight Yuwen Xiu and the old eunuch would never forget.