

Starlit Path 96

Chapter 96: A Mortal Challenges Immortals and a Sovereign Seeks a Dragon's Favor

Does the world harbor dragons? No one could say for certain. Ancient texts spoke of them, but without eyewitnesses, such tales remained unconfirmed. Yet today, Yuwen Xiu beheld what could only be a dragon.

The Young Lord gazed at the black carp floating before him, singled out from thousands of fish. It wasn't the strongest or the fattest, but it was the one with fate on its side. "When I fish, only the fated take the bait," he had said, and this carp was that fated one.

Seated in his wheelchair, his white robes fluttering, strands of hair dancing like serpents before his forehead, the Young Lord raised a finger. In his mind, the method of the Transformation Technique unfolded. A golden light bloomed from his fingertip, like a burning flower, and he pressed it to the carp's body. The black scales quivered, the fish's mouth opening and closing. His soul strength drained—three points, permanently gone, the limit for this creature. He withdrew his hand.

The carp writhed, its body elongating, unfurling like a banner in the wind, resembling an eel. From black carp to black serpent, its scales shimmered with golden light. Its gills expanded, thickening into a dense fringe encircling its head. Four bulges formed beneath its belly, as if claws were poised to burst forth.

Yuwen Xiu and the old eunuch stood at the bow of their boat, trembling with awe. A single touch from the elegant young man had transformed a fish into a dragon—an act of unfathomable, almost divine power. Was this the dragon of legend? Yuwen Xiu's face flushed. He, the emperor, was called the True Dragon, yet now he witnessed a dragon's birth.

On his solitary boat, the Young Lord frowned. "Though transformed, it's not a true dragon—merely a serpent," he murmured. "A water wyrm becomes a serpent, and so too can a fish?" It wasn't a celestial

dragon, meaning his task to create a dragon species remained incomplete, with no system prompt to confirm success. Could a dragon not be formed instantly?

“Dragon-Rearing Ground...” he whispered, his gaze sharpening. Perhaps true dragonhood required nurturing, the very purpose of the grounds he’d envisioned. With a nod to himself, he understood. The black serpent, over a meter long, floated in the air, its body flowing like silk. Beiluo Lake, as a Dragon-Rearing Ground, would nurture it into a celestial dragon in time. But in the Young Lord’s plan, this serpent had a greater role—as the catalyst for the next secret realm.

He reached out, his white sleeve drifting, and patted the serpent’s head. It nuzzled his palm like a kitten, then coiled obediently on the boat. “Bring them over,” he called, his voice carrying through the mist.

“Your Majesty, the Young Lord summons you,” Ning Zhao said.

Yuwen Xiu and the old eunuch snapped from their reverie, hearts racing. Yuwen Xiu’s face burned with excitement, while the eunuch bowed his head, pale with dread. Beiluo’s Young Lord was even more enigmatic than the rumors suggested.

Their boat glided forward, drawing near the Young Lord’s. Seated in his wheelchair, he offered a warm smile, his white robes pristine as jade. He raised a hand in salute. “Greetings, Your Majesty.”

“L-Lord Lu... no need for formalities,” Yuwen Xiu stammered, waving a hand.

The Young Lord smiled, sweeping his sleeve. The mist shrouding the lake’s center dispersed, revealing shimmering waters. Gulls cried overhead, their wings beating. “What brings Your Majesty to Beiluo?” he asked.

The old eunuch kept his head low, barely breathing. Ning Zhao stood silent. Yuwen Xiu took a deep breath, his gaze fervent. “My father, Emperor Yuwen Tuo, with Grand Preceptor Kong Xiu’s aid, expanded our borders, bringing Great Zhou to glory. The Grand Preceptor recommended you to me. I’ve come to Beiluo to invite you to join me, to restore Great Zhou’s honor!”

His voice trembled with passion, his fists clenched. He needed the Young Lord’s support. The old eunuch quivered, silently urging restraint—this was a cultivator of unearthly power.

But the Young Lord only shook his head, chuckling softly. One hand propped his chin, the other moved a piece on his chessboard, restoring his soul strength. “Not the Grand Preceptor. He’d rather I had nothing to do with Your Majesty.”

His words doused Yuwen Xiu like cold water. “With your talents, you could help me revive Great Zhou!” the emperor pressed.

The Young Lord remained unhurried. “The Grand Preceptor once asked me why I built a faction, dismantled noble clans, and slew disciples of the Hundred Schools. What was my aim for the world? I told him the rivers, courts, and world can be as they are—it’s no concern of mine.”

“Today, I answer Your Majesty the same. But since you, too, bear an immortal fate, I’ll add this: the world is a chessboard for immortals. Spiritual energy revives, ancient realms emerge, and immortals toy with mortals. My purpose is to challenge them. To fight immortals is endless delight.”

Yuwen Xiu’s breath caught. The old eunuch’s face paled further. Ning Zhao, standing on the lake, smiled faintly.

“Mortals cannot challenge immortals,” Yuwen Xiu said, swallowing hard.

Seated in his wheelchair, the Young Lord’s robes rippled in the breeze. “I am no mere mortal. Why can’t I fight them?”

Yuwen Xiu was at a loss for words but refused to give up. In the Young Lord, he saw hope to quell the rebellions and restore Great Zhou’s glory. Gritting his teeth, he stepped back and bowed deeply. The Young Lord’s boat rocked gently, but he said nothing. Yuwen Xiu bowed again, holding the pose for so long that sweat beaded on his forehead.

At last, the Young Lord sighed. With a wave, a breeze lifted Yuwen Xiu upright. “Very well,” he said. “As with my fishing, only the fated take the bait. Your Majesty’s presence here, witnessing a fish become a serpent, is fate.”

Yuwen Xiu’s face lit with joy. Was the Young Lord relenting? The black serpent coiled on the boat stirred, rising like dark silk, letting out a hoarse roar. “This is a black serpent, not yet a dragon,” the Young Lord said. “Once it becomes one, it will wield power rivaling a Body-Tempering cultivator. If Your Majesty can tame it today, it proves your bond. I’ll gift it to you, to be nurtured in the capital’s Dragon-Rearing Ground. In return, I’ll address your deepest concerns—doing what you dare not.”

Yuwen Xiu’s eyes sharpened. He understood what the Young Lord meant by “what you dare not do.” His body trembled, and he took a deep breath, his gaze burning. “It’s a deal.”

“Your Majesty is the emperor. Would I jest with you?” the Young Lord replied lightly.

Yuwen Xiu's eyes shifted to the serpent, blazing with determination. His boat edged closer. He reached out cautiously to touch it. By the Young Lord's side, the serpent was docile, but as Yuwen Xiu's hand neared, it turned feral, baring its fangs with menacing hostility. Yuwen Xiu paled, retreating several steps. The old eunuch steadied him, alarmed.

Undeterred, Yuwen Xiu tried again, employing every method he could think of, but the serpent remained aloof, ignoring him. The Young Lord, one hand on his chin, the other toying with a chess piece, watched with a faint smile. Exhausted and doubting himself, Yuwen Xiu faltered. As the True Dragon Emperor, why couldn't he win a dragon's favor?

Then, his eyes narrowed. Standing abruptly, he drew a short dagger and sliced his palm. Blood sprayed, and his fervent gaze locked on the serpent. The creature, unmoved before, now reacted, drawn to the emperor's blood. It surged forward, coiling around his arm, lapping at the crimson flow.

The old eunuch's face drained of color, his body shaking with fear. Ning Zhao's eyes tightened. The Young Lord's hand paused mid-motion with a chess piece, his brow arching slightly.