

## Starlit Path 97

### Chapter 97: Blood for a Serpent and a Realm in Turmoil

The emperor sliced his palm, letting blood flow to feed the black serpent. The Young Lord, witnessing this, was mildly surprised. Yuwen Xiu had daring ideas. The black carp, transformed into a serpent through the Young Lord's touch, was not yet a dragon—it required nurturing in the Dragon-Rearing Ground to achieve that state. Yuwen Xiu, having gained a wisp of spiritual energy in the Preaching Platform, was half a cultivator himself. His blood carried a faint trace of that energy, weak but irresistible to the serpent. It craved the spiritual essence, not the blood itself.

Naturally, Lakeheart Island, brimming with spiritual energy, was far more enticing, but the serpent dared not venture there. White Jade Pavilion, cloaked in the Young Lord's spiritual pressure, filled the creature with dread. Thus, Yuwen Xiu's blood became an irresistible lure.

The Young Lord frowned at the act of using blood to nurture a spiritual creature. It risked tainting the serpent with malevolent energy. Yuwen Xiu, however, was elated, his other hand gently stroking the serpent's cold, scaly body, trembling with excitement. He had succeeded.

The old eunuch swayed, nearly collapsing, and wailed, "Your Majesty!" The emperor's blood was sacred, yet Yuwen Xiu had spilled it so freely.

"Your Majesty, let this be the last time," the Young Lord said from his wheelchair, his tone cool. "All things in this world have spirit and pure natures. Their evolution depends on how they're nurtured. If led astray, a spiritual creature may turn malevolent, and if that evil grows too strong, it could turn on its master. Be cautious."

Yuwen Xiu sensed the displeasure in the Young Lord's voice. Nodding, he continued to stroke the serpent's gill-like fins encircling its head, barely containing his joy. "You promised that if I tamed the serpent, it would be mine. Does that still stand?" he asked.

The Young Lord turned his wheelchair, facing away from Yuwen Xiu as his boat rocked gently, mist creeping back around him. “The immortals designated eight Dragon-Rearing Grounds, one being the emperor’s residence. Place the serpent there, and it will become a dragon in time. Treat it well.”

“As for my promise to address Your Majesty’s concerns, I have it in hand. Ning, see them off.”

Ning Zhao, standing on the lake’s surface, bowed. “As you command.” She turned to Yuwen Xiu and the eunuch. “This way, please.”

Yuwen Xiu’s expression tightened. His blood-feeding tactic had clearly displeased the Young Lord, but he offered no defense. He felt no regret. He needed the serpent, needed allies. Once, the Grand Preceptor had been his pillar, but with Kong Xiu implicated in his father’s death, Yuwen Xiu was alone. A young emperor, he felt toyed with by his court. In the past, Kong Xiu’s presence had kept the ministers in check, but with the Grand Preceptor secluded in the Scholar’s Pavilion, perhaps out of guilt, the court had grown brazen.

Standing at the bow, Yuwen Xiu bowed to the Young Lord. The serpent coiled around him lunged toward the Young Lord, only to shrink back under an invisible force. “Go,” the Young Lord said, his words ambiguous—meant for Yuwen Xiu or the serpent, none could tell.

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The boat broke through the mist, returning to the shore. By Beiluo Lake, Yi Yue stood with her whip coiled at her waist, while Nie Changqing wiped blood from his butcher’s knife. Their eyes locked on the

serpent entwined around Yuwen Xiu. “Is that... a dragon?” Nie Changqing’s gaze sharpened. Had the Young Lord gifted the emperor a dragon?

Lu Changkong, too, was stunned. A dragon—a divine creature of legend, recorded only in ancient texts. His son had conjured such a being? The implications were profound.

Yuwen Xiu, brimming with excitement, felt he held the key to turning the tide. “Lord Lu, I’ve been away from the capital for two days. I must return at once. Thank you for your hospitality,” he said, grinning. He glanced at the bloodstains on the lakeside stones, noting the absence of the ministers. Out of sight, out of mind.

Climbing into his carriage, he ordered the return to the capital. The old eunuch, taking a deep breath, bowed to Lu Changkong. “Please, Lord Lu, assign a squad of elite soldiers to escort us.”

Lu Changkong nodded, dispatching a unit to guard the emperor’s carriage. Beiluo’s gates swung open, and the six-steed carriage thundered out, kicking up clouds of dust. As the emperor departed, news spread like wildfire across the realm.

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Thirty miles from Yuan Chi City, Tantai Xuan clutched a letter, eyes narrowing. “Lu Ping’an didn’t leave Beiluo with the emperor...” he murmured. “The emperor couldn’t persuade him?”

This was good news for him. Beside him, Mo Ju, clad in a scholar’s robe, fanned himself gently, pondering. “My lord, I sent agents to investigate Beiluo’s Young Lord. His temperament is volatile, his

methods ruthless—killing at the slightest provocation. He claims to be reasonable yet is quick to settle scores. He’s a vortex of mystery, impossible to fully grasp.”

Mo Beike, seated and silent, said nothing. Mo Ju’s assessment was measured, but Mo Beike knew the Young Lord’s true terror. White Jade Pavilion surpassed many of the Hundred Schools. The Yin-Yang School’s master, Mohist assassins, and Mechanism School tactics had all failed to leave Beiluo alive.

“Governor, since Lu Ping’an remains in Beiluo, we must seize this chance to march on the capital,” Mo Beike said, his voice rasping through the tent.

Tantai Xuan stood, his gaze sharp. “Master, that’s easier said than done. With Jiang Li commanding the army, we could face disaster if we fail to take the capital swiftly. Word just came—the Overlord leads his Western County forces north, straight for the capital. If we’re caught between them, our Northern County army will be crushed by the Western Liang cavalry!”

Mo Beike, hunched and hands clasped behind his back, reflected. The Overlord’s advance meant the Mohist Mechanism City, deemed impregnable, had fallen. Though anticipated, the reality stung. With no retreat left, he faced a fight to the end. Closing his eyes, he said, “Governor, leave Jiang Li to me.”

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In the capital, the emperor’s carriage charged through the gates, the six steeds galloping toward the imperial palace. The city simmered like a pressure-cooker ready to burst. Before the palace steps, ministers in court robes awaited the emperor’s return, their faces shadowed as if by storm clouds.

The carriage halted. The old eunuch, scanning the gathered ministers, paled and lifted the curtain. Yuwen Xiu emerged, head high, the black serpent coiling around his arm. The ministers gasped, staring in disbelief. To them, the serpent was no different from a black dragon. The emperor had returned with a dragon—what did this signify?

Yuwen Xiu, in his imperial robe, smirked, relishing their stunned expressions. A True Dragon Emperor with a dragon in hand—who would dare defy him? The serpent's presence indeed cowed the court, but the ministers, gathered before the palace, were not so easily deterred. With the Grand Preceptor's faction sidelined by illness, tied to rumors of the late emperor's death, these were not Kong Xiu's allies.

As Yuwen Xiu ascended the final step, the ministers knelt in unison. Minister He Shou stepped forward, holding a scroll with a look of resolute defiance. "Your Majesty!" he declared. "The late emperor's death remains unjust, his grievance unavenged. As his son, how can you not seek justice? How can the regicide hold military power? In Beiluo, Lu Ping'an whipped and slaughtered court officials—how can such a vile demon roam free?"

He handed the scroll to the old eunuch, who unfolded it and blanched. His face twitched as he stared at the minister. "Give it here!" Yuwen Xiu snapped, noting the eunuch's reaction. Taking the scroll, he read the title: Proclamation to Denounce the Demon Lu. His face whitened with rage. Though aimed at the Young Lord, it implicated Kong Xiu and Jiang Li as well. He tore it to shreds.

He Shou stood unfazed. "Your Majesty, this proclamation has spread through the capital and beyond. If the demon lives, the capital will fall to chaos, the late emperor's grievance unredressed. We, your loyal subjects, are torn with grief!"

Other ministers echoed his resolve. Yuwen Xiu, trembling with fury, roared, "Enough! You insolent fools!" He stormed off, retreating to the Purple Gold Palace's study, clutching the serpent. His face burned with anger.

But as he glanced at his desk, he froze, his expression shifting to shock. He slammed a hand on the sandalwood table. "Where are the nine edicts I drafted?!" The old eunuch, standing respectfully, paled in horror.

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Minister He Shou's proclamation spread like wildfire, plunging the capital into chaos. The populace seethed, whispering of the emperor bewitched by a demon, slaughtering loyal ministers, and a realm in disarray. Rumors of Kong Xiu and Jiang Li's regicide grew fiercer, debated in taverns, teahouses, and even brothels.

In the Scholar's Pavilion, Kong Xiu rocked in his chair, its creaking steady. Mo Tianyu finished reading the proclamation, admiring its craft. "Well-written, He Shou's prose is forceful, like a storm brewing—impressive."

Kong Xiu and Kong Nanfei stared at him flatly. Mo Tianyu's enthusiasm waned, and he slapped the scroll onto the table. "Hmph! Utter nonsense!"

Kong Nanfei rolled his eyes, while Kong Xiu closed his, murmuring, "They court death with such actions. With Lu Ping'an's temperament, a spectacle awaits."

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Deep in the night, under a star-filled sky, a breeze carried a single proclamation into the silent city of Beiluo.

