

Starlit Path 98

Chapter 98: A Storm Brews as the Young Lord Sets Out

The moon hung like a hook in the night sky, casting a faint glow. Within the White Jade Pavilion, candlelight flickered through lanterns, illuminating the room. The Young Lord sat in his wheelchair, draped in a white cloak. Beside him stood Ning Zhao, Yi Yue, and Nie Changqing, silent and attentive. Ni Yu clutched her cloth pouch, itching to pop a sugar-coated pill but hesitating, wary of the crisp crunch breaking the oppressive quiet.

Ning Zhao's face was frosty. She had read the proclamation—a scathing denouncement of the Young Lord, riddled with insults. “Young Lord...” she began, hesitating.

He raised a hand, silencing her. “The emperor came to Beiluo in person, and I promised to do what he dares not,” he said slowly, his voice resonating in the pavilion. “It’s time for a trip to the capital.”

Leaning back in his wheelchair, one hand tapped the armrest. “Old Nie, Ning, Yi Yue—prepare yourselves. Tomorrow, you’ll accompany me to the capital. I’m a reasonable man, but the world lacks proper respect for cultivators.”

Ning Zhao nodded, while Nie Changqing's eyes sharpened. The Young Lord in the capital—what chaos would that unleash? “By the way, Old Nie,” the Young Lord continued, “you mentioned your wife, Xiao Shuang's mother, is held by the Daoist Sect. Once we've settled matters in the capital, go to them. Bring her back under White Jade Pavilion's name.”

Nie Changqing trembled, his lips quivering before he let out a sigh heavy with emotion. “Thank you, Young Lord.”

The Young Lord nodded, dismissing them with a wave.

In Yuan Chi City, within the Great Zhou army's camp, Jiang Li studied a sand table, flanked by Chi Lian in a seductive black dress and several lieutenants analyzing the situation. "The emperor returned to the capital alone, unable to persuade Lu Ping'an?" Jiang Li sighed, tapping the sand table's Beiluo marker. "The greatest variable in Great Zhou's turmoil lies in Beiluo."

"Mo Beike and Tantai Xuan are allied. With Mo Beike's cunning, he wouldn't ignore such a variable. That night's assault—I thought the Yin-Yang School's Wei Luan came for me, but he didn't. Perhaps he went to Beiluo."

Chi Lian's face showed shock. Wei Luan, a master of the Yin-Yang School? Had he struck Zuolong City, Jiang Li might not have survived, and the city would have fallen. "But from the current situation, Wei Luan is likely dead," Jiang Li said, his fingers tracing the sand table. "Killed by Beiluo's Young Lord. That's why Mo Beike fears him. If the emperor had secured Lu Ping'an, the capital would be secure—Mo Beike wouldn't dare act, unable to predict his moves."

The tent was silent, the others hanging on Jiang Li's words. He turned to Chi Lian. "How's Qingniao?"

"She needs time to adjust to the bloodshed of war, but she's stable," Chi Lian replied, bowing.

Jiang Li nodded, gazing at the hooked moon outside, his emotions tangled. With Lu Ping'an staying in Beiluo, he now faced Mo Beike and Tantai Xuan's relentless onslaught. In the quiet night, hoofbeats thundered outside, like a storm rolling in. "Report! The emperor's edict has arrived!" a voice called.

Thirty miles from Yuan Chi City, Tantai Xuan's camp buzzed with frustration. Mo Ju, having read the proclamation, cursed, "This He Shou is an idiot!" Mo Beike, too, scanned the document, his wrinkled face twitching as he closed his eyes, at a loss for words.

"During Yuwen Tuo's reign, the noble families were crushed by Kong Xiu. Now, seizing their chance, they stir trouble—fools all," Mo Beike said, shaking his head. "This proclamation may make He Shou famous, but has he considered its consequences?"

He feared not a formidable foe but a foolish ally. The proclamation pressured the emperor but risked rousing Lu Ping'an, who had stayed in Beiluo. Mo Ju, fuming, crumpled the document and threw it to the ground. "With Lu Ping'an's temperament, the noble families' fate in Beiluo will soon play out in the capital. The emperor may hesitate with the capital's nobles, but what does Lu Ping'an care?"

Tantai Xuan, seated high, grasped the gravity. "Master, what now?"

Mo Beike's heavy eyelids flickered. "We wait."

From the west, a cavalry thundered toward the capital. The Western Liang cavalry, Great Zhou's mightiest force, outmatched even Jiang Li's former army, now diminished after years in Zuolong. The

Overlord, clad in black armor, helmetless, with a double-headed axe on his back, rode a towering black steed, a vision of menace in the night. Holding the proclamation, he glanced at it before tearing it to shreds. "The fool who wrote this is a mongrel," he spat.

His generals exchanged glances. You're the commander; you're always right.

Moonlight glinted off his armor, cold and unyielding. He pulled the reins, summoning a trusted grandmaster general, Xu Chu, a hulking figure with spiked iron balls on his back. "Xu Chu, don my armor and lead the army to Yuan Chi. Camp five hundred miles out, face off with the Northern County forces, but don't engage."

Xu Chu frowned. "What's your plan, my lord?"

The Overlord smiled, glancing toward Beiluo. "Since I'm here, it's only fitting I pay a visit to the world's foremost cultivator, Beiluo's Young Lord."

Xu Chu's muscles flexed, excitement gleaming in his eyes. The Overlord's "visit" was no small matter.

At dawn, the first rays of sunlight bathed Beiluo's cobblestones. The city's heavy gates creaked open, and a luxurious carriage rolled out. From the window, the Young Lord's serene face appeared. "Fan'er, go swiftly and return soon," Lu Changkong, clad in armor, called. He'd assigned Luo Cheng and five hundred elite soldiers to escort his son, despite the Young Lord's initial refusal. Lu Changkong insisted, and the Young Lord relented.

As the carriage left Beiluo, spies from various factions lurking outside sprang to life, like startled birds. Pigeons soared, carrying the news. But as the Young Lord's entourage neared the capital, another carriage crossed the Beiluo plains, kicking up dust, halting before the city. The Young Lord lifted his carriage's curtain, peering from his wheelchair. From the opposing carriage emerged an old man with a merchant's grin, a gold chain dangling from his neck, followed by a conflicted Lü Mu.

"Tianji School's Tianji Master, Lü Dongxuan, comes to pay respects to the Young Lord," the old man said, bowing deeply.

The onlookers' expressions twisted with curiosity. Ning Zhao wheeled the Young Lord down from his carriage. "Tianji School?" he said, his gaze locking onto Lü Dongxuan, then shifting to the gold chain. Suddenly, the chain's hollow gold beads began to spin. Lü Dongxuan's face paled, his eyes wide with shock.

The Young Lord raised a brow. The chain, while not a spiritual artifact like his chessboard, held a faint trace of spirituality, likely used for Lü Dongxuan's divinations. "Old Nie, Ning, Yi Yue—you three head to the capital. Handle things as usual," he said calmly.

"As you command," they replied, bowing.

"Ni Yu, wheel me back to the island." He turned to Lü Dongxuan and Lü Mu, nodding slightly. Compared to dealing with the capital's trifles, absorbing the Tianji School was paramount.

Outside Beiluo, spies gaped as the Young Lord returned to the city. Their messages had already flown, yet now he was back? Frantically, they scribbled new reports, stuffing them into pigeons that took flight, startling the air once more.

In the Northern County army's camp, Tantai Xuan and Mo Beike waited through the night. A pigeon arrived, and they unrolled its message. The tent's atmosphere grew heavy. "Lu Ping'an has left Beiluo for the capital," Mo Beike sighed.

Tantai Xuan's expression shifted, and after a long pause, he ordered the army, already withdrawn thirty miles, to retreat another hundred. But moments later, another pigeon fluttered in. He read the new message and froze, speechless.