

Starlit Path 117

Chapter 117: The Girl Opens Her Eyes, All Turn to Bones

Buzhou Peak, Northern Prefecture

Blood stained the bluestone. A Daoist in a green robe stood before the dark cave, gripping a dripping wooden sword, his posture unyielding, like a blade forged from resolute conviction. Northern soldiers lay scattered at his feet. With a sweep of his sword, infused with spiritual energy, Li Sansi felled swathes of enemies. His wooden blade cut like the sharpest steel, unstoppable.

His slender frame stood like a mighty warrior, guarding the pass alone, immovable against thousands. Within the cave, a white, egg-like spiritual shield emerged. Black-and-white eyes watched the steadfast figure who refused to yield.

In those eyes, a vivid memory flickered: under soft moonlight, the green-robed Daoist played a flute on the bluestone, a girl clutching a wine jug, legs tucked together, listening quietly, her head swaying gently.

Li Sansi was no Overlord. When his qi reservoir drained, exhaustion flooded his body like a tide. He resorted to martial techniques, striking foes down the mountain one by one. Panting, sweat soaked his robes, leaving him weary and frail.

Dantai Xuan, clad in armor, narrowed his eyes. Even cultivators tire—not all were monsters like the Overlord. He glimpsed a way to counter them. “Kill!” he roared, his gaze fixed on the cave’s familiar egg-like shield, identical to Wolong Ridge’s. Beyond it lay the immortal opportunity.

Li Sansi lost count of his swings, of the lives taken. His body swayed, propped by his sword. He lived without regret, vowing to protect Zhulong with all his strength. Regret was a wound too deep to heal.

A soldier charged, slamming into him. His frail form flew like a leaf, crashing to the ground, blood spraying. "He's done! Kill him!" the soldiers bellowed. "Seize the Dragonland! Claim the opportunity!"

Their cries echoed across the silent peak. Suddenly, a childlike roar erupted from the cave, morphing into a dragon's bellow. Ears bled, faces contorted in pain. A surge of spiritual energy and pressure poured forth.

Dantai Xuan and his soldiers turned. A girl emerged from the cave, eyes closed. Behind her, the egg-like shield shattered, revealing a Dragon Gate, spiritual energy surging from it. Zhulong stood before it, hair billowing, roaring.

Her long lashes trembled. For the first time since they met, in Li Sansi's complex gaze, Zhulong opened her eyes—one black, one white. In that instant, Li Sansi glimpsed the cycle of sun and moon.

An invisible wave rippled outward. "Governor, beware!" a guard shouted, tackling Dantai Xuan down the mountain path. Black-and-white light blazed atop the peak.

As the light faded, Dantai Xuan, dirt-streaked, clambered up, heart pounding. In that moment, he had felt death's grasp. He and his guard reached the summit, only to freeze. Corpses littered the peak, each kneeling in armor, their flesh dissolved, leaving only white bones.

Dantai Xuan's sweat poured. The immortal realms seemed cursed against him. At Wolong Ridge, five thousand troops vanished in an instant. Now, a girl's glance reduced his men to skeletons.

Zhulong lifted the bloodied Li Sansi, guiding him into the Dragon Gate. She glanced back at Dantai Xuan, who, terrified, scrambled down the peak. Immortal opportunities, it seemed, were forever beyond his reach.

Southern Prefecture, Nanjiang City

Nie Changqing, bundle and butcher's knife slung across his back, rode into the city. Tianhuang Mountain, home of the Daoist Sect, was just fifty or sixty miles away. On the open road, clad in white, he walked unhurriedly. As the day to reunite with his wife neared, his heart grew steadier. Years had tempered him from an impulsive youth into a man of calm resolve, etched with the weight of time.

Whispers of the Great Marsh Dragonland's secret realm filled the air. Despite Tang Xiansheng's orders to suppress the news, martial artists' tongues wagged freely. Nie Changqing's lips twitched. Entering an inn, he secured a second-floor room.

"Clerk, fetch me paper, ink, and an envelope," he said, tossing a piece of silver.

The clerk, grinning ear to ear, hurried off and soon returned with supplies. Nie Changqing thanked him, sat by the window, and dipped his brush in ink. After a moment's thought, he began to write.

The first letter was for his wife—the first in five years. Once, he lacked the courage and means to write, fearing exposure. Now, backed by Young Master Lu and White Jade Capital, he had strength. The second letter was for the Daoist Sect. Rather than storming in brashly, he followed Lu's advice to act with the dignity of a White Jade Capital disciple, sending a formal notice.

He was once a Daoist disciple, fleeing in disgrace on a rainy night, carrying a crying infant Nie Shuang. That night haunted him. Finishing, he signed: Disciple of White Jade Capital, Nie Changqing.

Folding the letters into envelopes, he leaned back, lost in thought. He summoned the clerk, who balked at delivering to the Daoist Sect until Nie offered a silver ingot. The clerk, clutching the letters like treasures, set off for Tianhuang Mountain.

Back in his room, Nie Changqing lay down, pulled the blanket over himself, and slept peacefully, forgoing cultivation for the night.

East Yan River

The Overlord, axe and shield on his back, led elite troops through the Dragon Gate. Western Liang cavalry barred martial artists ten miles from the river, securing the Dragonland for him. None dared challenge his dominance.

Pushing open the gate's heavy valves, he stepped into a new realm. Before him stood ninety-nine clay soldier statues, lifelike yet with closed eyes, each posed uniquely. Beyond them, an iron chain bridge led to a floating island with a palace. Past the palace, a white jade bridge connected to a grand, cloud-topped palace radiating multicolored light.

The Overlord's eyes narrowed, his demonic qi stirring instinctively. The grand palace felt like a nexus of terror. Eight white jade bridges radiated from it, each linking to a floating island connected by iron bridges. "Do all eight Dragonlands' gates lead to that palace?" he murmured.

Waving his troops forward, they moved through the statues toward the bridge.

North Luo, Lakeheart Island

After opening the Dragon Gate realms, Lu monitored their progress. The breeze tousled his hair. As factions entered the gates, he leaned against the red-carved railing, one hand on his chin, the other nudging a chess piece across the spiritual pressure board. The creak of the piece echoed through White Jade Capital.

Beyond the Dragon Gate, the Overlord halted, his elite troops tensing. The sky darkened, a killing aura rising with the faint roar of armies. A cold wind swept through, stirring dust.

They turned, hearts sinking. The clay statues, once with closed eyes, now stared directly at them.