

Starlit Path 119

Chapter 119: A Blade to Shatter the Daoist Sect's Gate

North Luo, Lakeheart Island

Ni Yu hummed cheerfully, her waist pouch bulging with treats. She tended to Lu's plum wine, occasionally popping a sugar-coated Qi-Gathering Pill into her mouth like candy. A full pouch meant a carefree heart.

Lu ignored the spiritual pressure board. The Dragon Gate realms, unlike the rudimentary Wolong Ridge, were meticulously crafted. As cultivators grew, so did he. If Wolong Ridge was a test, the Dragon Gates were its refined evolution, addressing its flaws.

The eight Dragon Gates, scattered across Great Zhou, granted more people the chance to cultivate and condense qi. The Overlord's elite soldiers, for instance, gained spiritual energy by slaying clay statues, while Lu reaped a share of the energy. The statues' destruction also nourished the Dragon Gates' dragon seeds, hastening their growth.

Beyond fostering cultivators, the realms pushed those like the Overlord, stuck at the Qi Reservoir Realm's peak, to break through to the Hidden Body Realm. The resulting spiritual energy storms were Lu's true aim, accelerating the dragon seeds' transformation into true heavenly dragons.

The Dragon Gate realms had three stages. The first, ninety-nine clay statues, trained cultivators. The second, a floating island palace guarded by two peak Qi Reservoir Realm figures formed from pill mist, pressured breakthroughs and offered rewards: Qi-Gathering Pills, which Ni Yu munched like sweets, and Body-Building Pills, crafted based on the Preaching Platform to aid those struggling to reach the Hidden Body Realm. Lu, however, preferred his favored cultivators to break through without pills.

For those who failed at the second stage, a third awaited: a slumbering overlord in the grand central palace.

Southern Prefecture, Great Marsh

Tang Xiansheng, fearing death, stayed outside the Dragon Gate. He sent his eldest son, Tang Baiyun, and Tang Yimo with five thousand troops into the realm. Tang Yimo, touched by immortal opportunity, was new to secret realms, while Tang Baiyun had never entered one. Unlike the East Yan River's realm, their experience was brutal.

When the clay statues' eyes snapped open, the Southern troops froze in terror. A statue's blade cleaved a soldier in half, plunging Tang Baiyun's five thousand into chaos. Pale with fear, Tang Baiyun cowered as the living statues struck, their eerie nature shattering morale.

Outside, Tang Xiansheng's face darkened as bloodied soldiers fled the gate in panic. Inside, Tang Baiyun, clad in armor, turned to Tang Yimo. "Third Brother, what do we do?" Despite his disdain and jealousy of Tang Yimo's opportunity, only the cultivator offered safety now.

Tang Yimo glanced at him coldly. Activating his technique, he charged a statue, shattering it with a punch. Spiritual energy surged into him, startling him briefly. "These statues are the opportunity. Kill them to gain spiritual energy," he said coolly, diving into the fray like a tiger, amassing energy to break his second meridian.

Tang Baiyun, hesitating, rallied the troops into a formation to combat the statues. As Tang Xiansheng's heir, he had resolve. When a statue fell, he seized the chance, slashing its head off. Spiritual energy flooded him, and his eyes lit up. "Immortal opportunity!"

Elated, he ordered the troops to overwhelm the statues with numbers, lingering behind to deliver killing blows and absorb energy. Blood flowed like rivers beyond the Dragon Gate, the Southern troops suffering heavy losses.

*Nanjiang City

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Nie Changqing slept soundly. At dawn, as the sky paled, he awoke, his eyes clear as a rain-washed sky. Unhurried, he rose, washed, and packed his bundle. He wiped his butcher's knife carefully with a cloth, then donned a white robe and left the inn, locking the door. Save for the knife at his waist, he resembled a scholar bound for a journey, laden with stories.

The yawning clerk, cleaning tables, brightened at his approach. "Young Master, your letters reached the Daoist Sect yesterday," he said, smiling.

Nie Changqing nodded, saying little. "Heading to Tianhuang Mountain?" the clerk asked, wiping a table.

Nie Changqing dipped his head again, stepping into the dim streets of Nanjiang City, still cloaked in early morning haze. "What brings you to the Daoist Sect? Visiting kin? It's dark—be careful," the clerk called.

Nie paused, smiled, and vanished into the streets without a word.

As the sun broke free, climbing the sky, Nie Changqing reached the foot of Tianhuang Mountain. Hugging his butcher's knife, he gazed at the ancient stone steps winding to the peak. Closing his eyes, he felt the breeze lift his hair, recalling five years prior—fleeing down these steps, a crying infant in his arms. The sect's gate had slammed shut, its crack like a blade severing his hopes.

Five years of hiding, living as a farmer, fisherman, or woodcutter, dodging the Daoist Sect's relentless pursuit to take Nie Shuang, his last shred of hope. Each of Nie Shuang's cries for his mother cut Nie Changqing like a knife. Time etched his face with weathered lines, his sword hand now wielding a butcher's knife.

Now, he stood where his dreams began. Five years of trials, and Nie Changqing returned to the Daoist Sect.

He stepped onto the stairs. Spiritual energy surged from his qi reservoir, emotion fueling a breath that scattered dust and leaves like needles. Step by steady step, he climbed from the base to the peak. Through dense shade, he faced the sect's closed gate—cold and unyielding, as it was five years ago.

His expression was calm, devoid of joy or sorrow. Standing on the steps, white robe billowing, he drew his butcher's knife. Spiritual energy coiled around it, trembling faintly. A letter had failed to open the gate.

So be it.

The knife shot forth like black lightning, slicing through the daylight. A massive blade shadow loomed, shattering the Daoist Sect's gate with a thunderous crash, debris collapsing in a cloud of dust.

From the haze, a weathered figure in white emerged, butcher's knife hovering before him. He spoke softly, "Disciple of White Jade Capital, Nie Changqing. I have arrived."