

Starlit Path 122

Chapter 122: Before the Dragon Gate, the Green-Robed Daoist Nun

Imperial Capital, Purple Gold Palace, Royal Gardens

Five steeds trampled the stone path, halting before the garden's vermilion walls, gleaming red under the blazing sun. Kong Nanfei supported the National Teacher as they alighted from the carriage, the old eunuch standing respectfully nearby, whisk in hand.

They crossed an intricately carved arch bridge into the gardens, where the air thickened with spiritual energy. Kong Nanfei's eyes narrowed. "The Imperial Capital... a Dragonland?" The presence of one of Great Zhou's eight Dragonlands in the royal city was no secret.

The National Teacher's expression remained calm. "Let's meet His Majesty."

"Yes," Kong Nanfei replied, suppressing his awe.

Before the gardens, ranks of soldiers stood guard, lending the once-serene retreat a grim air. Jiang Li, clad in silver armor, emerged. "National Teacher," he greeted, bowing slightly.

"General Jiang, as gallant as ever—truly Great Zhou's God of War," the National Teacher said, his wrinkled face creasing with a hoarse smile.

Jiang Li returned the smile, assisting the National Teacher into the gardens. “God of War? I merely guard our nation’s gates, as any soldier should.”

The National Teacher chuckled. They passed stern rows of armored troops, reaching the garden’s depths. A vast whirlpool churned in a jade pond, a majestic Dragon Gate suspended within, spiritual energy gushing forth. A black dragon coiled around it, breathing mist.

“A Dragonland,” the National Teacher murmured, a glint in his eyes.

Emperor Yuwen Xiu sat on a wooden chair, attended by maids with parasols and fans. Seeing the National Teacher, he rose eagerly. “Teacher, you’ve finally left the Scholars’ Pavilion! I’ve missed you day and night.”

He helped the National Teacher to a seat, with Jiang Li and Kong Nanfei flanking them. “Thanks to your guidance, I visited North Luo and gained Lu Ping’an’s counsel and the black dragon’s protection. It saved me from Zhao Kuo’s rebellion and turned the tide.”

The National Teacher listened with a smile, then waved a hand. “Your Majesty, I never sent you to North Luo. Lu Ping’an is unfathomable—best to keep your distance.”

Yuwen Xiu grinned, unconcerned. “Teacher, you worry too much. Lu Ping’an’s easy to get along with, just a bit eccentric.” Pointing to the Dragonland, his eyes gleamed. “This black dragon realm is key to Great Zhou’s rise. I’ve had it scouted. The clay statues inside yield spiritual energy when slain, turning men into cultivators. I could build an army of them, but the statues regenerate slowly, and not all can refine qi. Some succeed in an hour, others fail in a day.”

“Naturally,” the National Teacher said, stroking his beard. “Cultivators face stricter limits than martial artists, who already require talent.”

“Beyond the statues lies a floating island, and past it, a grand palace. I suspect it links all eight Dragon Gates,” Yuwen Xiu mused. “The immortals’ intent is hard to grasp, but these Dragonlands will spark a cultivation storm in Great Zhou. For now, we can only explore the statue area. A ten-man team tried the iron bridge but was beheaded instantly. General Jiang believes only high-level cultivators can cross.”

The National Teacher nodded, listening as Yuwen Xiu spoke. Eventually, the emperor’s voice faded. He looked at the National Teacher. “Teacher, will you enter the Dragonland?”

The garden’s air shifted. Kong Nanfei frowned. “Your Majesty, the Master is too old for such a venture.”

Yuwen Xiu glanced at him, waving dismissively. The National Teacher smiled. “South Fei’s right, Your Majesty. I’m half in the grave, unlike you young ones. I lack the strength for this opportunity and won’t enter.”

His refusal was firm, echoing Jiang Li’s. Yuwen Xiu’s eyes narrowed. Why did both refuse him? Perplexed, he leaned back, the garden’s atmosphere growing tense.

East Yan River Dragon Gate Realm

Thunderous booms echoed as Western Liang soldiers watched the battle on the iron bridge, awestruck. The Overlord fought like a demon god, axe and shield in hand, the air groaning under his swings. The two purple-smoke figures—a man and woman—darted and struck, their swords weaving a deadly net across the bridge.

Even the Overlord's flesh bore countless cuts, blood seeping. His shield was dented, sword marks biting deep. The bridge swayed, but his eyes blazed with battle lust, unyielding, thrilled by the pressure. His pores tightened, hair standing on end.

The smoke figures moved with ghostly speed, like assassins or elegant swordsmen. The Overlord's divine strength sent one tumbling off the bridge, but the smoke reformed, its sword stabbing from a cunning angle, drawing blood. He recognized his weakness: agility. In qi reservoir cultivation, his demonic state nearly matched them, but their techniques were elusive.

Had he not been demonized, his tough flesh enduring, another would've fallen. Pressure bred progress. His muscles quivered with excitement, eyes fixed on the grand palace beyond the floating island. If these smoke figures were this strong, what awaited there? A true Hidden Body Realm cultivator?

Roaring, his demonic qi erupted, eyes bloodshot as he unleashed his full power. The bridge became a blur of afterimages, sword light, and intent. A Western Liang master martial artist tried to aid him but was hurled back, leg shattered and bleeding from a dozen cuts. Only peak Qi Reservoir cultivators could join this fight.

Tianhuang Mountain, Daoist Sect Plaza

Blood stained the tiles, the elder's death casting a pall of fear. Miao Renyu, pupils tight, stared at Nie Changqing's calm face, gripping his bow. "Am I too lenient?" Nie asked, flicking blood from his knife. "Did I give the impression I'm soft, that I won't kill?"

His words rang across the plaza. Pines rustled, birds chirped. "Rain, where's Ru'er?" he asked.

Miao Renyu paled, shaken by Nie's unfamiliarity. "She's—"

"Silence!" an aged Daoist shouted from the narrow path to Star-Picking Peak. "Without the Master's order, revealing her makes you a traitor!"

"Uncle, why?" Miao Renyu clenched his fists.

"Those who break our rules end like this beast—expelled!" The elder's death had enraged the sect's old guard. The Daoist Sect, the most enigmatic of the Hundred Schools, feared even by the Confucian National Teacher, now faced Nie Changqing's lone blade.

Nie laughed, a cold edge to it. With a wave, his knife shot forth like lightning, striking the aged Daoist. The man roared, clashing with it, but coughed blood, pores oozing red as he flew back. The knife returned, hovering above Nie, dripping blood, lending him a grim aura.

He advanced, disciples retreating to Star-Picking Peak in terror. Miao Renyu and the others, helpless and afraid, marveled at his power. Was this a cultivator's strength? Unreasonably formidable.

Nie restrained his slaughter, emulating Young Master Lu's principle: reason followed force. "Traitor! The Master raised a wolf!" another old Daoist cursed. Nie's knife flashed, blood spraying as the man fell on the steps.

Disciples froze, silenced. "Keep talking," Nie said, hands behind his back, robe unstained despite the carnage. He crossed the narrow path to Star-Picking Peak, his footsteps echoing, none daring to stop him.

On the peak's plaza, he gazed at the floating Dragon Gate, shrouded in dense clouds, and exhaled. From the gate emerged a figure in a green Daoist robe, hair bound in a cloth. The impassive nun, lashes trembling, met Nie Changqing's eyes.