

## Starlit Path 124

Chapter 124: Someone Breaks Through to the Hidden Body Realm

\*Star-Picking Peak, Tianhuang Mountain\*

Blazing sunlight pierced the sky, yet failed to dispel the thick clouds blanketing the peak. A dragon formed of swirling clouds roared above, its spiritual pressure overwhelming. The Daoist Sect's disciples stared, awestruck, their fists clenched with excitement. They saw hope—a chance for the sect's resurgence.

From the moment Nie Changqing shattered the sect's gate with a single stroke, to his ascent to Star-Picking Peak, the Daoist Sect had crumbled like paper before him. Even the blood-and-qi array crafted by the sect's Master was no match for his butcher's knife. The elder leading it had fallen, beheaded. Fear had gripped the disciples, awed by a cultivator's terror.

Now, at last, the sect had someone to face him: Li Sansui, the reclusive Li Mochou, summoning a cloud dragon to challenge the disciple of White Jade Capital.

Clouds churned, and the disciples' robes whipped in the gale. Nie Changqing's butcher's knife slashed upward, its invisible edge seeming to rend the heavens. The brilliant sunlight dimmed, as if sliced into eternal night. His face was impassive, but this strike carried his full resolve, echoing the thrill of his first Blade Control technique under Lu's guidance on North Luo Lake, where he'd cut down hundreds of Confucian scholars in a river of blood.

Today, that dazzling slash returned—to cleave a cloud dragon.

The blade met the dragon, its edge slicing through its form, splitting it in two. The heavens' clouds dispersed. Li Sansui's eyes snapped open, astonishment flickering within. She hadn't expected Nie Changqing to shatter her cloud dragon technique with one stroke.

The peak fell silent—leaves stilled, winds hushed. As the dragon split like a cleaved pastry, a deafening roar shook Star-Picking Peak, nearly bursting eardrums. A gale whipped through, scattering stones and sand.

Li Sansui stumbled, sitting before the Dragon Gate, a severed strand of hair drifting past like a thread of worry, snapping her from her daze. She had lost—a rare taste of defeat.

A butcher's knife hummed, halting before her brow, the gust parting her hair and slicing a fine cut on her skin, a bead of blood welling up. Yet the blade didn't fall. With a flick, Nie Changqing recalled it, the knife slamming into the plaza, cratering the ground. Cracks spiderwebbed from the impact, and a wave of spiritual energy sent stunned disciples tumbling.

Sheathing his knife, Nie said, "Sansui, the Daoist Sect doesn't suit you. Go to North Luo."

Her lashes trembled. North Luo? Raising his head, his stubbled jaw gleamed in the sunlight, a touch of weariness in his demeanor. "Had I not held back, you'd be dead. Despite your Dragon Gate opportunity, the gap between us is vast. You couldn't block that strike."

His words were blunt, echoing across the peak. The disciples shuddered. Even Li Sansui, empowered by the immortal opportunity, summoning clouds into a dragon, couldn't withstand Nie's blade. Miao Renyu and the other top disciples trembled, knowing more than the naive. Nie wasn't even White Jade Capital's strongest. The enigmatic Lu of North Luo could shift the heavens with a gesture.

They'd thought the sect's array gave them a chance against White Jade Capital. Now, one disciple had crushed them. Before the Dragon Gate, Li Sansui retied her hair, regaining composure. Leaping down, she said, "Brother Nie, follow me."

A nearby elder protested, "Sansui, no!" But a black flash of Nie's knife severed his head. "Next one who speaks, I cut," Nie warned, his icy gaze sweeping the aged Daoists. Having walked with Lu, he'd killed plenty but spared most here, repaying the sect's past nurture. His patience, however, was spent. Any further obstruction, and his blade would drink deeply.

His words silenced the peak. Li Sansui glanced at the crowd, then repeated, "Brother Nie, follow me." After a few steps, she paused, a hint of defiance in her tone. "And call me Mochou, not Sansui."

Nie, caught off guard, followed. The disciples, staring at the cratered plaza and Nie's fading figure, collapsed, legs trembling. Some recalled the Master's foresight when Han Lianxiao's death reached them: "Don't stir trouble."

Descending the peak along a winding path, the air grew quiet and deep. Li Sansui walked silently, Nie rubbing his hands, nerves and anticipation mingling. Five years had grayed his temples. Now, facing reunion, how could he not be anxious?

In the deep mountains, two bamboo huts stood. "Sister Ru is in that one," Li Sansui said, pointing to a weathered hut. She glanced at Nie, hesitating, but said nothing more.

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\*North Luo, Lakeheart Island\*

Lu, orchestrator of the eight Dragon Gate realms and the spiritual resurgence, finished his porridge, letting Ni Yu clear the dishes. Leaning against the carved railing, he savored the lake breeze, hair fluttering. "Nine-stage Qi Reservoir on her first refinement," he mused. "Her talent's monstrous, boosted by her bond with the cloud dragon."

Li Sansui was moldable, and Nie's ruthless lesson would spur her growth. Her future was promising. With Nie's mission to retrieve his wife nearing its end, Lu lost interest in watching. His focus shifted to the Dragon Gates, hoping the Overlord and Ning Zhao would break through to the Hidden Body Realm. Such a breakthrough's spiritual storm would hasten the dragon seeds' birth, earning him attribute points. The statues' shattered energy was also swelling his spiritual reserves, nearing a breakthrough to the third layer of Qi Refinement.

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\*East Yan River Dragon Gate Realm\*

The Overlord's axe sundered the male smoke figure, his eyes alight with thrill. Trading wounds for victory suited his style. The female figure, emotionless as pill mist, pressed on. His body bore countless cuts, his shoulder burning, but he didn't retreat. Axe in one hand, shield in the other, he charged.

"Not enough!" he roared, shoving his shield forward. Without the male figure, the female posed less threat. The near-breakthrough sensation ebbed, frustrating him. Swinging wildly, he shattered her with an axe, the bridge trembling as she dissolved into smoke.

Bloodied, he slammed a fist into the iron chains, unwilling to accept failure. The smoke figures, though strong, hadn't pushed him to the Hidden Body Realm. Glancing at a distant bridge, he sought the other challenger's progress but sensed nothing across the vast divide.

Slinging his axe and shield, he stepped toward the floating island, each step resolute. As his foot touched the island, a tremor ran through him, as if a string in his heart snapped. Turning, he sensed a distant bridge where a vortex of spiritual energy swirled. His eyes widened, fists clenching, heart burning with reluctance.

Someone had beaten him to the Hidden Body Realm.