

Starlit Path 138

Chapter 138: Clash of Two Eras

Leaving South County behind, he journeyed to the Imperial Capital.

South County was now under the control of his eldest son, the heir to the family. Free from his father's oversight, the young man finally tasted the thrill of power. Yet, he didn't let it consume him. Instead, he poured his time and energy into exploring the Dragon Gate Secret Realm and training the South Manor Army, nurturing ambitions to forge them into a private force loyal only to him.

Shattering the clay soldiers yielded spiritual energy—a mere glimpse of the Dragon Gate's potential. What greater opportunities might await beyond the iron chain bridge, on the floating island? He had sent men to cross it once. Two first-tier masters barely set foot on the bridge before their heads were severed in an instant, their bodies plummeting into the abyss below. He hadn't even seen how they died, and the sight shook him to his core. With the South Manor Army's current strength, crossing that bridge was impossible. Even a full assault would end in annihilation. Perhaps only when his younger brother returned would they stand a chance.

Late at night, he sat in a grand chair, his gaze drifting to the floor, lost in thought. "That younger brother..." His fist clenched, a deep breath escaping him, his voice laced with envy and resentment. His brother's prowess as a cultivator gnawed at him. He himself was a cultivator in name, but without a proper cultivation method, he was incomplete. His brother, however, possessed an orthodox method, one that amplified his combat strength.

"Report!" A soldier clad in armor burst in, interrupting his thoughts. "Young Master, someone requests an audience." The soldier handed over a crudely carved wooden statue, its rough craftsmanship exuding a rugged, primal aura. "He said to present this, and you would grant him entry."

Squinting, he took the statue, its coarse design intriguing him. "Let him in," he ordered. The soldier saluted and left. Soon, footsteps echoed, and a figure cloaked entirely in black entered, a faint, eerie chuckle filling the room.

The Sword Saint, wielding a single blade that had carved his legend through decades in the martial world, descended from Zhongnan Mountain alongside two others. Unlike his sect's tradition of carrying multiple swords in a case, he bore only one—an old sword, weathered but still razor-sharp. The trio rode in three carriages, heading not directly to Beiluo but to North County first. As the Sword Saint left, the Zhongnan Sword Sect stirred, its disciples streaming north in his wake.

At Tianshuang Mountain, a young man in green robes returned astride a black ox, gazing at the mist-shrouded peaks with a mix of emotions. He climbed the ancient steps, leading the ox upward. The broken mountain gate still bore the scars of a blade. His fingers traced the marks, and a vision flickered—a lone figure striding up from the mountain's base, cleaving the gate with a single stroke.

"The tenth brother?" he murmured, his emotions tangled. This was inevitable, yet unsurprising. Some grudges demanded resolution. As he stepped onto the main plaza, the Daoist priests cleaning up froze, then erupted in excitement. "Senior Brother is back!" "The Dao Sect's prodigy returns!" Their voices carried both joy and sorrow, mourning the day a lone swordsman shattered their pride.

Caught off guard by the fervor, he nodded with a smile, handing his ox to a young disciple before ascending Star-Picking Peak toward the bamboo pavilion. "The Dao Sect... has a Dragon Gate now?" he mused, staring at the familiar yet alien structure, his heart a storm of feelings. Mist gathered above the Dragon Gate, coalescing into a figure—a woman in Daoist robes. She raised a hand, and the clouds pressed down, forming a dragon, oppressive and terrifying.

“You finally decided to show up,” she said, eyeing him. The cloud dragon lunged, its ferocity unstoppable. He smiled, raising his wooden sword. With a gentle tap on the dragon’s snout, the massive beast disintegrated. Wind howled, her robes fluttering. “Not bad. Ninth-stage Qi Core Realm,” he said with a light chuckle.

Her eyes narrowed, sensing the impossible. “You’ve grown stronger!” she exclaimed. His gaze deepened, leaning on his wooden sword as he stared at the starry sky and the Dragon Gate. “Qi Core Realm? I’ve moved beyond that.” Ignoring her shock, he asked, “Where’s the Master?”

She drifted down from the Dragon Gate, studying him with complex emotions. He seemed... different, more mature, profound. What had happened to him? She didn’t ask, instead answering, “The Master... lost his way.” His brow furrowed. What kind of talk was that? “Big Brother came, split the gate with one slash, defeated the Master, and took Sister Ru away. So, the Master lost his way and headed to Beiluo.”

His expression grew odd. “He really lost it. The tenth brother hit him hard.” She continued, her robes billowing in the mountain wind. “The Master said if he doesn’t return, I’m to be the next leader of the Dao Sect.” He nodded calmly, and she let out a soft hum. Silence fell over the peak, the siblings untroubled by the prospect of leadership. Neither craved it. He had wandered the borderlands for years, dancing with death, precisely to avoid it.

“You’re destined to lead the Dao Sect one day, little sister. Take care of yourself and stop crying over men,” he teased, a relieved smile on his face. Her face darkened, glaring at him. Suddenly, the clouds above Star-Picking Peak surged, forming multiple cloud dragons that stared him down coldly. He raised his wooden sword with a faint smile. “It’s useless. I’ve mastered Body Storage. I’d crush any Qi Core cultivator.”

“Try fighting back, and I’ll cry at our parents’ graves,” she shot back icily. His hand froze. The cloud dragons descended in a rush. That night, the Dao Sect disciples watched in astonishment as their prodigy, limping and leaning on his ox, left Star-Picking Peak and headed for Beiluo.

In Beiluo, at Lakeheart Island, the long rain finally ceased, revealing a sky clear as glass, stars twinkling, moonlight like frost. On the second floor of the White Jade Pavilion, a suffocating pressure enveloped the building. A man sat, frowning at a spiritual pressure chessboard, his eyes reflecting a storm. Each move summoned winds; each piece placed unleashed torrents. A tempest seemed to swirl around him.

The rain had cleansed the island's air. A young woman, carrying a black pot, splashed through puddles as she ran from the pavilion, a younger girl trailing behind, clutching a chick. The older girl's eyes flicked to the chick, her tongue brushing her lips. Another woman, cradling a pipa, wiped a stone step clean and sat, determined to infuse her music with spiritual energy. She refused to give up.

Two others stood leisurely, gazing at budding peach blossoms. Suddenly, one's gem-like eyes sparkled. The buds showed signs of blooming. "These are the Young Master's spiritual plants, like the Skyward Chrysanthemum. When these peaches bloom, their spiritual energy will erupt, creating a storm. Don't miss your chance," she said to her companion, who nodded eagerly. The terrifying aura from the pavilion's chess game made them tremble. "The Young Master's grown unfathomable. Even his chess is terrifying now," one remarked.

A white dove broke through the island's mist, landing on the head of an old man sipping tea. He grabbed the bird, reading the message tied to its leg. Tea poured into his cup, its fragrance rising. "What's the news that's got you so rattled?" his companion asked, grinning. "The Dao Sect's leader, the Sword Sect's Sword Saint, and the Mechanism Sect's master are heading north together. Their target... is the Young Master."

The man with the gold chain paused mid-sip, then shook his head with a laugh. "Those old fossils refuse to fade quietly. They're about to be swept aside by the times. If they don't leave a mark now, they'll die with regrets." He sipped his tea. "They're not fools. They know the score but can't accept it."

The other man sipped his tea thoughtfully. “The Sword Saint, the world’s greatest swordsman, a grandmaster of renown, plus the other two—can they challenge the Young Master?” His companion scoffed. “Challenge? With what? Ten Sword Saints couldn’t match a single move from the Young Master. They’re not even in the same league.” He shook his head. “They’re not here to fight. They just don’t want to leave regrets.”

The other man mused, pouring more tea. “No regrets, huh? Marching to Beiluo, knowing they’ll lose, maybe die.” He looked at the green tea cascading into his cup. “Why?” His companion touched his gold chain, gazing at the tea. “Maybe to let their era end without regrets.”

The next day, in the North County military camp, three carriages rolled in. The camp’s commander emerged, followed by two others. Curious generals watched as three elderly figures stepped out, frail and half in the grave but brimming with vitality. One radiated a sage-like aura, another a sword’s piercing edge, the third an enigmatic cunning. Three titans of the Hundred Schools.

“Commander, we’re short one for a game. Care to join us in Beiluo?” one asked. The commander smiled, wrinkles creasing his face. “I’d love to, but I fear the Young Master would end me the moment I set foot in the city.” He recounted how he’d once deceived the Young Master by having another impersonate him. “Knowing his temper, I’d be done for. So, I’ll pass.”

The Sword Saint gave him a cool look. The others sighed, one with mixed emotions. They didn’t press him. The carriages turned and left, dust trailing as they vanished toward Beiluo. A young general watched them go,感慨道: “An era’s end. The Hundred Schools’ leaders are extraordinary, as expected. This clash between their time and the White Jade era is like a mantis against a chariot, yet... I can’t help but feel reluctant to miss it.”

The commander gazed at the fading dust. "My lord, I must go to Beiluo after all." He bowed to the young general, who smiled. "Go. Miss this, and you'll regret it forever." The commander bowed again. Soon, another carriage tore across the plains, racing toward Beiluo.

In the Imperial Capital, in a study, an old scholar sat in a rocking chair, gazing at banana leaves battered yet defiant after the rain. He smiled. "Tianyu, prepare the carriage." His student, sipping from a gourd, froze. "Master, where to?" "Beiluo," the scholar replied, brushing his Confucian robes to look sharper. The student's copper divining tool clattered to the floor. "Why Beiluo, out of the blue?" The scholar smiled wordlessly, gazing at the banana leaves and the stars striving to shine, his cloudy eyes tinged with nostalgia.