

## Starlit Path 148

### Chapter 148: This Time, He Won't Run

Li Sansi had reached the Body Treasury Realm too? For the Overlord, this was a crushing blow. He could accept Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao's breakthroughs—they were Baiyujing disciples, already halfway there, backed by the enigmatic and powerful Lu Ping'an. Their advancement was no surprise. But Li Sansi? Why him?

The Overlord stared at Li Sansi, disbelief in his eyes. Back in the Wolong Ridge Secret Realm, his strength had surpassed Li Sansi's. Li Sansi had gained little there—just a copy of the Spirit Transport Sword Manual. Could that alone have propelled him into Body Treasury? The Overlord had endured countless beatings from the mysterious shadow, persevering through relentless punishment, yet he still hadn't broken through. How had Li Sansi, of all people, overtaken him?

Unwillingness gnawed at him, but it was futile. Immortal fate was just that—fate. Exhaling, Xiang Shaoyun's gaze softened. He had grown, no longer the hotheaded, impulsive Overlord of old. "I may be a step behind," he said, his eyes blazing, "but I'll catch up. I'm certain of it."

Li Sansi, in his flowing Taoist robe, wooden sword in hand, spotted Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao. His face stiffened, especially when he saw Nie Changqing. Their last clash outside Beiluo City had left him battered and questioning his worth. That defeat had spurred reflection. His breakthrough, guided by Zhu Long, had been somewhat forced, leaving his strength and control over his power weaker than Nie Changqing's, who had shattered his limits through personal insight.

So, Li Sansi had come here, passing through the Dragon Gate Secret Realm and crossing the iron chain bridge to reach this central palace. The eight Dragon Gates housed formidable secret realm masters, like the ancient qi refiner in Wolong Ridge's coffin. It had taken great resolve to come. The Great Zhou Dynasty offered few places to hone his strength, and Baiyujing—home to Lu Ping'an—was too daunting. Challenging Lu could mean no return. After weighing his options, he'd returned to the Daoist Sect and entered the Dragon Gate.

He hadn't expected to find Nie Changqing and Ning Zhao here. "What a... coincidence," Li Sansi said, smiling awkwardly.

Nie Changqing, butcher's knife at his side, his white robe fluttering, glanced at him. "Here to challenge the secret realm master?"

Li Sansi nodded.

"Bold move," Nie Changqing said. "The Young Master says this master is no ordinary Body Treasury cultivator." He gestured toward the palace. "You first."

Li Sansi's expression shifted. Praised by Lu Ping'an himself, this master must be terrifyingly strong. To ease the tension, he turned to the Overlord. "It's been a while, Overlord."

Noticing the Overlord's aura still lingered at the peak of the Qi Core Realm, not yet Body Treasury, Li Sansi raised an eyebrow. That hint of surprise stung the Overlord, who shot him a cold look. "Want to fight?" He slammed his axe against his shield, the clang echoing through the palace.

Li Sansi waved dismissively, his face stiffening. Why was the Overlord so fiery, like he'd swallowed a chili pepper?

Ning Zhao ignored them. With a light tap of her foot, her white dress billowed as she shot forward, a streak of white lightning. Her Cicada Wing Sword rose before her. Nie Changqing followed, hand on his knife's handle, moving in step with her into the palace's depths.

Li Sansi exhaled, his robe fluttering as he trailed them. The Overlord, clenching his fists, didn't hesitate. He stepped into the palace too. Everyone else was in Body Treasury; he alone wasn't. Unwilling to lag behind, he sought to force his breakthrough under greater pressure.

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On Lake Island, in Baiyujing's second-floor pavilion, Lu sat in his wheelchair, warming wine on a golden nanmu table. The wine simmered, its rich aroma filling the air. He dropped a green plum into the pot, watching it vanish in the boiling liquid. Sipping from a bamboo ladle, he sensed the group challenging the secret realm master in the Dragon Gate's central palace.

"The Overlord hasn't reached Body Treasury," he mused. "His demonic path makes him stronger than most peak Qi Core cultivators, but breaking into Body Treasury is far harder. A blessing and a curse."

Squinting with interest, he turned his attention to the events unfolding outside Lake Island.

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On the shore, the gathered martial artists grew restless. Impatience brewed, and some began to shout. Luo Yue stood coldly, saber at his side, flanked by Beiluo's ironclad guards, their hands on their blades, holding the crowd back. Some rogues sensed trouble and tried to leave. "Let me go! I don't want to join Baiyujing anymore!" a second-rate martial artist yelled, blocked by the guards.

Luo Yue glanced at him, sensing the blood on his hands—a ruthless man, no doubt, with lives taken. As the man’s protests sparked others, the lakeside’s calm shattered. “Why can’t we leave?” one shouted. “Baiyujing’s a letdown! We came with respect, and this is how you treat us?” another cried. “What kind of cultivation force is this? Just like those sanctimonious martial sects—same old hypocrisy!”

Luo Yue’s face twitched. Some might genuinely wish to join Baiyujing, but most were opportunists, hoping to bask in its prestige. Joining Baiyujing, even briefly, would give them bragging rights, a chance to lord over smaller clans and rise to prominence. He’d seen their kind before.

“This isn’t a marketplace to come and go as you please,” Luo Yue said, his voice icy. “You think Beiluo City—what Baiyujing—is a revolving door?” His saber flashed from its sheath, the clang ringing out. The guards drew their blades in unison.

The martial artists erupted in outrage, but no fight broke out. Luo Yue looked up as a lone boat glided across the lake. At its bow stood a man in a white robe, a pearwood sword case on his back holding four swords, arms crossed with a resolute air. The boat’s ripples spread through the mist, lending him an aura of decisiveness.

“The Young Master says if you can reach the island, you may join Baiyujing,” the man called out, his voice cutting through the clamor. “But to get there, you’ll have to get past me.”

Luo Yue’s lips curled, sheathing his saber. “Flee, and you die,” he said coldly. The crowd shuddered.

“Are you a Baiyujing disciple?” a martial artist shouted.

The man stood, shaking his head. “Not yet. But if I defeat all of you, I will be.”

His words ignited the crowd like boiling water. They'd come to join Baiyujing, only to face someone who wasn't even a disciple, using them as a stepping stone. And he was bold enough to challenge a thousand martial artists? "They say Baiyujing's disciples are arrogant, their master even more so," one sneered. "Now some nobody dares to act this big?"

Some schemed. Defeating or injuring this man would give them a story to boast about—a tale of wounding a Baiyujing disciple, enough to elevate their status in smaller regions.

The boat reached the shore. Jing Yue leaped onto the steps, facing over a thousand martial artists. The pressure was immense, stirring his instinct to flee. He pinched his trembling thigh, the pain dulling his fear.

Some martial artists mocked him. "His legs are shaking!" one laughed. "One against a thousand martial artists? Who does he think he is—Lu Ping'an? No wonder he's scared stiff." "Bet he bolts any second," another jeered.

But as they laughed, the seasoned fighters struck. Blades flashed toward Jing Yue's vitals, ruthless and deadly. He exhaled, fingers snapping forward. A sword flew from his case, striking a martial artist's chest, sending him flying with a spray of blood. Jing Yue caught the sword, his eyes resolute. The Young Master had given him this chance, and he wouldn't waste it. Lu could crush these rabble with a single chess move, yet he'd tasked Jing Yue with this trial.

A thousand martial artists, mostly second-rate or lesser, were daunting enough. Worse, first-rate fighters and masters lurked among them. Another sword left his case. Gripping two blades, Jing Yue charged, avoiding spiritual energy to preserve his stamina. A master's endurance couldn't outlast hundreds.

He slashed, sending several martial artists flying, blood spraying. Their groans filled the air. “You... a bandit who massacred a village,” Jing Yue said, locking eyes with a second-rate fighter. His sword twisted, piercing the man’s body and pinning him to the ground.

All four swords now drawn, Jing Yue grew fiercer. Initially sparing lives, he met their killing intent with equal force. His blades danced, cutting through foes, pulling swords from bodies to strike again. Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine—a master’s blade aimed at his skull. Spinning, Jing Yue unleashed a wisp of spiritual energy, sweeping the attacker away in a spray of blood.

He panted, the crowd closing in. Luo Yue watched, his expression grave. Jing Yue was far weaker than Nie Changqing or Ning Zhao, with only a few strands of spiritual energy. Once depleted, his stamina would fail. This fight was brutal for him.

Jing Yue’s chest heaved like a bellows. The martial artists’ weapons swung relentlessly, threatening to overwhelm him. His vision blurred, memories of a burning village flooding back—corpses, blood-soaked earth, the cries of women and children. His parents’ screams urged him to flee, to survive. He’d fled across a thousand miles, from West Command to South Command. His whole life, he’d been running.

In the Sword Sect, they mocked his cowardice. Would he flee now? Pain snapped him back—a martial artist, gleeful at wounding him, thought victory was near. Jing Yue’s sword, infused with spiritual energy, sent him flying.

Leaning on his sword, Jing Yue couldn’t retrieve the others. He’d been sidelined on Lake Island, and he knew why: his instinct to flee at danger’s first sign. Lu hadn’t accepted him, wary he’d abandon Baiyujing in a crisis. Better no hope than betrayal. Yet Lu had given him this chance, and Jing Yue treasured it. He loved Baiyujing’s atmosphere—Ni Yu’s quirky alchemy, Nie Shuang’s earnest training, Ning Zhao’s cool resolve, Nie Changqing’s weathered strength, and others like Yi Yue, Lü Dongxuan, and Lü Mudui. And the mysterious, mighty Lu Ping’an.

When Sword Saint Hua Dongliu left, he'd offered to take Jing Yue. Jing Yue refused. He loved Lake Island, saw it as home. Facing the ferocious martial artists, he smiled. This time, he wouldn't—couldn't—run. He had to face this.

His sword scraped the stone, sparking as he laughed softly. Blood-stained and resolute, he charged into the crowd, swallowed by the tide.