

STARLIT PATH OF THE MYSTIC FORGE

Chapter 17: The One I'm Interested In... Is You

Lu eyed the weary middle-aged man, his brow quirking. The man's aura matched the blurred figure from the Preaching Platform—Nie Changqing, no doubt.

Ning Zhao stepped in front of Lu, her stunning face taut with caution. This disheveled butcher gave her a faint sense of danger. A *Grandmaster*? Yet his vital energy seemed overly stagnant, not quite fitting the profile. A *hidden figure in Beiluo City*?

Yi Yue's hand rested on her whip, her body tense. Weaker than Ning Zhao, she felt the butcher's glare like a physical force, her pores constricting, her vital energy sluggish. As for Ni Yu, she leaned against Lu's wheelchair, her eyes dull with despair. Leading them to the wrong shops meant skipped meals. *Why did I volunteer at the mention of a butcher shop?* Starvation loomed, despite Lu's earlier praise of her appetite. *The Young Master's getting crueler.*

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Nie Changqing shielded the big-headed boy, his gaze wary. Lu's words, brimming with arrogance yet delivered with calm certainty, threw him off. "You're not from the Daoist School?" he asked, voice raspy.

"Young Master is Beiluo City's heir, with no ties to the Daoist School," Ning Zhao replied.

Lu sat in his wheelchair, smiling, one hand propping his chin, the other tapping the wool blanket on his legs. His eyes drifted to the boy in Nie's arms, whose clear, untainted gaze—like a pristine sky—made even Lu, self-proclaimed pure, blush faintly. The boy shrank back, intimidated by Lu's intense stare.

"Lu's heir, what brings you to my humble shop?" Nie asked, relaxing slightly but remaining cautious. How did Lu know he was a Daoist outcast? He'd hidden in Beiluo for five years, even changing his name to "Nie Rourong" to protect his son, Nie Shuang. Yet Lu had found him.

"What's his name?" Lu asked, smiling at the boy.

Nie's heart tightened, clutching Nie Shuang closer, pressing the boy's head into his blood-scented chest. "My son's name isn't worthy of your ears," he said, his tone laced with refusal.

Lu's smile faded, his gaze turning serious. "In the martial world, you're not your own master. Think hiding your name ensures a peaceful life? Don't you consider your son's future? Will he inherit your cleaver, destined to be a stinking butcher?"

Nie froze, caught off guard by Lu's words. He didn't argue, his hand stroking Nie Shuang's head, his expression wistful. "What's wrong with being a simple butcher? As a parent, I only want him safe and stable," he said bitterly.

Lu squinted, ignoring Nie and addressing the boy. "Little guy, tell your big brother—do you want to be a butcher?"

Nie Shuang peeked out, his bright, soulful eyes meeting Lu's. "No... I don't," he said firmly, looking up at Nie. "Father doesn't like being a butcher, so I don't either."

Nie's heart clenched, as if gripped tightly, his son's words striking deep. Lu smoothed the blanket on his lap. "He's pure gold, yet you let him gather dust. That's a crime, you know."

Ning Zhao and Yi Yue were speechless, awed by their Young Master's eloquence, worthy of the Grand Preceptor's praise. Ni Yu, roused from her gloom, flushed with excitement. "I'm gold too, but Young Master lets me gather dust—that's a crime!"

Lu's lips twitched. He shot her a glare. "Quiet, or I'll smack you."

Ni Yu shivered, clamping her mouth shut, tears welling. *Young Master's cold arrow pierced my heart.* She inwardly wailed.

Nie fell silent. After a long pause, he rasped, "So, Young Master Lu, you've taken a shine to my son, to nurture him?"

Nie Shuang's eyes sparkled, filled with dreams of soaring like an eagle, growing strong to find his mother. Lu, leaning back, appraised the boy with admiration, then spoke slowly. "No... the one I'm interested in is you."

The air stilled. Nie Shuang's eager gaze froze, his small heart sinking, suddenly empathizing with Ni Yu's despair. Nie blinked, stunned, then his face twitched. "Young Master Lu, I'm spoken for. My apologies."

Lu: “???”

“The shop’s closing early today... sorry,” Nie said, swiftly pulling down the hanging meat, tossing it into a basket, and slinging it over his shoulder. In straw sandals, he led Nie Shuang down a market alley.

Ning Zhao hesitated, her gaze odd as she asked, “Young Master, shall I capture him?”

Lu stroked his pale chin, smirking. “No rush. He’ll feel my sincerity soon enough.”

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Thunder rumbled as dark clouds rolled in, oppressive and heavy. Raindrops fell, splashing into the earth, stirring up warm, muddy air. Nie adjusted Nie Shuang’s conical hat, rain pattering against it. Wiping his face, he carried the meat basket, guiding Nie Shuang through the misty rain along a stone path toward their dilapidated home in the alley’s depths.

Suddenly, Nie stopped. The rain intensified, thunder roaring, the mist blurring the world. At the alley's end, before their worn house, three figures stood in conical hats and raincoats, their forms hazy in the downpour.

“Shuang’er,” Nie called, his face blank, squeezing his son’s cold hand. “When I say run, you run back. Don’t look back. Understand?”

Nie Shuang, sharp for his age, pursed his pale lips and nodded. A thunderclap tore the sky, and Nie shouted, “Shuang’er! Run!”

Nie Shuang clutched his hat and sprinted back without hesitation. Nie dropped the basket, meat spilling across the ground, and yanked a gleaming cleaver from it. His straw-sandaled foot splashed in a puddle. In the distance, two of the raincoat-clad figures charged, blades flashing under their cloaks, cutting through the rain. One figure remained still, watching.