

STARLIT PATH OF THE MYSTIC FORGE

Chapter 18: The Ninth of the Daoist School

Rain fell in a relentless drizzle, splashing two feet high as it hit the ground. Nie Changqing gripped his cleaver, eyes bloodshot, rainwater snaking down his face like writhing worms. Madness and unwillingness surged within him, his killing intent thick. After five years of hiding, the inevitable had arrived.

The assassins' blades gleamed blindingly, slicing through the rain with a trembling hum, drowning out the downpour's roar. Their footsteps pounded rapidly. Nie roared, his cleaver arcing through the air. The two assassins unleashed torrents of vital energy, blasting away nearby rainwater.

Clang! Clang! Blades met cleaver in a shower of sparks. The three figures danced across the alley's wet stones, water splashing high. Blood mixed with rain, staining the ground red before being washed away. A deep gash stretched from Nie's shoulder to his abdomen, blood gushing out. One assassin fell with a *thud*, bisected at the waist, blood spraying. The other retreated, then charged again, splashing through puddles.

Nie's hand trembled on the cleaver's handle. In the distance, Nie Shuang, disobeying his father, stopped running and turned back. Seeing Nie cut down an assassin with the cleaver—a tool not just for pigs but for men—shocked the boy. His father, blood-soaked, stood defiant. Young Nie Shuang's mind reeled, and he froze in the rain, sobbing hysterically, his cries laced with fear and worry.

Nie had no time to comfort him. If these assassins didn't die today, he and his son would. His cleaver whirled, ferocious and wild, yet guided by a subtle pattern. The remaining assassin was forced back under its onslaught.

At the alley's end, the lone figure in a conical hat and raincoat stirred. Stepping forward, he drew a wooden flute and played a soft tune, its notes overpowering the rain's clamor, echoing through the alley.

Splurch! Nie's cleaver pierced the second assassin's back, blood dripping. Swaying, he gripped the weapon, staring at the approaching figure, rainwater dripping from his chin, his face etched with defiance.

"One song, *Tide Ballad*. Han Lianxiao, Ninth of the Daoist School," Nie rasped, peering through the rain.

Han Lianxiao, playing his flute, approached slowly, yet somehow closed the distance swiftly. As the tune ended, his handsome face emerged beneath the hat. "The Tenth 'Peerless Blade' of the Daoist School... still impressive. Even with severed hand tendons, you dispatch two First-Rate martial artists with ease. I'm in awe, Junior Brother Nie."

He pressed his flute against Nie's cleaver, forcing it to Nie's chest with overwhelming strength. His praise dripped with mockery. "If my tendons weren't cut, one slash would end you," Nie spat, coughing blood that flowed onto the flute.

Han frowned at the blood, then sighed. "Return with Shuang'er. Beg the Master's forgiveness, and you might live."

"Five years, and my answer's the same: I did nothing wrong!" Nie growled, veins bulging.

"Then I'll bring your corpse back," Han said, sighing again. His vital energy surged, his raincoat shaking with five explosive bursts. The flute pressed harder, shattering Nie's spirit. Blood sprayed as Nie was flung back three meters, sliding to one knee. His cleaver stabbed into the stone, screeching, halting his retreat.

Nie staggered up, wiping blood-mixed rainwater from his face, gripping his weapon. Nie Shuang, hat askew, stood trembling in the rain, crying hoarsely. Han's face turned cold. He tossed his flute, then struck it with a palm. It spun, spraying water like a dragon, blades sprouting from it, a whirling meat grinder aimed at Nie.

With his tendons severed, Nie, no longer a Grandmaster, couldn't block it. Suddenly, Han's brow quirked. A thin, near-transparent sword pierced the rain, its song tearing the air. *Clang!* The flute was knocked back, its blades retracting as Han caught it.

Beside Nie stood a woman in a silk dress, holding a paper umbrella in one hand and a cicada-wing sword in the other. "Killing in Beiluo City, targeting someone / chose?" a lazy, sleepy voice drawled. "Tch, tch, tch... You clearly don't respect me, Beiluo's young lord."

Wheelchair wheels sloshed through the rain. Han frowned, looking ahead. In the misty alley, a pale-lipped youth approached in a wheelchair, flanked by maids with oil-paper umbrellas, as if on a leisurely outing. The wheelchair stopped beside Nie Shuang, who'd ceased crying.

Lu glanced at the boy, smirking. "Hey, little guy, happy to see your big brother?"

Nie Shuang, eyes red and swollen, sniffled, dazed. “H-Happy,” he stammered, voice hoarse.

Lu’s brow rose, intrigued. “How happy?”

Nie Shuang froze, at a loss. Lu chuckled. “If I save your dad, will that make you happy?”

Nie Shuang snapped to, dropping to his knees in the rain, his big head slamming into the wet ground, crushing his hat. “Please, Young Master, save my father!” he cried, voice breaking.

Lu nodded, then turned to Han Lianxiao. “You heard him. I made a promise, so... give me some face.”

Han gripped his flute, brushing his sideburns, and smirked. “Beiluo’s Young Master Lu.” His voice was soft, magnetic. Both smiled, like old friends meeting. Then Han’s voice echoed through the alley. “If your father, Lu Changkong, were here, I might grant that face. But you, Young Master Lu? You don’t carry that weight.”