

## Starlit Path 181

### Chapter 181: A Game of Cosmic Chess

Lu had always considered himself a patient man. But patience was one thing—protectiveness was another.

Nie Shuang, the boy who once knelt before Lu in a rain-soaked night, begging for help to save Nie Changqing, had grown into a cultivator capable of standing on his own. Lu had watched Nie Shuang's relentless training on Lakeheart Island, his dedication shining through. Compared to Ni Yu's half-hearted efforts—three days of work followed by two days of slacking—Nie Shuang was the epitome of diligence. Who wouldn't admire such a hardworking kid? To Lu, Nie Shuang was the disciple he held in highest regard.

So when Nie Shuang was struck down by the Western Rong King's fist in the Northern Commandery battlefield, left vomiting blood and unconscious, how could Lu sit idly by?

On Beiluo Lake, an oppressive force hung in the air, so thick it felt tangible. The blond man's soul, kneeling on the lake's surface, didn't dare move. The wrath of a Golden Core Realm master was not something a Body Forging Realm cultivator could withstand.

Lu sat calmly in his wheelchair, ignoring the blond man and the Buddhist monk. He held a chess piece between his fingers. The spiritual pressure chessboard before him seemed to reflect the very mountains and rivers of the world. The blond man, the monk, and the trapped soul fragment of the Mid-Martial World's plane lord stared in awe. That chessboard... was it some kind of mystical weapon?

Click.

Lu placed the piece on the board. An invisible ripple spread across the heavens and earth. His white robes billowed as if caught in a gust, his hair fluttering across his refined, jade-like face, lending him an air of ethereal grace.

---

In the Northern Commandery, outside Tianhan Pass, snow fell heavily over the boundless grasslands, blanketing the earth like a thick quilt. The Western Rong King sat atop a palanquin, carried by several Western Rong warriors who trudged through the snow, step by laborious step. Behind them trailed a long column of Western Rong soldiers, retreating from Tianhan Pass for a temporary respite.

To the Western Rong, war was nothing new. Every winter, when resources grew scarce, the Western Rong King would lead his army to assault Tianhan Pass, hoping to breach its defenses and claim the fertile lands beyond. Success meant abundant grain to last the winter. Failure, though brutal, eased the strain on their limited food supplies by thinning their numbers.

But this year felt different. The Western Rong King had summoned all the tribes, amassing an unprecedented force of 100,000 soldiers to storm Tianhan Pass. His presence was unsettling, radiating an oppressive aura. Several dissenting tribal leaders had already met gruesome ends, their necks snapped by the king's hands, their bodies lost to the snow. The surviving leaders seethed in silence, powerless against the king's iron grip over the army. His martial prowess was terrifying, a force that crushed all hope of resistance.

As the king sat on his palanquin, deep in thought, he dismissed the likes of Dantai Xuan and Jiang Li as mere mortals, no real threat. The true challenges were Bai Qingniao, who wielded three fiery phoenixes with bewildering skill, and Nie Shuang, whose sheer grit and solid foundation allowed him to trade blows with the king himself. The Western Rong King marveled at this vibrant world, brimming with heroes and prodigies, reminiscent of his own lost realm—a world that had crumbled long ago.

Suddenly, the snowfall ceased. A suffocating pressure descended, so intense it stole the breath from the air. The horses of the Western Rong army whinnied in panic, sensing a primal terror. The king leaped from his palanquin, his instincts screaming of danger.

Boom!

The sky churned, clouds roiling. The snow parted, forming a massive hand, its middle finger crossed over its index as if placing a chess piece. "Who's there?!" the king roared, his pupils narrowing. No words answered him. The unseen player treated the world as a chessboard.

The king unleashed his peak Foundation Building strength, his power surging. The giant hand descended, slow and deliberate, like a chess piece falling into place. The snow on the ground scattered under the immense pressure, revealing the bare earth beneath. The Western Rong soldiers collapsed to their knees, trembling, while the tribal leaders stared in horror. Had their unsanctioned campaign angered the gods of the grasslands?

The king landed, his peak Foundation Building aura blazing. To the awestruck leaders, he seemed to defy the heavens themselves. But the pressure was overwhelming, as if the snow itself would burst under its weight. The king's eyes bulged in shock. "This pressure... a Golden Core Realm master? The plane lord of this world?" He couldn't believe it—a low-martial world harboring a Golden Core cultivator?

The heavens seemed to cage him. In his eyes, white flames flickered, and faintly, he glimpsed a figure in a wheelchair, placing a chess piece. The gaze of that figure struck him like a hammer to the soul. Blood trickled from his nose and mouth as the human skin he wore burned away, revealing a charred face. White flames engulfed his head, granting him a burst of strength to break free from the spiritual pressure. He stomped the ground, the earth trembling, and fled as a streak of black light, racing through the snow.

---

Back on Beiluo Lake, Lu raised an eyebrow. “Oh? He broke through the chessboard’s spiritual pressure?” It was a first. “Must be those white flames,” he mused. “They’re not something a Body Forging cultivator should possess.” Thoughtfully, he picked up a black chess piece and placed it atop the previous one, sliding it forward with a soft scrape. One piece should suffice for a Body Forging cultivator—but if not, two would do.

---

The Western Rong King felt like an ant scurrying across a vast chessboard. His head blazed with “Bone Ghost Fire,” the cursed flame that had destroyed his world. He had betrayed his realm to claim it, a power from a high-martial plane. Regret? None. With this fire, he could rise again, given time to grow in secret. This low-martial world had seemed the perfect opportunity—until now. He had misjudged it entirely. This was no ordinary low-martial world, and its plane lord was a Golden Core master.

Escape was his only option. As long as he kept the Bone Ghost Fire, he could rebuild. But the world solidified around him, trapping him within the chessboard’s bounds. The snow parted again, forming another hand, as if the unseen player had placed another piece. The king roared, his body engulfed in white flames that melted the surrounding snow. He punched upward, his flames clashing with the descending finger.

Boom!

He fell to his knees. “Plane lord, spare me!” he pleaded. “I meant no offense! I offer the lives of 100,000 Western Rong soldiers for my own!” His desperate cry echoed through the storm. The soldiers and tribal leaders paled, trembling at the thought of their king sacrificing them to a god.

The clouds shifted, forming a massive face. Its voice thundered, shattering the snow. "Debts must be repaid. You struck a child of White Jade City until he bled. That debt is yours to settle. The Western Rong's debts will be claimed by the Northern Commandery."

The king froze, recalling the stubborn boy he'd fought at Tianhan Pass. All this... for one punch? He had been so cautious, disguising himself as the Western Rong King to avoid attention, only to be undone by a single blow. "This is a low-martial world! How can there be a Golden Core master?!" he roared, unwilling to accept his fate.

But the sky formed another hand, descending like a final chess move. His cries were swallowed by an avalanche of sound, and he was erased under the heavens' might. The 100,000 Western Rong soldiers knelt, trembling, as their king vanished.

---

On Beiluo Lake, a gentle breeze rippled the water. The fog parted, revealing a massive spiritual hand holding a despairing soul wreathed in white flames, screaming with resentment. The blond man's soul and the monk, pinned by a silver blade, stared in shock. The blond man gave a wry smile. "Fancy meeting you here," he said to the Western Rong King's soul. The monk opened his mouth but said nothing.

The king's soul thrashed, but Lu glanced at it, unimpressed. He flicked the armrest of his wheelchair, and a swarm of silver blades materialized, their chilling aura freezing the soul in place. Each blade was a high-grade treasure. The king's soul finally saw the boy in the wheelchair clearly. "The plane lord... a Qi Condensation cultivator?" he stammered, confused.

Lu waved a hand, and the silver blades pierced the soul, severing the white flames. The king realized too late: this unassuming boy was no mere Qi Condensation cultivator but a terrifying Golden Core master in disguise.

The severed flames floated before Lu, a strange blend of icy cold and searing heat. As he studied them, the flames seemed to reflect his figure, a silent challenge in their flickering light.