

Starlit Path 21

Chapter 21: A New Path Begins with a Charioteer

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“Mission Evaluation: Grade A (Satisfactory).”

The moment Nie Changqing bowed his head in allegiance, a system notification flickered before the young master’s eyes. His heart stirred with quiet excitement. A Grade A evaluation—this was an unexpected delight. With these 5 attribute points, he could finally break through to the second level of Qi Refining.

A wave of emotions washed over him. At last, he could advance. It hadn’t been easy. For his first breakthrough, a spark of anticipation flickered in his chest.

The rain had stopped as quickly as it had come. The dark clouds parted, revealing a full moon glowing like a jade disk in the sky, its light draping the world in a silvery veil.

Nie Changqing remained kneeling, his forehead damp from the rain-soaked ground. The decision to follow the young master had not come lightly. It wasn’t just his pride as the former tenth disciple of the Taoist sect that made him hesitate—it was the danger his choice could bring to the young master and Nie Shuang. As a fugitive of the Taoist sect, hunted relentlessly, his allegiance could drag the young master into the sect’s crosshairs.

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Yet, when the young master ordered Han Lianxiao's death without a second thought, Nie Changqing realized his fears were misplaced. From the moment Han Lianxiao's blood stained the alley, the young master had already braced himself for the Taoist sect's wrath.

And so, Nie Changqing chose to follow. The "spiritual pressure" the young master had wielded—a cultivator's power—was something he yearned to master.

Beside him, Nie Shuang knelt stubbornly, mimicking his father's bow. In his childish voice, he echoed, "Me too!"

Ni Yu, clutching her umbrella, couldn't hold back a giggle. The young master snapped out of his thoughts, catching sight of Nie Shuang's earnest imitation, and a smile tugged at his lips.

"Alright, get up," he said, chuckling. "A two-for-one deal? I'm coming out ahead here."

Nie Changqing rose, pulling Nie Shuang to his feet.

"From today onward, you're with me," the young master said. "I need a charioteer, so you'll take that role for now. Oh, and you'll train little Ni in martial arts while you're at it."

His legs, weakened by ailment, confined him to a wheelchair for short distances, but long journeys required a carriage.

"Understood," Nie Changqing replied, clasping his hands respectfully.

"And you, little Nie," the young master said, glancing at Nie Shuang with a grin. "You'll train with Ni. Let's see who becomes a second-rate martial artist first. The winner gets a hefty reward."

His fingers tapped lightly on the armrest of his wheelchair as he spoke. Ni Yu's eyes sparkled, her chubby cheeks flushing with excitement. "Young Master, I won't let you down!" she declared, her voice brimming with determination. She shot a playful, challenging glance at Nie Shuang, who said nothing but clenched his fists, his resolve clear.

Nie Changqing ruffled his son's hair fondly.

"Enough. It's late, and I'm tired," the young master said, rubbing his brow and leaning back lazily. "Yi Yue, dispose of the body. Ning, push me back to the manor. Old Nie, bring little Nie and settle in at the Lu residence."

Nie Changqing's lips tightened. Questions swirled in his mind. When he'd first received the cultivation technique, he'd tried channeling it as a blood-moving method, but it yielded nothing. He'd dismissed the so-called "immortal opportunity" as a sham. The Blade Control Art, which promised to wield a blade from miles away, had seemed like pure fantasy. But witnessing the young master's spiritual pressure had rekindled his belief.

The young master had mentioned a missing "spark" for his cultivation path. What could it be?

"Young Master," Ni Yu piped up, her face still flushed. "Didn't the lord ask us to collect a plot of land from the Chen family to offset their rent? Are we not going?"

The reminder jolted the young master, who'd nearly forgotten the day's original purpose. "Right. Let's make a quick stop at the Chen family," he said, rubbing his temples and nodding.

That plot of land was crucial—a cornerstone for building his own transcendent force, the foundation of the fantastical world he envisioned.

“Old Nie, go pack your things and report to the Lu manor tomorrow?” he asked, eyeing Nie Changqing’s drenched, bloodied clothes.

“No need,” Nie Changqing replied, bowing respectfully as he held Nie Shuang’s hand. “Shuang and I have little to pack. We’ll follow you now, Young Master.”

“Very well,” the young master said, nodding. “Ning, give him a bottle of healing salve.”

Ning Zhao tossed a small vial to Nie Changqing, then began pushing the wheelchair out of the narrow alley. Ni Yu, still holding her umbrella, followed closely. The young master glanced at her with a smile. “The rain’s stopped. No need for that.” He ruffled her hair playfully.

Nie Changqing gathered his basket, securing the pork inside, and trailed behind with Nie Shuang.

As the group disappeared from the alley, Yi Yue’s gaze lingered on Han Lianxiao’s corpse. Her emotions were tangled. The Taoist sect’s ninth disciple, a man who nearly killed her with a single move, had been crushed like an insect under the young master’s spiritual pressure.

He’s that powerful.

She vowed to grow stronger, to match his might and earn his recognition. Gazing at the jade-like moon, her eyes hardened with resolve. With a flick of her whip, she wrapped it around Han Lianxiao’s body and the corpses of two first-rate martial artists nearby, dragging them out of the alley.

Only a pool of blood remained, the air thick with the scent of iron.

At the Lu manor, in the study, a candle flickered softly. Outside, the night's heavy rain had dwindled to droplets falling from the crimson carved eaves.

Lord Lu Changkong stood at his desk, brush in hand, sleeve held back, writing swiftly on a silk scroll. When he finished, he called out, "Old Luo."

The carved wooden door swung open, and Luo Yue entered, clad in dark armor, his sword at his side.

"Take this letter and ride to the capital at once," Lu Changkong instructed. "Inform His Majesty that I'll set out tomorrow to personally escort the captured martial grandmasters to the capital. Deliver this letter to His Majesty's hands directly."

Luo Yue took the scroll, clenching his fist solemnly. "I won't fail you, my lord."

Lu Changkong smiled faintly. "The world is descending into chaos. These martial grandmasters once obeyed the Imperial Preceptor, but now, at this critical moment, they've turned traitor. If not for Ning Zhao, Beiluo City would have fallen. Tantai Xuan's army would be at the capital's gates by now."

Luo Yue, a trusted general, understood the gravity of the situation.

“Back then, the Imperial Preceptor, with a single feather fan and a Confucian robe, tamed the martial world. Even the Hundred Schools retreated to their strongholds,” Lu Changkong mused. “Now, with the Preceptor aged and the late emperor gone, those martial artists are stirring again.”

Luo Yue’s voice was cold. “They never learn.”

“The times have changed,” Lu Changkong said softly, sighing. “The Preceptor’s era ended with the emperor’s passing.”

He waved a hand, dismissing Luo Yue. The general saluted, donned his helmet, and left to prepare a horse.

Lu Changkong, dressed in his Confucian robe, stood by the crimson carved window, gazing at the moonlit night.

“Old Huang,” he said suddenly. “How’s my son?”

From the shadows, a hunched figure materialized, still dripping with rainwater. Bowing to Lu Changkong, he rasped, “During tonight’s downpour, the young master killed a Taoist sect operative.”

“Oh? A Taoist operative? Which one?” Lu Changkong asked, his hands clasped behind him, a hint of surprise in his voice.

“The one who plays ‘Tide’s Lament,’ the ninth disciple, Han Lianxiao,” the figure replied hoarsely.

“The flute-playing fifth-rank grandmaster?” Lu Changkong’s eyebrow arched. “How did he do it?”

The hunched figure hesitated, unsure how to describe the scene. From a distance, he hadn’t seen clearly. Should he say the flute-playing grandmaster was pinned to the ground like a fool, stabbed dead by Ning Zhao’s sword? It was too bizarre.

“No matter,” Lu Changkong said, waving a hand when the figure struggled to explain. “A kill is a kill. With the capital’s forces moving, the Taoist sect won’t act rashly for now. Keep protecting my son. Ning Zhao may be a grandmaster, but she’s still too young.”

“As you command,” the figure said, bowing before dissolving like scattered mist.

Lu Changkong narrowed his eyes. Raising his hand, a faint blue glow shimmered in his palm—a single strand of spiritual energy dancing freely at his will.