

Starlit Path 22

Chapter 22: A Silent Night Stirs

In the city of Beiluo, three great families held sway: the Chen, Liu, and Zhu clans. These noble houses wielded immense influence in the Great Zhou Dynasty, commanding vast lands and labor forces, forming self-sufficient economic strongholds with deep-rooted power. Most of the twelve rebelling warlords and regional governors hailed from such families.

Beiluo, being close to the imperial capital, lay under the emperor's watchful eye, which kept the ambitions of these families in check. Compared to their counterparts in distant regions, the Chen, Liu, and Zhu clans were less dominant. But even so, they were still formidable noble houses.

The night was still, the silence heavy.

At the Chen family estate, the grand gates stood firmly shut, littered with leaves swept in by the recent downpour, giving the entrance a desolate air—like an ostrich burying its head in the sand.

Tantai Xuan had led an army to besiege the city, and the three great families, betraying Lu Changkong, had planned to coordinate an inside-out assault to topple Beiluo. Their goal? To break free from Lu Changkong's iron grip and reclaim control of the city.

But plans have a way of unraveling.

Lu Changkong had a hidden card—a grandmaster warrior—who struck with devastating precision, executing the heads of the three families. The betrayal had backfired spectacularly, leaving the noble houses reeling. Tantai Xuan failed to seize Beiluo, and the families' gambit collapsed.

Creak...

The sound of wooden wheels grinding against cobblestones echoed through the quiet midnight streets. A group approached the sealed gates of the Chen estate under the dim veil of moonlight.

“Is this the Chen estate?”

He sat in a wheelchair, pulling a wool blanket tighter over his lap against the damp chill left by the rain. Ning Zhao, pushing the wheelchair, gave a slight nod.

“The master originally planned to deal with the three families,” she said. “But their roots run deep in Beiluo—businesses, influence, connections. Uprooting them recklessly could disrupt the city's stability, so he's still weighing his options.”

He chuckled, interlocking his fingers and stretching them with a crack. “Throughout history, the boldest heroes of turbulent times often come from noble families like these.”

His eyes gleamed. “It's late, and I'm tired. Let's make this quick.”

Ning Zhao nodded, lifting the wheelchair over the stone steps leading to the Chen estate's entrance.

"Little Ni, go knock on the door," he said, ruffling the hair of Ni Yu, who stood nearby.

Ni Yu froze, caught off guard by the request. Her lips trembled. "M-Master... I'm scared."

He glanced at her. "Scared? If you want to master martial arts, you start with courage. Without guts, you'll never become a peerless warrior."

Nie Changqing, standing nearby and holding his son Nie Shuang's hand, shot Ni Yu a look. "Shuang'er, go with her."

Nie Shuang, though young, felt a pang of fear. But under his father's stern gaze—a look he'd never seen before—something stirred within him. Since he'd begun training in martial arts, his father had grown stricter, his expectations clear. That severity carried hope.

With Nie Shuang by her side, Ni Yu's courage grew. The two children exchanged a glance, mustered their bravery, and stepped up to the imposing gates of the Chen estate. They pounded on the bronze beast-head knocker.

"Hey! Anyone there?" Nie Shuang's small voice rang out, high-pitched but bold, with Ni Yu echoing behind him.

He watched from his wheelchair, one hand propping up his chin, a faint smile on his lips.

No response came.

The children kept knocking, their young voices piercing the night's stillness. Under the pale moonlight, their faces glowed with growing excitement.

"Quit your racket! It's the middle of the night!" A gruff voice exploded from behind the gate. With a heavy thud, the bolt slid back, and the gates creaked open. A servant in coarse clothing glared down, his face twisted with menace.

"Who do these brats belong to? This is the Chen estate, not a playground!" he bellowed. "Get lost, or I'll thrash you!"

Nie Shuang stood his ground, staring up defiantly. Ni Yu's legs trembled, but she held her glare, refusing to back down despite her fear. This guy's terrifying!

He raised a hand, brushing his nose lightly. In a flash, Nie Changqing moved. His butcher's knife sliced through the dark like a shadow, coming to rest against the servant's neck.

The servant's eyes widened as he finally noticed the group under the moonlight—the man in the wheelchair, Nie Changqing, and the others. His face paled, sweat beading on his brow.

“Y-You... who are you?” he stammered. “This is the Chen estate! You can’t act reckless here!”

Ning Zhao pushed the wheelchair forward, crossing the threshold as the wooden wheels rolled steadily into the courtyard.

“City Lord’s Manor, here to collect dues,” he said coolly, one hand on his chin, the other brushing his nose. He didn’t even glance at the servant, his tone flat and indifferent.

The servant’s pupils shrank, his body rigid with dread. His heart raced. The City Lord’s Manor?!

He knew exactly what the Chen family had done. During the siege, the three great families had betrayed the City Lord. Now, with the manor still standing, it was time for a reckoning.

The servant’s face turned ashen. The new head of the Chen family had strictly ordered him not to open the gates under any circumstances. And yet... he’d done exactly that.

How cunning! He felt like crying. They’d used children to bang on the door, catching him off guard. He’d thought it was just some neighborhood kids making noise. Who could’ve imagined the City Lord’s Manor would send children to announce their arrival? If he’d known, he’d have sooner died than opened the gate.

Ning Zhao pushed the wheelchair deeper into the Chen estate, ignoring the trembling servant. The estate’s layout mirrored the Lu family’s—traditional garden architecture—but it was far more opulent.

Winding paths led through serene pavilions, artificial hills, and tranquil ponds, all bathed in soft moonlight, like a scene from a delicate ink painting.

Nie Changqing kept his butcher's knife pressed against the servant's neck, his expression cold and unyielding. The blade reeked of blood, its grim aura nearly making the servant retch. This knife... it's cursed with restless spirits.

A cool breeze swept through, carrying the freshness of the recent rain. He sat comfortably in his wheelchair, savoring the moment. Ning Zhao stood quietly behind him, her dark hair catching the moonlight like a veil, giving her an ethereal, untouchable grace. Ni Yu clutched an umbrella nearly as tall as she was, standing close by his side.

"Old Nie," he said, his voice low as he gazed at the fish gliding in the pond, his hand smoothing the blanket over his lap. "This night... it's a bit too quiet."

Nie Changqing's eyes narrowed, catching his meaning. With a flick of his wrist, the butcher's knife grazed the servant's thigh. Blood sprayed, and the servant's eyes bulged as he let out a scream so shrill it could've been mistaken for a slaughtered pig. The cry shattered the night's silence, chilling to the bone.

Within the Chen estate, oil lamps flickered to life, casting wavering shadows. The sound of rustling footsteps and splashing puddles erupted in the darkness.

From the depths of the garden, the twang of bowstrings cut through the air. A group of martial artists in scholarly robes emerged, their bows drawn, arrows glinting with cold menace, aimed directly at the group.

The atmosphere turned electric, taut with impending conflict.