

Starlit Path 23

Chapter 23: A Poetic Haven in the Moonlight

The air turned heavy with menace. The gentle breeze that followed the rain now carried a biting chill. Moonlight glinted off the arrowheads, their cold gleam like venomous snakes lurking in the shadows, eyeing their prey. In the traditional garden, the only sound was the soft trickle of water winding through the ornamental stream. The silence was so profound a pin could be heard dropping.

“Bold!” Ning Zhao’s hand rested on the wheelchair’s handle, her face hardening into an icy mask. Her lips parted in a sharp rebuke. With a metallic clang, her Cicada Wing Sword sprang from its sheath, gripped tightly in her hand. She stepped forward, her long skirt billowing, dark hair swaying, positioning herself protectively in front of the young master.

Nie Changqing’s expression remained impassive, his butcher’s knife pressed against the servant’s neck. The veins on his hand pulsed faintly, as if ready to unleash a burst of force and sever the man’s throat. The servant, who moments ago had screamed like a slaughtered pig, now stood rigid, not daring to whimper despite the blood streaming from his wounded thigh. The oppressive atmosphere silenced even his pain.

“Interesting,” the young master mused, leaning back lazily in his wheelchair. Moonlight pierced the thinning clouds, bathing his pale, refined features in a soft glow, as if draped in gossamer. “Are you forcing my father to send troops to raze the Chen family?”

His words, light and teasing, shattered the blood-chilling stillness. He was genuinely curious. Why hadn’t Lord Lu Changkong simply rounded up the remnants of the three great families, charged them with treason, and seized their assets? Such a move might cause temporary unrest, but in the long run, it would eliminate many lurking threats.

A rustle broke the silence as the archers parted, making way for a group of Confucian scholars in flowing robes. At their head was a young man in a teal robe, his hair bound with a jade hairpin, a yellow pearwood sword case strapped to his back. His well-groomed beard and sharp, stary eyes gave him an air of refined charisma.

“Well, well, Young Master Lu! A misunderstanding, truly,” the man said with a warm chuckle, stroking his beard. “Your late-night visit honors our humble Chen estate. These servants are clueless, mistaking you for the bandits stirring chaos in Beiluo City.” He raised a hand, signaling the archers to lower their bows. “I am Chen Beixun of the Chen family,” he added, bowing respectfully, his eyes gleaming as they fixed on the young master.

The young master, lounging in his wheelchair, propped his chin on one hand, studying Chen Beixun with mild curiosity. After the death of Chen He, the Chen patriarch, he’d expected the family to be in disarray, perhaps filled with the wails of grieving widows. Yet, the estate was eerily orderly, almost unnervingly so. Chen Beixun, it seemed, was the linchpin.

“Chen Beixun...” the young master murmured, narrowing his eyes. “The Chen family has someone like you?”

He rubbed his slender fingers together, his tone casual but probing.

Chen Beixun smiled, sweeping his long sleeve with a flourish. “I was sent to study swordsmanship at Zhongnan Tianshan in my youth and only returned yesterday. It’s no surprise you haven’t heard of me, Young Master. But I’ve long admired your reputation. Despite your ailment, your intellect is unmatched, your spirit as vast as a dragon’s. Even the Imperial Preceptor praised you—a true model for us scholars.”

His voice rang clear and forceful in the garden, his flattery delivered with earnest simplicity. The young master's lips curled slightly. They say swordsmen are straightforward, and Chen Beixun was proving it—speaking such bold truths with a straight face.

“Zhongnan Tianshan... the Sword Sect?” Nie Changqing's eyes narrowed. As the former tenth disciple of the Taoist sect, he was no stranger to the Sword Sect, a formidable and enigmatic faction among the Hundred Schools.

“I like people who speak plainly,” the young master said, rubbing his fingers again, his smile deepening with meaning. The Sword Sect, then. Was this the force behind the three great families, making his father hesitate to act? Beiluo City, one of the six guardian cities of the imperial capital, held critical strategic importance. If the Sword Sect controlled the three families, their ambitions were clear. Did his father know and have plans in place?

“You flatter me, Young Master,” Chen Beixun replied, his expression unwavering.

“Old Nie, let him go,” the young master said, glancing at Nie Changqing. “We're here to collect rent, not start a fight. Let's be reasonable.”

Nie Changqing nodded silently, withdrawing his butcher's knife. The servant, trembling, clutched his bleeding thigh and scrambled toward Chen Beixun, collapsing in a heap.

“Thank you, Young Master,” Chen Beixun said warmly. “It's cold tonight. Shall we share a cup of plum wine to warm you up?”

His eyes flickered briefly to Nie Changqing, noting the man's wounds and stern demeanor. He's still alive? Did Han Lianxiao, the Taoist sect's ninth disciple, fail? Was he stopped by the young master? Shock stirred in Chen Beixun's heart, but his smile never faltered.

The young master waved a hand dismissively. "No wine. My father sent me to collect rent. Let's get to business."

Chen Beixun stroked his beard. "Since the city lord commands, the Chen family dares not disobey. I was devastated to learn my late father colluded with bandits. Thankfully, Lord Lu's brilliance saved Beiluo from ruin. I am in awe. The Chen family will reform thoroughly. Bring a thousand taels of silver!" he ordered, turning to his guards.

Soon, two servants carried out two chests of silver, their contents gleaming blindingly under the moonlight. The young master, propped on his chin, yawned, utterly unmoved by the thousand taels.

"Young Master, is this rent sufficient?" Chen Beixun asked, his smile radiant.

The surrounding Confucian scholars watched the young master and Ning Zhao with a mix of awe and fear, still haunted by her bloodbath atop the city walls days ago.

"As expected of an aristocratic family—wealth to spare," the young master said lightly, smoothing the wool blanket over his legs. Then his smile faded. "But on that day at the city walls, your scholars mocked my condition, wounding my spirit. Even now, the memory leaves me heavy-hearted. A thousand taels can't soothe that pain."

Chen Beixun's smile froze. Not enough? "Bring another thousand taels!" he said, his expression softening as he stroked his beard.

"Wait," the young master interjected, his face breaking into a warm, sincere smile under the moonlight. "Money isn't the issue. Born with my ailment, I've always struggled to care for myself. Since childhood, I've dreamed of owning a home where I can live out my days in peace. We're getting along so well, and I find you quite agreeable, so..."

Chen Beixun's expression stiffened, but he caught the young master's earnest gaze, sparkling with sincerity. "Easily done! The Chen family has houses aplenty. If it brings you joy, Young Master, I'd gladly part with one," he said, laughing heartily, his voice booming with magnanimity. "Bring another thousand taels and the property deeds!"

The Chen scholars stirred uneasily, but Chen Beixun, backed by the Sword Sect, held unchallenged authority—the family's lifeline in Beiluo City. Soon, two more chests of silver arrived, along with a maid bearing a thick stack of deeds.

The young master's lips twitched at the sight. Filthy rich.

Chen Beixun scanned the deeds, then approached with measured steps. Ning Zhao moved swiftly, her qi surging, her sword tip lowered to halt him. "Stop."

"Little Ni, get the deeds," the young master said, patting the nervous Ni Yu's head. She scurried forward, taking the stack from Chen Beixun and hurrying back.

"Young Master," she said, handing them over.

The young master took a deep breath, flipping through the deeds—houses, shops, tangled webs of interests and influence. Chen Beixun’s gesture was no simple offering; it was a reminder that destabilizing the Chen family could plunge Beiluo into chaos, a concern shared by Lord Lu Changkong.

The garden fell silent, the pond’s mirror-like surface rippling softly in the breeze. Under the moonlight, the young master reviewed the deeds, everyone holding their breath.

Chen Beixun smiled broadly. “Take your time, Young Master. It’s an honor to please you.”

Suddenly, the young master’s eyes lit up. He pulled a single deed from the stack, setting the rest on his lap. He flicked the paper, studying it closely, a faint smile curling his lips. “This one,” he said. “I’ve chosen.”

Chen Beixun bowed, chuckling. “So quick? With thousands of shops and hundreds of estates, you’re sure? Which fortunate property caught your eye?”

The young master handed the deed to Ni Yu, then leaned back, closing his eyes. Ni Yu squinted at the paper in the moonlight, her voice clear as she read, “The Young Master has chosen... Drunken Dust Pavilion on Beiluo Lake’s heart island.”

Her chubby cheeks flushed crimson. Chen Beixun’s smile froze. Nie Changqing blinked in confusion. Ning Zhao’s sword hand trembled. The Chen scholars exchanged bewildered, incredulous glances.

Is he serious?

No one expected the young master to pick that place. Drunken Dust Pavilion—its name poetic and refined, but in truth... a den of courtesans and fleeting pleasures.

To live out his days... in a brothel?