

Starlit Path 24

Chapter 24: A Dragon Rises, Unbound by the Pond

The young master reclined lazily in his wheelchair, eyes half-closed, a faint smile playing on his lips. He was thoroughly pleased with his choice. Drunken Dust Pavilion was an unexpected gem, perfectly aligning with his vision.

Beiluo City was vast, and at its heart lay Beiluo Lake, a haven for scholars and beauties. Flower boats often docked along its shores, where poets and romantics indulged in fleeting pleasures. At the lake's center sat a small island, home to a single structure: Drunken Dust Pavilion. The system tasked the young master with building a transcendent faction from scratch, and selecting the right location was critical. He planned to infuse the area with spiritual energy, transforming it into a cultivation ground to nurture future practitioners. The pavilion's isolation on the island made it an ideal choice—separate from the city's bustle, a perfect foundation for his ambitions.

The moment he saw the deed, his heart had been set.

Chen Beixun watched the young master, his expression tinged with uncertainty. Was he serious? Did he intend to dominate the courtesan trade? Or was this Lord Lu Changkong's scheme? In these chaotic times, with the Hundred Schools and twelve warlords challenging the Great Zhou Dynasty, Beiluo City was a prime target for the Sword Sect. As their chosen figurehead, Chen Beixun bore immense pressure, every decision weighed with caution.

"Young Master..." Chen Beixun took a deep breath, his smile returning. "Drunken Dust Pavilion is a place of pleasure. Though scholars have long indulged in such pursuits, it's hardly suitable for your retirement."

The young master's eyes opened, his expression cooling. "A place of pleasure? If you're reluctant, just say so. I don't force anyone," he said evenly.

Chen Beixun's eyes narrowed, and the Chen family scholars behind him fell silent, their anger restrained by fear. The young master's confidence was unshakable, backed by the city lord's manor. Without Chen Beixun's Sword Sect ties, the Chen family might already have been crushed.

As his tone sharpened, Ning Zhao raised her Cicada Wing Sword, her skirt fluttering without wind, a faint aura swirling around the blade's tip. Nie Changqing hoisted his blood-stained butcher's knife onto his shoulder, his calm presence radiating quiet menace. The servant, still clutching his bleeding thigh, dared not make a sound.

Chen Beixun chuckled. "Young Master, you misunderstand. If you want it, the Chen family keeps its word. But..." He paused, his tone measured. "Drunken Dust Pavilion is jointly run by the Chen, Liu, and Zhu families. I can't decide alone. And if you shut it down, the scholars of Beiluo will riot. You might find yourself the target of their outrage."

The night grew hazier, the Chen garden cloaked in stillness. The young master, leaning back, took the deed from Ni Yu's hands, holding it between his fingers and waving it lightly before Chen Beixun. "Jointly run? Perfect. Go to the other two families yourself. Each must deliver two thousand taels of silver and this deed to the Lu manor by tomorrow, and the rent will be settled. Otherwise, I'll visit them personally—and the price won't be so kind."

Chen Beixun stared, incredulous. The young master's audacity was perfectly balanced within the bounds of propriety, bold yet calculated.

"As for the scholars' discontent..." The young master toyed with his slender fingers, a sly arc curving his lips as he glanced at Chen Beixun. Moonlight illuminated his face, lending his smile an enigmatic depth. "What's that to me? Let them come. A thousand pointing fingers? Let them try."

His smile was laced with playful defiance. “Ning, take me back. I’m tired.” He closed his eyes, dismissing further debate.

Ning Zhao stepped behind the wheelchair, sheathing her sword and pushing gently. The wooden wheels creaked over the cobblestones, echoing through the silent garden. Ni Yu returned the remaining deeds to Chen Beixun and walked beside Nie Shuang, following the young master. Nie Changqing lingered, his butcher’s knife on his shoulder, his sharp gaze sweeping the Chen scholars before he melted into the darkness.

Chen Beixun replayed the young master’s cryptic smile in his mind, exhaling deeply. He patted the stack of deeds, then bowed toward the retreating figure, his voice booming, “Chen Beixun bids farewell to Young Master Lu!”

He signaled, and the reluctant Chen scholars echoed, “We bid farewell to Young Master Lu!” Their voices, tinged with resentment and humiliation, roared into the night, as if tearing the darkness apart. The young master, chin propped on his hand, was already gone, wheeled away by Ning Zhao into the night.

Chen Beixun straightened, a faint smile on his lips. “Intriguing. I thought Lu Changkong’s son was a naive scholar lost in books. Clearly, the world misjudged him. As chaos looms, talents emerge.” Stroking his beard, he murmured, “This one’s no mere fish in a pond. Given a storm, he’ll soar as a dragon.” He chuckled to himself. “But I, Chen Beixun, relish the challenge of taming dragons and drinking their blood.”

Back at the Lu manor, the night was deep. Yi Yue stood at the gate, awaiting the young master’s return.

“The bodies?” he asked, glancing at her.

“Weighed down with stones and sunk in Beiluo Lake,” Yi Yue replied, wiping blood from her yellow skirt, her lips pursed.

“Good work,” the young master said with a nod. “Ning, arrange rooms for Old Nie and Little Shuang.” He rubbed his brow, gesturing for Ni Yu to wheel him to his quarters.

“Ning, don’t dwell on today,” he said as they moved. “I’m not as helpless as you think. But take this as a lesson. Spiritual energy gives you an edge, but it’s not everything. Until it’s overwhelming, never underestimate the world’s martial artists.” His fingers tapped the wool blanket. “Don’t let it happen again.”

Silence followed, broken only by the fading creak of the wheelchair. Ning Zhao stood rooted, her face pale, fists clenched, her lips marked by deep bite marks. The failure stung deeply. Had the young master not been prepared, the night could have ended in disaster—his body, not Han Lianxiao’s, might have been the one sunk in the lake.

She knew he didn’t blame her; her mastery of spiritual energy was still new. But her defeat wasn’t just inexperience—it was arrogance, believing her spiritual energy made her superior to ordinary martial artists. She’d dismissed grandmasters entirely. Yet, among the nine ranks of grandmasters, anyone above fifth rank could dispatch her with ease.

“Martial artists must stay humble and vigilant,” Nie Changqing said, ruffling Nie Shuang’s hair as he addressed Ning Zhao. “Underestimating your foe is a fatal flaw. Even a lion uses full strength to hunt a rabbit, let alone a grandmaster.”

His words were kind, drawn from experience. Ning Zhao’s gloom lifted, and she bowed slightly. “Thank you, Brother Nie.”

With a gentle smile, she and Yi Yue led Nie Changqing to the guest quarters.