

Starlit Path 26

Chapter 26: Blood Reborn, A Sixth-Rank Grandmaster Awakens

Sipping his porridge, the young master took the white silk scroll from Ning Zhao. It detailed Lord Lu Changkong's blood-moving technique. Scanning it, he mentally compared it to the Taoist Blood-Moving Technique. Surprisingly, his father's version seemed superior, which caught him off guard. He tucked the scroll away, planning to collect the remaining four blood-moving techniques before refining them further.

"Father's gone to the capital?" he asked, popping a pickled vegetable into his mouth. The tangy sweetness complemented the porridge perfectly. "At such a delicate time, isn't he worried Tantai Xuan's northern army will regroup and attack again?"

"Young Master, no need to worry," Ning Zhao replied. "The lord received intelligence that after failing to take Beiluo, the northern army joined forces with the western army, aiming to breach the western Drunken Dragon guardian city instead."

The young master nodded. He wasn't deeply versed in the broader state of the world, but if Lu Changkong felt confident leaving Beiluo, he must have the situation under control. Still, the young master couldn't shake a nagging doubt. The memory of the city's defense lingered—his father's reliability seemed questionable. Even if an army attacked, breaching Beiluo quickly would be no easy feat. With the three great families under military surveillance and the Sword Sect's champions restrained, betrayal from within was unlikely. Without insiders, storming a fortified city was a daunting task.

"Let's get some sun," the young master said, stretching lazily after breakfast. "Ning, check if the three families have sent the deeds."

"Yes, Young Master," Ning Zhao said, bowing and leaving the room.

“Yi Yue, find the best craftsman in the city,” he instructed. “Have them redesign my wheelchair to fit these chess boxes—carve two hidden compartments in the armrests.” He showed her the black and white chess piece boxes. As Yi Yue leaned closer, curious, he beckoned her and whispered something in her ear. Her expression grew serious, and with a nod, she hurried off.

“Little Ni, carry the chessboard,” he said with a grin, handing the Spiritual Pressure Chessboard to Ni Yu. She secured it with a rope, slinging it over her back. The board nearly reached her ankles, making her look comically cumbersome.

“Young Master... are you playing chess?” Ni Yu asked, her wide eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Yep. Know how to play?” he replied, his eyes lighting up. “Want a match?”

“Let’s go to the courtyard!” he added, chuckling.

Ni Yu pushed his wheelchair out, the oversized chessboard bouncing behind her. In the distance, Nie Changqing approached, hands clasped behind his back, his butcher’s knife tucked at his waist. Nie Shuang trailed him, drenched in sweat.

They crossed the garden’s winding stone bridge, arriving at the young master’s courtyard. “Young Master,” Nie Changqing greeted, bowing slightly.

In the courtyard, the young master and Ni Yu were engrossed in a chess match. He held a white piece between his fingers, placing it with deliberate flair. At Nie Changqing's greeting, he waved casually. "Old Nie, just call me Young Master like the others. Know chess? Once I trounce this little one, you and I can have a go."

Nie Changqing paused, a faint smile crossing his face. "It's been years since I touched a board. My skills might be rusty—please don't hold it against me."

Turning to Nie Shuang, his expression hardened. "Shuang, horse stance. One hour."

Nie Shuang pursed his lips but obeyed, dropping into a stance without protest. He'd been dragged out at dawn to run ten laps around the garden. Exhausted as he was, martial training demanded endurance—no master was forged overnight.

As Nie Shuang held his stance, Nie Changqing approached the chess game. The young master, Beiluo's heir and a prodigy praised by the Imperial Preceptor, was renowned for his intellect. Surely his chess skills were exceptional. As a former Taoist disciple, Nie Changqing was no stranger to chess, a pursuit that cultivated mind and spirit, common among the Hundred Schools.

His gaze fell on the chessboard—and he froze. A faint glow seemed to emanate from it, an oppressive aura that made his breath catch. This board, these pieces... they're extraordinary.

Shifting his focus to the game, his initial enthusiasm faded. The young master and Ni Yu were locked in intense concentration, pondering their moves. Nie Changqing's lips twitched, his expression torn between amusement and disbelief.

He'd expected a masterful duel. Instead, it was... a clumsy skirmish. The board was riddled with amateur mistakes, glaring vulnerabilities at every turn. The young master placed a piece with grave seriousness, as if waging an epic battle. Nie Changqing watched briefly before looking away, unable to bear the sight.

Clack! A piece hit the board, and after a silent struggle, Ni Yu placed hers triumphantly. A swath of the young master's black pieces was captured. His face darkened as Ni Yu, eyes curving into crescents, counted her gains gleefully. "Yay! I won by two pieces!"

The young master shot her a mild smile. "Won, huh? Off to horse stance. You were all gung-ho about training yesterday. Double Nie Shuang's regimen and get to it."

Ni Yu's face fell, her chubby cheeks quivering. Young Master, are you really this petty?!

Ignoring her, he turned to Nie Changqing, eyes gleaming. "Old Nie, let's play a round."

"Young Master... my chess skills are... lacking," Nie Changqing hedged, his face conflicted.

"No worries about losing. Come on," the young master urged, already clearing the board.

Nie Changqing sat reluctantly, picking up a piece with the air of someone constipated. Just then, Ning Zhao returned. "Young Master, Chen Beixun of the Chen family seeks an audience."

The young master, mid-move, frowned slightly but continued pondering the board. “Oh?”

Ning Zhao hesitated, then added, “He’s brought the Liu and Zhu families’ deeds and four thousand taels of silver.”

The young master’s brow relaxed, a faint smile forming. “They agreed, huh?” It made sense—the other families had little choice. “They moved fast. Father’s barely left, and here’s Chen Beixun. These deeds must be a hot potato.”

He set the piece back in its box, sighing regretfully at Nie Changqing. “Old Nie, what a pity. We’ll play another day.”

Nie Changqing exhaled in relief. “Ning, let them in,” the young master said, one hand on his chin, the other resting on the wool blanket.

Ning Zhao nodded and left. The young master turned to Nie Changqing, his smile deepening. “No chess today, but let’s talk business. You wanted to learn spiritual pressure, right? You’re missing a spark. Today, I’ll grant it.”

Nie Changqing blinked, caught off guard. The young master extended a hand, intending to channel spiritual energy as he had with Ning Zhao. But picturing Nie Changqing’s rough, calloused hands, he grimaced. “Old Nie, sit cross-legged,” he said, pointing to the ground before the wheelchair.

Puzzled but compliant, Nie Changqing sat. The young master’s expression grew solemn. Pale blue spiritual energy swirled around him—one strand, two, three, weaving densely. His hair floated, his eyes

blazing with focus. Raising a hand with an air of sage-like grace, he pressed it lightly to Nie Changqing's forehead.

“Activate permission: [Spiritual Energy Deployment]. Target: Nie Changqing.”

A tremor shook Nie Changqing as a warm current surged through his crown, flooding his body. His long-dormant, withered blood energy roared to life, catalyzed by the heat. It boiled, resonating with explosive force.

Boom, boom, boom!

Six successive roars erupted, shaking the courtyard's fallen leaves. Nie Changqing sat, eyes like torches, hair standing on end, his body trembling as if ancient shackles had shattered, a sleeping lion awakened. A sixth-rank grandmaster was reborn.

At that moment, Ning Zhao led Chen Beixun and the heirs of the Liu and Zhu families into the courtyard. The thunderous resonance of a grandmaster's blood energy struck their ears like a bolt of lightning, sending shivers through them.