

Starlit Path 27

Chapter 27: Testing the Blade on Lakeheart Island

The thunderous resonance of six consecutive bursts echoed through the courtyard, marking the power of a grandmaster. Each burst signified deeper strength, and six was a rare feat. Chen Beixun, clad in a teal Confucian robe with a jade crown, looked refined and dashing, his well-groomed beard lightly scented from a wash with petal-infused water. Yet, as he stepped into the courtyard, the overwhelming force of a grandmaster's blood energy hit him, scattering his beard and stirring unease.

His gaze landed on the young master, lounging in his wheelchair under the sunlight, a wool blanket draped over his legs, exuding lazy confidence. Before him sat Nie Changqing, the source of the six bursts, his presence radiating newfound power. A sixth-rank grandmaster—an elite warrior even in the vast Great Zhou Dynasty.

Chen Beixun's heart sank. He recognized Nie Changqing, the former tenth disciple of the Taoist sect, the "Peerless Blade." Not only had he survived, but his cultivation had been restored, breaking through to the sixth rank. With Nie Changqing, the Lu manor now boasted three grandmasters—a formidable force.

"You're early, Little Chen," the young master said, twirling a black chess piece in his hand. Crafted like a polished river stone, it gleamed under the sun, cool and smooth to the touch.

"Not at all, Young Master," Chen Beixun replied, bowing with a smile. "I couldn't wait to deliver the deeds. After you left last night, I rushed to the Liu and Zhu residences to discuss Drunken Dust Pavilion. Both heirs were delighted to accommodate your request."

Nie Changqing rose, his excitement fading to a stern mask. He pressed the butcher's knife at his waist and stood behind the young master, his grandmaster aura radiating quiet menace. Behind Chen Beixun stood two young men in ornate robes, their temples bulging with vigorous blood energy, though likely only second-rate martial artists. The six bursts had left them visibly shaken.

“Young Master,” they greeted, forcing smiles and bowing.

The young master glanced at them, nodding slightly from his wheelchair, barely acknowledging them as he toyed with the chess piece. “I’ve chosen Drunken Dust Pavilion. Any objections?”

Liu Ye, the Liu heir, stole a glance at Chen Beixun before replying with a strained smile, “How could we object to your choice, Young Master?”

Zhu Yishan, the Zhu heir, echoed with a deferential nod. They produced their deeds, which Nie Changqing collected with a sharp glance, handing them to the young master. Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan flushed under the weight of his grandmaster presence, their backs prickling.

“Young Master, who is this... senior?” Liu Ye ventured, unfamiliar with Nie Changqing since they weren’t part of the Hundred Schools.

“Oh, Old Nie? He’s my charioteer,” the young master said casually, flipping through the deeds without looking up.

Chen Beixun’s smile froze. The Peerless Blade, a sixth-rank grandmaster, reduced to a charioteer? Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan exchanged stunned glances, reeling. Not even the emperor could boast such a servant.

“Excellent,” the young master said, flicking the deeds. With Chen Beixun’s added, Drunken Dust Pavilion was now his. The thought lifted his spirits, sunlight highlighting the fine hairs on his fair face. “No time like the present. Let’s visit Drunken Dust Pavilion.”

He shot a meaningful look at Chen Beixun, who stood with a bowed head. Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan’s eyes gleamed, their smiles widening.

“Old Nie, prepare the carriage. Ning, take me out,” the young master ordered, tapping the blanket.

Nie Changqing withdrew silently, and Ning Zhao glided behind the wheelchair, her silk skirt rustling as she pushed. Chen Beixun, Liu Ye, and Zhu Yishan followed, smiling deferentially. Ni Yu, still in her horse stance, pouted, her chubby face full of grievance as she stared at the young master. He’s going out to have fun without me? Did I fall out of favor for winning at chess?

“Little Ni, grab the chessboard and come along,” the young master said, chuckling at her expression.

“Yes, sir!” Ni Yu’s face lit up, her pout vanishing as she hoisted the chessboard and scurried after him. Nie Shuang remained in the courtyard, steadfastly holding his horse stance.

Outside the manor, an elegant carriage awaited, pulled by a spirited blood-sweat horse snorting steam. Nie Changqing sat on the driver’s perch, casually coiling the whip. The carriage, custom-built for the young master, featured a side door that lowered into a ramp for his wheelchair. The spacious interior was cushioned with soft cotton and lined with woven brocade, blending comfort with elegance.

Ning Zhao wheeled him aboard, then sat on the opposite side of the driver's perch. With the young master's permission, Ni Yu, clutching the chessboard, clambered in, beaming. Nie Changqing glanced at Chen Beixun and the others but ignored them, cracking the whip.

Snap!

The horse neighed, hooves pounding the cobblestone road as the carriage sped off. Chen Beixun stroked his beard, a glint in his eyes. Servants brought horses, and the three heirs mounted, trailing the carriage.

The carriage raced down the main boulevard, Beiluo's bustling streets lined with towering buildings, a testament to its proximity to the capital. Pedestrians and vendors scattered at the sound of hooves and wheels, recognizing the ornate carriage emblazoned with the "Lu" crest—Young Master Lu was out.

The carriage veered onto the lakeside road, bordered by white jade railings encircling Beiluo Lake. Its speed slowed as Nie Changqing reined in the horse, which snorted and halted.

"Young Master, we've arrived. Drunken Dust Pavilion is on Lakeheart Island. There's no road—we'll need a boat," Nie Changqing said.

From the carriage, the young master's chuckle drifted out. "Old Nie, you sure know your way to Drunken Dust Pavilion."

Nie Changqing's weathered face flushed. Few men in Beiluo didn't know the route, though he'd only ever passed by, too poor to indulge in such places. Ning Zhao leapt down, brushing her skirt and opening the carriage door, carefully assisting the young master out.

He gazed through the jade railings at the shimmering lake, his mood lightening. It was his first visit—his ailment had kept him from such outings. Though Beiluo lay in the north, the lake's misty ambiance, kissed by last night's rain and dappled sunlight, evoked the poetic charm of southern Jiangnan. The water sparkled, a scene of serene beauty.

"Where's Chen Beixun and the others?" he asked, still admiring the lake.

Ning Zhao shook her head, a faint hum of displeasure escaping her. "Interesting," the young master said, flicking the deed with a sly smile. "Looks like we won't be waiting. Ning, find a boat. We're heading to Lakeheart Island."

Nie Changqing's calloused hand rested on his butcher's knife as he peered into the lake's mist. A faint silhouette of a lone boat and a gaunt figure flickered in the haze. "Young Master, are you sure?" Ning Zhao asked, her voice grave. "This lake... it's not calm."

The young master smoothed the blanket over his legs, his smile unwavering as he squinted at the misty, emerald water. "No matter," he said. "It's the perfect chance for Old Nie... to test his blade."