

## Starlit Path 31

### Chapter 31: Behold! The Young Master's Spiritual Pressure

Fled... he fled?

Chen Beixun stood alone on the fishing boat, dumbfounded, watching the solitary skiff speed away into the distance. In the Sword Sect, status was marked by the number of swords in one's case. First-rate martial artists earned the right to carry a sword case, while grandmasters bore cases with two swords. From first- to fourth-rank grandmasters, the case held two swords. Starting at fifth-rank, each additional rank added a sword. A sixth-rank grandmaster carried four, and the pinnacle, a ninth-rank, wielded seven—swords crafted by the Mohist masters, among the finest in the world. This was the Sword Sect's ancient tradition.

The swordsman on that skiff, with a four-sword case, was a sixth-rank grandmaster. Yet this formidable warrior had abandoned their plan and fled without a backward glance. Nie Changqing's lake-cleaving strike, followed by twenty relentless slashes that sank flower boats and slew dozens of scholars, had terrified even this Sword Sect elite.

Chen Beixun's body trembled. He suddenly understood the young master's unshakable calm, his fearless demeanor. The Taoist outcast was a monster.

On the boat, Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan's faces were etched with fear, their expressions twisting into snarls as they turned on Chen Beixun. "You lied to us!" Zhu Yishan roared. "You swore we could eliminate Lu Ping'an!"

Liu Ye's gaze was equally hostile. Last night, Chen Beixun had rallied them, plotting through the night, assuring them the Sword Sect would intervene and kill Lu Ping'an as he sailed to Drunken Dust Pavilion. But now, it was all hot air. The Sword Sect's champion had fled without even showing his face. They'd been betrayed.

They could already imagine the consequences when Lu Ping'an came to settle the score. The memory of the refined, wheelchair-bound youth sent a chill through them.

"Fear what?" Chen Beixun snapped, standing at the boat's prow, his teal robe fluttering in the lake's breeze, his pearwood sword case on his back. "Empires rise and fall, but noble families endure. Our three Beiluo families may not rival Tantai's elite, but with the Sword Sect—one of the Hundred Schools—backing us, Lu Ping'an wouldn't dare touch us."

His voice was cold, resolute. Liu Ye pointed shakily at the vanished skiff. "But the Sword Sect's master... he ran!"

Chen Beixun's jaw clenched. "A temporary strategic retreat. We're withdrawing too—back to our estates to regroup."

He ordered the boatman to turn around. But as the boatman struggled with the pole, a terrifying pressure erupted.

Boom!

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“Hm?” The young master, having returned the chess pieces to their box, raised a brow. He looked out at the now-clear lake, where a lone skiff churned white waves, speeding away. “Who’s that?” he asked, nodding toward it.

Nie Changqing, shouldering his butcher’s knife, glanced over. “Yellow pearwood sword case, four swords—Sword Sect, sixth-rank grandmaster swordsman.” As the former tenth disciple of the Taoist Sect, he knew their rivals well.

“Sword Sect grandmaster?” The young master squinted. “Why’s he running? I’m so mild-mannered—would I eat him?”

Nie Changqing choked, glancing at the scholars floundering in the lake. Mild-mannered? Your temper’s as petty as a fire dragon fruit seed. Wisely, he stayed silent.

“Fine, let him be clever and run,” the young master said, propping his chin and closing his eyes to check his spiritual energy recovery. He waved dismissively. “Young Master,” Ni Yu, slumped weakly at the boat’s edge from seasickness, pointed feebly. “There’s a boat behind us—Chen Beixun and the Liu and Zhu heirs.”

“Oh,” the young master replied, glancing at her pitiful state before closing his eyes again. Nie Changqing’s twenty strikes had cost him twenty strands of spiritual energy, but his qi core was slowly regenerating, like a furnace. At this rate, it would take an hour to restore one strand—slow, but satisfactory.

“Young Master, they’re turning to leave,” Ni Yu’s frail voice added.

“Leave?” He opened his eyes, placing the Spiritual Pressure Chessboard on his lap and drawing a black piece from the box. Its glossy surface gleamed as he held it between his fingers. “Think they can just watch my show and walk away?”

His vision shifted, the world dissolving into translucent lines, as when he’d deployed spiritual energy to Ning Zhao. Zooming out, he located Chen Beixun’s retreating boat. With a sly smile, he placed the black piece on the board’s central star.

Clack.

A wisp of pale blue spiritual energy flared at the point of contact, like a flickering flame. The lake’s calm broke as wind surged. Ning Zhao’s silk skirt billowed, and Nie Changqing’s eyes widened, legs tensing.

There it is—the Young Master’s spiritual pressure!

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On their boat, Chen Beixun’s spirit quaked as an overwhelming, godlike pressure slammed into him. His face smashed into the deck, pinned flat, unable to move a finger. Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan fared worse, blood seeping from their noses and mouths. The boatman, terrified, leapt into the lake, swimming frantically for shore.

The lake exploded around the boat, water surging seven feet high. The vessel sank instantly, icy water swallowing Chen Beixun, Liu Ye, and Zhu Yishan, its fishy tang flooding their mouths. What had

happened? How had the boat sunk? What was that crushing pressure? They couldn't fathom it was Lu Ping'an's doing—how could a man, not an immortal, unleash such force from miles away?

Confusion swirled, but survival instincts kicked in. They swam desperately, their second-rate martial strength barely sustaining them. Many scholars, exhausted midway, sank with a gurgle, lost to the lake. Chen Beixun, a first-rate martial artist, and the others reached shore, drenched and filthy with lake debris.

Suddenly, the ground shook. Hooves thundered as armored soldiers galloped forward, onlookers scattering in recognition of the Beiluo Army from the city lord's manor. Yi Yue rode a chestnut steed, backed by the ironclad ranks.

"Young Master's orders," she declared coldly. "Take the three heirs to the city lord's dungeon for tea."

"Shackle them."

Ironclad soldiers advanced with heavy chains. Chen Beixun, soaked and bedraggled, his groomed beard a matted mess, stood defiantly. "I am Chen Beixun of the Sword Sect—"

Crack! Yi Yue's whip lashed across him, the stinging pain nearly bringing tears.

"I demand to see Young Master Lu!" he shouted.

Crack! Another whip struck, leaving a bloody mark. “Young Master’s orders,” Yi Yue said, her foxlike face smiling faintly as she coiled the whip. “Speak, and you’re whipped.”

Chen Beixun fell silent, burning with defiance but powerless against the hundred-strong Beiluo Army. Even a grandmaster would yield. Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan surrendered without a fight, chained and led away. Chen Beixun, lakeweed clinging to his beard, glanced back at the young master’s fishing boat, picturing the serene, wheelchair-bound youth. A chill gripped him.

“This round, I, Chen Beixun, was careless...” he muttered, gazing at the lake.

Crack! Another whip landed.

“Ow! Easy!”