

Starlit Path 36

Chapter 36: Then... Let Them All Be Executed

Seated in his wheelchair, Lu Ping'an resembled a refined jade prince, his smile warm and approachable. Yet to Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan, that smile was utterly menacing. The reclusive, crippled young master of the Lu family... was he truly this terrifying?

"Lu... Young Master Lu," Liu Ye stammered, forcing a smile uglier than a sob.

Zhu Yishan opened his mouth, intending to declare his family name, but stopped. In this situation, such a claim was useless—perhaps even hastening their doom. Chen Beixun, however, sat resolute on the straw-covered dungeon floor, eyes closed, exuding steely defiance. Even as Lu Ping'an unleashed a massacre, he remained unafraid. Beyond being a son of Beiluo's Chen family, he was a Sword Sect disciple. If Lu dared touch him, he'd have to reckon with the Sword Sect's potential to turn Beiluo upside down. Lu Changkong's restraint against the three noble families stemmed from this very fear.

Chen Beixun was calm, almost serene. He wouldn't stay in this cell long. As long as he didn't confess, Lu would have to release him back to the Chen estate. Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan's breathing grew shallow, their fear palpable.

The young master's expression remained placid. The ironclad soldiers, fresh from slaughtering the scholars, gathered behind Luo Cheng, who pressed his sword lightly, silencing them. The dungeon reeked of blood, thick with killing intent. Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan's legs trembled, while Chen Beixun, still feigning composure, was inwardly rattled. Lu's ruthlessness and decisiveness exceeded all expectations. These were dozens of titled Confucian scholars, yet he'd ordered their deaths without hesitation. Once word spread, the entire Great Zhou would quake. Court Confucians would relentlessly impeach both Lu Ping'an and Lu Changkong.

In the quiet dungeon, the young master chuckled. His wheelchair turned on its own, facing away from Chen Beixun, Liu Ye, and Zhu Yishan. "I know where your confidence lies... the Sword Sect, right?" he said softly. "Luo Cheng, escort them."

Luo Cheng saluted, ordering the three bound. Yi Yue pushed the wheelchair forward, her steps measured. Luo Cheng and his ironclad soldiers followed, cold blades pressed to the necks of the captives, ensuring compliance. They exited the dungeon, emerging onto Beiluo's main thoroughfare.

On the long street, oblivious onlookers parted to the sides, watching the procession with curiosity and awe. The ironclad soldiers, blood still wet from the scholars, marched in disciplined formation, their steps shaking the ground. Their destination was clear: the estates of the three noble families.

The Liu estate, as lavish as the Chen's, stood silent as they approached. Its gates were tightly shut, like a turtle hiding in its shell. Yi Yue's foxlike face was stern as she pushed the wheelchair steadily. Nie Changqing, knife at his side, walked beside the young master. Ni Yu, lugging the chessboard and holding an umbrella, barely dared to breathe—she sensed the young master was about to do something monumental. Luo Cheng's soldiers flanked them.

Suddenly, chaotic shouts echoed down the street. A mob approached, wielding farm tools and woodcutting blades, led by a few red-eyed scholars spouting righteous indignation. They accused Lu Ping'an of massacring scholars, seizing Drunken Dust Pavilion, and plotting to ruin Beiluo's businesses, leaving citizens destitute. The crowd's anger surged, fueled by slogans. Bystanders, unclear on the truth but drawn to the spectacle, joined in, swelling the mob from hundreds to nearly a thousand, their cries thundering like a storm.

Luo Cheng roared, drawing his sword. Yi Yue's face darkened, her hand gripping her whip. Nie Changqing was stunned. The young master, however, remained unfazed, observing the near-rebellious mob with a playful glint in his eye.

Chen Estate

A nanmu round table groaned under exquisite wines and dishes. Several figures sat around it, clinking cups. Some bore sword cases, their three-sword loads marking them as Sword Sect elites, their auras sharp. "The city lord's manor comes on strong, but water can carry a boat or capsize it," one middle-aged scholar with a three-sword case said, downing his wine. "Great Zhou's thirteen counties have seen plenty of mobs kill officials. Lu Changkong's in the capital, leaving Beiluo leaderless. His crippled son dares parade through the streets, slaughter titled scholars, seize Drunken Dust Pavilion, and arrest the heirs of three families. He's courting death."

Laughter rippled around the table. Present were the heads of the Liu and Zhu families, Sword Sect masters, and Beiluo's key merchants. The Liu and Zhu patriarchs smiled tightly. With the Chen family backed by the Sword Sect, Lu's arrest of their heirs meant open war. They'd rallied merchants, spending heavily to hire thugs and idle tenants to stir chaos on the streets. If they could kill Lu Changkong's crippled son in the uproar, all the better. Such tactics weren't new; in Great Zhou's turbulent times, noble families often orchestrated mobs to kill officials.

The table's occupants exchanged knowing smiles, raising their cups.

The mob surged, hired thugs leading the charge, their shouts inflaming the crowd. Uninformed citizens joined, swelling the tide. The young master, toying with a chess piece, glanced at the leading scholars, a cold smile curving his lips. The three families had bled coin to stage this farce.

Chen Beixun laughed boldly, his beard fluttering. “Lu Ping’an, see the cost of crossing us? The Hundred Schools are taking over the cities. The Sword Sect will rule Beiluo—it’s the tide of the world, and you can’t stop it!”

Liu Ye and Zhu Yishan’s eyes gleamed with hope, their spines straightening as they sensed leverage, expecting Lu to bow to the Sword Sect’s pressure and release them.

The young master didn’t spare Chen Beixun a glance. He turned to Luo Cheng. “Are these people guilty?”

Luo Cheng’s eyes narrowed, a spark flashing within. The young master had warned of violent deeds. His hand rested on his sword, his gaze turning cold as he surveyed the mob. “Bearing weapons and gathering to rebel—this is a grave crime.”

His words quieted the street, the mob’s clamor dimming. After a pause, the thousand-strong crowd erupted in outrage. Rebellion was a charge few dared bear. Many who’d joined for spectacle fled, faces pale, leaving mostly the hired thugs and agitators.

The leading scholar, shaken, shouted, “We gather for justice! You seize Drunken Dust Pavilion today, tomorrow every shop and tavern! Where is the law? This isn’t rebellion—it’s righteousness! The law spares the masses!”

The young master’s gaze locked onto the scholar, his chess-playing hand pausing. His jade-like face smiled faintly as he exhaled. “You’re rebels because I say so. Justice? You’re not worthy.”

“Old Luo, what’s the penalty for rebellion?”

Luo Cheng drew his sword, the blade scraping harshly against its sheath. “The crime... demands execution.”

The young master chuckled. “Then... let them all be executed.”