

Starlit Path 52

Chapter 52: The National Teacher's Smile Shakes the Island, Righteous Spirit Meets Spiritual Pressur

Nie Changqing stepped lightly on withered branches, floating effortlessly above the water's surface. His mastery of qinggong was nothing short of astonishing, a feat that demanded extraordinary control over one's strength—beyond the reach of even most grandmasters.

On the ornate wooden boat, the National Teacher's kind face glowed with serenity, his white hair and beard swaying gently in the leisurely breeze. Lu Changkong furrowed his brow, while Luo Yue stood beside him, equally puzzled.

"White Jade Capital? That's the faction my son put together?" Lu Changkong murmured. His son had mentioned plans to build a force, but he hadn't expected it to come together so quickly. Glancing at the National Teacher, Lu Changkong called out to Nie Changqing, who stood poised on the lake. "This is the National Teacher of the Great Zhou Dynasty. Surely my son would allow us to enter the island."

After all, he was the boy's father—how could he be denied entry to the island at the heart of the lake?

Nie Changqing's gaze flickered toward Lu Changkong, his hair swaying slightly. He took a deep breath and shook his head. "Without the young master's orders, no one may set foot on the island."

Lu Changkong was taken aback. This man was as unyielding as stone, stubborn to a fault.

On the boat, the National Teacher chuckled softly, stroking his white beard. His eyes narrowed with appreciation as he regarded Nie Changqing standing firm on the lake. "Ping'an has a good eye. He's chosen a fine disciple," he said with a gentle laugh.

Nie Changqing remained impassive. Being called the young master's disciple wasn't inaccurate, so he didn't object.

"Once a discarded follower of the Dao Sect, the unparalleled tenth blade... Nie Changqing," the National Teacher continued, rising from his relaxed posture on the boat. His kind gaze softened further as he spoke. "Who would've thought you'd rise from the ashes, reborn from your fall?"

Adjusting his robes, he added, "The old fool from the Dao Sect, so rigid and unyielding, drove you to a dead end. Tell me, Changqing, do you harbor hatred?"

On the lake, Nie Changqing's withered branch drifted forward, the water parting to either side as it propelled him gently. He shook his head. "No hatred."

"I was an orphan, scraping by as a beggar on the streets, beaten and broken. It was the Dao Sect's master who pulled me from that misery, taught me the way of the blade, and gave me a place in the martial world. How could I hate him?"

The National Teacher stood at the bow, the wind tugging at his wide robes, revealing his frail frame. "But he tore your family apart. He sent men to kill you."

Nie Changqing shook his head again. "What he gave me, I owed him. That debt was settled the day Han Lianxiao came for my life. Now, my debt is to the young master." His eyes grew distant yet resolute. "When my cultivation is complete, I'll storm the Dao Sect alone, reclaim my wife, and reunite my family."

With those words, Nie Changqing pressed his foot against the branch. It sank into the water, creating a swirling vortex. His body soared into the air, the butcher's knife slipping from his hand to hover before him. A wisp of spiritual energy flowed from his qi core, coursing through his body.

"National Teacher, please step back," Nie Changqing said, his hair whipping in the wind.

On the boat, Lu Changkong frowned but held his temper. Luo Yue's hand rested on the hilt of his sword, beads of sweat forming under the terrifying pressure radiating from Nie Changqing—a force even a first-rate martial artist like him could barely withstand.

The National Teacher stood calmly at the bow, his robes billowing, his gaze deep and clouded. "You understand loyalty and justice, with a heart as vast as a valley. You're a good man, a rare talent... It's a pity Ping'an claimed you first. Otherwise, I'd have loved to guide you myself. You're far more humble than that boy Mo Tianyu."

He sighed softly, but Nie Changqing's expression didn't waver.

"The young master gave me a second chance at life. My loyalty to him is unwavering," Nie Changqing replied. "Forgive my offense, National Teacher."

With a flick of his arms, he sent the butcher's knife slicing forward, wrapped in spiritual energy. An invisible blade of qi formed above the lake, cutting through the mist as if it were paper. The water parted, white waves surging like serpents, rushing toward the boat.

The National Teacher's kind face remained unchanged, his hands clasped behind his back. The terrifying strike was like a gentle breeze to him.

But on the boat, Lu Changkong and Luo Yue felt an immense pressure. The lake around them churned as if boiling. Above, a massive vortex of mist gathered, swirling over the boat.

"Like a gentleman of virtue, polished and refined, radiant as a star..." The National Teacher's voice echoed across the lake, his recitation soft yet resonant, like a cleansing spring breeze washing over the soul.

His white hair and beard fluttered as an overwhelming aura of righteous qi gathered above him. He gazed calmly at Nie Changqing, who wielded his blade with deadly intent. The lake's fish scattered in panic, the water splitting as the blade's qi roared forward, raising goosebumps on anyone nearby.

Nie Changqing recalled the last time he'd faced Confucian scholars on Beiluo Lake. Now, he challenged the National Teacher himself, a titan among Confucians.

Yet, as the blade neared three feet from the boat, it froze. The National Teacher's voice filled the air, soothing and commanding, like a bell tolling in the mind. Nie Changqing's control over his knife wavered, and it plummeted into the lake.

On the boat, the National Teacher stood serene, his words flowing like a river. The mist thickened, no longer intangible but shaped by his righteous qi, pressing down on Nie Changqing until he sank into the water. For a moment, it felt as though he faced the young master's own spiritual pressure.

Drenched and floating in the lake, Nie Changqing gazed at the elderly figure on the boat, a mix of awe and respect stirring within him.

Lu Changkong and Luo Yue were stunned. “This is the power of a Confucian master, a sage among scholars,” they thought. With effortless grace, he’d subdued a sixth-rank grandmaster without lifting a finger.

In the distance, a figure in white glided across the lake on a lone skiff. Her delicate hands rested at her waist, her grace timeless and elegant. “The young master has invited his honored guests to the island,” she said softly. “National Teacher, please come ashore.”

The righteous qi dissipated like clouds parting to reveal the sky. The National Teacher laughed heartily, stroking his beard. “Changqing, learn well from Ping’an. That old Daoist is far less reasonable than I am.”

The wooden boat cut through the water, moving forward on its own. The woman’s skiff drew alongside Nie Changqing, pulling him aboard before gliding toward the island.

As the mist cleared, the boat reached the shore. The National Teacher, supported by Lu Changkong, stepped onto the island, his feet touching the smooth bluestone path. Lu Changkong and Luo Yue surveyed the island. The peach blossoms were gone, replaced by ten towering chrysanthemums. The Drunken Dust Pavilion remained, but it had been transformed—subtle, understated, yet exuding an effortless elegance.

The National Teacher, frail and trembling, fixed his deep gaze on the chrysanthemums, a knowing smile spreading across his face.

Before the pavilion, the young master sat in his wheelchair, dressed in white, a thin blanket over his legs, smiling warmly. On the pavilion's second-floor balcony, a woman knelt gracefully, her dark hair cascading as she focused intently on brewing a pot of wine, adding green plums with care. Two children leaned curiously over the balcony railing, peering below with cautious wonder.

The young master's eyes met the National Teacher's, their gazes locking. Clad in flowing white, his features refined and striking, the young master's lips curved slightly. "I, Lu Ping'an, apologize on behalf of Changqing's rudeness, Master."

The National Teacher stroked his beard, his eyes glinting as he smiled. A low rumble stirred the air. The mist over the lake gathered once more, forming a towering mountain of pressure, as if the heavens themselves bore down.

The Confucian righteous qi surged again. The National Teacher's gentle voice rang out: "Like a gentleman of virtue, with earrings of jade and a cap like stars... unforgettable, eternal."

As his words fell, the overwhelming righteous qi pressed toward the young master. The sheer force made Nie Changqing and the woman gasp, their breaths catching. Beneath the pavilion, the young master smiled calmly, unfazed by the torrent of qi.

He reached into his chess box, his fingers deftly picking up a black piece. Facing the invisible tide of righteous qi, he placed the piece in the air before him. The black piece hovered, and a faint blue spiritual energy swirled around him, releasing an intangible spiritual pressure.

The National Teacher's companions, Lu Changkong and Luo Yue, flushed red under the weight of the young master's aura, stumbling back. They couldn't approach the circle of power formed between the young master and the National Teacher.

Awe and astonishment gripped them all. This was no ordinary clash—it was a battle of titans, a collision of sage-like forces.