

PROTEGE 186

Chapter 186: NO ORDINARY FOE

Ling Li remained wholly immersed in controlling her energy over the kiln, furnace, and broiler, her mind attuned to the delicate yet volatile alchemical process. The world beyond her chamber no longer existed—only the flames, the swirling essence of her concoctions, and the unwavering focus required to maintain balance.

Yet, unbeknownst to Ling Li, the storm outside the mansion had grown fiercer.

Ling Li had unwittingly become the beacon that drew the different martial arts factions to her doorstep. The whispers of failed attacks had spread like wildfire, sending shockwaves through the martial world. Rumors swelled and twisted, each faction scrambling to uncover the identity of the formidable force that had single-handedly thwarted their efforts. Even the Hidden Valley was alerted.

At dawn, Shi Min strode toward the alchemy chamber, his expression unreadable, his steps brisk with anticipation. He halted before the Samurai man guarding the entrance and wasted no time.

“Did you catch it?” His voice was taut with expectation.

The Samurai immediately knelt, his back straight, his hands cupped in a formal bow. “Young Master, please punish me. The pursuit lasted an hour, but the enemy—he was a powerful, cunning practitioner of dark arts. His aura was stronger than expected, filled with malice and immorality. He resorted to poison, attempting to cripple me in battle. I fought him fiercely and managed to injure his right abdomen, right arm, and knee, but in the end, he lured me deep into the forest. I feared an ambush was set and decided to retreat.”

Shi Min’s gaze darkened, thoughts racing. His jaw tensed.

“Stand,” he ordered, watching as the Samurai obeyed. “There will be no punishment. Your retreat was the right choice. Safety takes precedence. This adversary is no ordinary foe—an evil practitioner bound by darkness and deception. No wonder his aura felt suffocating.”

Shi Min exhaled sharply, rubbing his chin, his mind weaving through endless possibilities. “This man will return. He won’t give up easily.” His voice held certainty. “Please inform the others—capturing him is

our priority. Mushu and his team can hold off the external threats for now. The factions who attacked last night suffered severe losses. They won't dare to make another move so soon."

Shi Min pivoted slightly. "Wusheng and his team will arrive this afternoon," he added before walking away.

Just before stepping into the hall, Shi Min encountered the training group, their movements steady as they made their way toward the grounds. Only then did he remember—he would be leading them for the coming days.

As they walked, Ren surveyed their surroundings, her sharp eyes catching the heightened security, the tense vigilance in the air. Her brows furrowed.

"What's going on?" Ren asked his brother Shi Min.

Shi Min gave him a brief rundown of the situation. The weight of the news pressed upon them, though none spoke further—until a small voice cut through the stillness.

"Evil! Evil! Big Bro..der.. temple! Temple!"

The words came from Kim Kim, spoken with startling clarity. The twins had been trailing behind with their tiny steps everyday during the training, but now, Kim Kim's words rang with an eerie certainty that froze them in place.

Shi Min's breath hitched. He turned abruptly, kneeling to lift Kim Kim into his arms. His eyes locked onto hers. "Kim Kim," he said slowly, "do you mean the evil is at the temple?"

Kim Kim's small face scrunched as she nodded vigorously. "Big Bro..der.. catch.. catch evil! Temple! Temple!"

A stunned silence followed.

Four Eyes stiffened beside them. His pupils constricted—was his daughter truly capable of sensing something so precise? Concern flickered across his features.

Shi Min, however, felt something entirely different—exhilaration.

A rare talent.

A gift.

Shi Min's lips parted slightly in amazement before he gently patted her head. "Thank you, Kim Kim," he murmured. "Big Brother will definitely catch the evil."

He passed Kim Kim to Four Eyes, who regarded her with suspicion. His grip was secure, his eyes sharp. "Are you sure?" he asked, voice steady but laced with an unmistakable edge.

Kim Kim giggled, her toothless smile unwavering. "Sur! ...Sur! Pa... pa!" She cooed, pressing tiny hands against her father's cheeks before planting a messy, affectionate kiss on him.

The tension within Four Eyes softened—just a little.

Four Eyes only wanted her daughters to live a carefree simple life without worries; he only wished for them to be happy and live like a princess. However, it seemed his wish was no longer possible. His daughter is gifted with special ability at such a young age. Four Eyes could only silently sigh inwardly.

As Shi Min arrived at the training ground, his eyes swept over the group. His expression hardened. "Drills and conditioning—three times the usual. Kata—thirty repetitions. Sparring—one full hour," he commanded.

He turned toward Butler Peng. "Make sure everyone completes it."

"Yes, Young Master." The bow was respectful, the tone unwavering.

Meanwhile, Chatty had been preparing to slack off, thinking today would be light without Shi Min present—but the moment he saw Butler Peng’s piercing gaze, every lazy thought fled. A shiver ran down his spine.

‘Since when was Butler Peng this terrifying?’ he thought in disbelief.

Beside him, Cannonball, coiled snugly around his neck, whispered, “Master, train diligently. Otherwise, Miss will be angry and disappointed again.”

Chatty swallowed. He imagined Pharsa’s wrath and immediately straightened his posture. “You’re right!”

Shi Min met with the Samurai man beside Mushu and Pharsa, recognizing him as Otako’s group team leader. He hesitated for a fraction of a second, wondering how to broach Kim Kim’s revelation—but decided there was no use delaying.

When he relayed the information, the Samurai man did not hesitate. “I will make arrangements to check every temple,” he said before vanishing like mist in the wind.

Shi Min barely had time to process his departure before Rockie arrived.

Shi Min acknowledged him with a nod. “Report,” Rockie said with cupped hands.

“Let’s go to the study,” Shi Min said.

Once they were in the study, the atmosphere turned serious.

“Speak,” Shi Min commanded.

Rockie took a measured breath. “We’ve been tailing Solaris. Every day, after leaving our territory, he visits a temple—one that only houses an old monk and a young disciple around his age. He stays until the evening before returning home.”

Shi Min listened intently.

Chapter 187: THE MONK IS NOT ORDINARY

Lingering unease settled over Shi Min as Rockie recounted the details of Solaris and his father. The weight of his words seeped into the very air of the study, thick and suffocating. It was as if the temperature had dropped, leaving an icy layer of tension between them.

“The old monk is not ordinary,” Rockie began, his voice low, laced with the cautious edge of someone who knew they were dealing with something sinister. “He sensed our presence immediately the first time we arrived. As for Solaris—he has only his elderly father with him at home. His father always leaves at night and returns at dawn.”

Shi Min’s gaze remained locked on Rockie, absorbing every word with precision. He remained silent, his eyes slightly narrowed, his fingers tapping idly against the thick wooden desk.

Rockie took a breath before continuing, his voice growing heavier. “But this morning, his father returned—injured. And shortly after, we learned that Solaris was wounded too.”

Shi Min straightened slightly, the pieces slowly falling into place in his mind. His jaw tightened.

Rockie leaned forward, lowering his voice into a whisper as if speaking too loudly might give their thoughts away. “Goldie and I believe it’s not a coincidence. If one never left the house, how could they both be injured? We suspect they are the same person.”

Shi Min felt the weight of the revelation settle in his chest like a stone. He inhaled slowly, controlling his reaction and forcing himself to think rationally. Yet, deep down, a single thought clawed at his subconscious.

‘If Solaris and his father were one and the same... then how deep did this deception run?’

His fingers clenched slightly against the desk. He didn’t like this. Not one bit.

“What injuries did he sustain?” Shi Min asked, his voice clipped, sharp.

Rockie’s eyes hardened. “According to the servant that was bribed by Goldie, it’s a deep wound on the right abdomen, right hand, and right knee.”

Shi Min stiffened, his muscles tensing instinctively. His heartbeat quickened. A cold realization trickled down his spine.

‘Could Solaris be the same evil cultivator from last night?’

Shi Min’s thoughts immediately shifted—no, raced—toward Lily. She was involved with Solaris, and if their suspicions were correct, then she was already in danger. Perhaps far deeper danger than any of them had realized.

He wasted no time. His voice cut through the tension like a blade. “Summon Leeroy.”

Leeroy who is guarding Lily on the sideline, felt a chill through his spine. When someone informed him that Shi Min was summoning him, he thought, ‘No wonder I felt that chill earlier.’

Within minutes, Leeroy arrived. Shi Min briefed him swiftly, laying out every detail with precision and urgency threading through his tone.

Leeroy’s jaw nearly dropped, but he quickly composed himself, his frame straightening in alarm. His usual calm demeanor faltered—this was no ordinary matter.

Shi Min’s voice was firm, unwavering. “Increase shadow guards around Lily. Twenty-four seven.”

Leeroy nodded sharply. “Understood, Young Master.”

Shi Min then turned to Rockie, his tone steady but laced with simmering intensity. “Continue tracking Solaris. Follow his ‘father’ when he leaves at night.”

Rockie didn't hesitate—he bowed slightly, his face serious. “Understood.”

Shi Min sat back slightly, exhaling. “Dismissed.”

Not long after, a messenger arrived from Solaris' estate, shifting uncomfortably under Shi Min's scrutinizing stare.

“Young Master Solaris cannot come for dance practice due to a bad cough and cold with fever,” the messenger announced, bowing in apology.

Shi Min didn't even try to mask his reaction—he snorted, his lips curling into a sneer. ‘Convenient.’ He waved his hand in irritation, dismissing the messenger without another word.

After the training session, Shi Min summoned the group to the study for a meeting. The atmosphere was tense, thick with unspoken concern.

Kim Kim, perched comfortably in Four Eyes' arms, suddenly reached toward Shi Min, her small fingers grasping at the air. “Bro...der, carry....”

Shi Min's hardened expression softened for the briefest moment. Without hesitation, he scooped her up, letting her tiny fingers curl against his collar.

Once everyone was settled, Shi Min recounted Goldie's report, laying out the alarming evidence and their growing suspicions regarding Solaris. He turned toward Lily, eyes sharp but careful. “You need to stay vigilant around him. If he approached you, there's a reason behind it. A motive we haven't uncovered yet.”

Kim Kim, who had been unusually silent, suddenly blurted out, “Yes, yes! Evil!”

A suffocating silence fell upon the room.

Four Eyes tensed, his frustration deepening. 'His gifted daughter was precious—but also terrifying in her insight. I must grow stronger. I must protect her.' He silently made a vow.

Lily hesitated for a breath before asking, "Kim Kim, do you mean Solaris is truly an evil cultivator?"

"Um," Kim Kim's little head bobbed vigorously, her movements precise, like a rooster pecking at grain.

Gasps rippled through the group.

A knock at the door cut through the tension. Shi Min's voice was steady and sharp. "Come in."

The door swung open, revealing the Samurai Man. His presence alone commanded the air—powerful, suffocating, radiating strength and authority. The room instinctively stiffened.

He strode forward, stopping before Shi Min, his expression impassive but unmistakably serious. "Young Master," he greeted, cupping his hands.

Shi Min wasted no time. "Did you find anything?"

"Yes," the Samurai Man replied without hesitation. "We investigated several temples. Two of them had underground chambers—with concealed defense arrays and formations. Altars lined with corpses of young women."

The air froze.

"These young women were virgins," the Samurai continued. "Sacrificed to absorb their pure spirit—used to maintain the evil cultivators' youth and power. They specifically target young virgin women from cultivator families—the purer their bloodline, the more valuable they are."

A wave of horror settled over the group.

“I have reported this to our Master and informed the Hidden Valley,” he added. “They will not stand idly by.”

Shi Min exhaled, nodding once. “Thank you.”

The Samurai Man bowed slightly before vanishing into the corridor.

Fatty was the first to break the silence, his voice trembling. “What should we do? What if something happens to Lily?”

Shi Min’s mind churned with calculation. “Solaris must be deeply wounded. He won’t appear for a while. The Hidden Valley is aware now—and they will make their move.”

Chapter 188: THE HEAVENS ROARED

“A thousand-year-old ginseng and a dragon marrow?” Shi Min smirked, a sharp glint flashing across his eyes as he dismissed Rockie. Shi Min turned and strode purposefully toward the Samurai Man guarding the alchemy door. The weight of the task ahead pressed on his shoulders, but his steps remained steady.

After a brief discussion, Shi Min’s voice dropped with finality. “Set the trap. Capture the Old Monk and interrogate him.”

The Samurai Man bowed and vanished into the shadows.

Soon, the news of Solaris’ father searching for rare medicinal items spread quickly through the underground networks. However, this was Russia—not China. Such rare ingredients were nearly impossible to find in the region, and even ordinary ginseng was a rarity. Yet it wasn’t the elusive herbs that caught the public’s attention.

It was the three hundred gold bars.

A fortune beyond imagination, circulating freely and unclaimed. The mere whisper of it ignited a frenzy. Mercenaries sharpened their blades, thieves plotted in darkened alleyways, and rogue cultivators emerged from their hiding places—all converging on the unfortunate Old Monk.

The Old Monk's young helper burst into the temple, still panting from exertion, sweat dripping from his brow. "Master!" he gasped out, gripping the edge of the altar for support. "Everyone is hunting you! There are people everywhere asking about the gold bars!"

The Old Monk visibly paled. His trembling hands clutched at his robes, and his knees buckled slightly. He was doomed.

Before dawn the next day, masked figures emerged from the shadows outside the Old Monk's quarters, their presence cold and suffocating.

The Old Monk barely had time to stir before his instincts screamed at him—danger.

He bolted upright in bed, his breath hitching in pure terror. His legs moved before he could think, scrambling backward, only to find himself cornered against the wall. His lips quivered, his aged face frozen with dread.

"Please! Don't kill me!" he croaked, his voice hoarse with fear.

One of the masked men chuckled, the sound deep and amused. "We have no intention of killing you. Just follow us. Quietly."

The Old Monk's body sagged in relief, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He blinked, processing their words—and then looked at them with an expression so oddly reverent that it unsettled the masked men. But there are only two words in the Old Monks mind together with the glittering eyes, 'My Saviour.'

"..." The masked figures exchanged glances.

'Why is this Old Monk looking at us with perverted eyes?' one of them thought, nearly cringing.

Still, they said nothing and escorted the monk into the night.

Meanwhile, the two servants were ordered to return to Solaris, their faces bloodied, their robes torn, and their injuries exaggerated to sell the cover story of an ambush.

The masked men, of course, didn't forget to confiscate the free gold bars.

When Solaris heard the report from his bleeding servants kneeling in front of him, trembling, his reaction was instant—pure rage.

“Imbeciles! Useless!!!” His voice thundered through the mansion, shaking the very foundations.

Solaris' breathing turned erratic, his eyes bloodshot, his fists clenched tight enough to draw blood. His vision blurred with fury, and before he could control himself, he had already smashed every fragile object within reach. Ceramic shattered, wood splintered, precious artifacts lay in ruins around him.

His body trembled violently from exertion, and before another word could leave his lips—darkness consumed him.

Solaris lost consciousness.

At the same time, the Old Monk sat across from Shi Min, his trembling hands clutching a cup of tea as if it were his final lifeline.

“You don't have to be afraid,” Shi Min reassured, his voice calm but firm. “Tell us everything about Solaris, and we will protect you.”

The Old Monk inhaled shakily, the years of torment weighing down on him, curling his spine. His eyes gleamed with unspoken grief, and his fingers tightened around the porcelain teacup.

The Old Monk exhaled sharply. Tears welled in his aged eyes. Then, with great effort, he stood, cupped his hands, and bowed deeply. “Thank you, Young Master,” He whispered with deep gratitude.

And then, he began his story.

The Old Monk poured out the horrors he had witnessed.

The horrors of Solaris.

The deception.

The evil altar beneath the temple—an abomination tainting sacred ground.

The life of the young girls sacrificed.

And worst of all—the face-changing technique.

Shi Min remained still, unreadable. His fingers curled slightly on the wooden surface of his desk, his mind whirling, processing.

‘Solaris is indeed the evil cultivator. Kim Kim was once again correct. And Solaris is neither weak nor simple. Anyone who knows face-changing techniques is a powerful cultivator.’

Shi Min’s grip tightened. His brows furrowed.

This revelation changed everything.

On the third night, the inevitable happened, another wave of forces charged toward the alchemy doors.

Pharsa’s eyes darkened when she witnessed yet another wave of falling corpses. ‘The Raining Men’ a grotesque repetition of the past nights.

‘Can’t they learn their lesson?’ she thought angrily. ‘It’s a waste of human life.’

As if sensing her frustration, Mushu muttered, “They can’t sit still anymore. It’s already the third day. They know that if they don’t act now, they won’t have a chance to claim the pills and elixirs.”

Pharsa pursed her lips, observing as Mushu’s team continued clearing the battlefield, disposing of bodies like discarded chess pieces.

Then came the fourth night.

The heavens roared.

A deafening rumble echoed across the sky—one after another, the sound growing louder, more ominous.

A wave of fear rippled through those who heard it. Something primordial stirred in their bones, something instinctual—the undeniable power of a heavenly tribulation.

The masked man beside Mushu and Pharsa suddenly barked orders, his voice sharp. “Gather everyone inside! Madam is breaking through! Keep everyone safe! We will guard the doors!”

Six more Samurai landed in front of the alchemy door, their movements like spirits in the wind.

Mushu and Pharsa stiffened. Their gazes met.

‘Heaven’s tribulation... for producing such heavenly-defying pills.’ The realization struck them with undeniable gravity.

They hurriedly ordered everyone to retreat indoors.

Shi Min, who had been in the study, felt the rumbling deep in his core.

His heart skipped.

Without a second thought, he bolted down the halls, his voice sharp and commanding. “Quick! Everyone, return to your bedrooms! Close all the curtains! Mom is breaking through! Paps, go and calm the twins! They’ll be terrified once the lightning starts!”

Pharsa rushed in with Mushu, but Shi Min was already ahead. “Pharsa, stay with Chatty! Fatty, stay with Lily! Shun, stay with Ren! Go!” His voice was nearly a roar.

Chapter 189: BRIBING THE SERVANT WAS WORTH IT

Shi Min remained quiet for a long moment, deep in thought. His fingers tapped rhythmically against the edge of the thick wooden desk, his sharp eyes distant. ‘Otako is the head of the constabulary of the Hidden Valley as far as I remember,’ he reminded himself—but he kept the information to himself.

Meanwhile, chaos indeed exploded across the Hidden Valley. The moment word spread of an evil cultivator kidnapping young virgin women, the families of the missing persons stormed the constabulary. The cries of grieving mothers and enraged fathers filled the air, their voices raw with fury and desperation.

The gruesome discovery of corpses only confirmed their worst fears—many now believed their love ones - daughters, sisters, and cousins were gone forever.

The constabulary was under siege.

Men and women barricaded the exits, refusing to let the officials move freely, demanding answers, demanding swift justice.

Fear gripped the valley, settling into every household like an unshakable curse. Families tightened their security, refusing to let their daughters wander unattended. Doors were locked at all hours, and guards doubled. The scent of incense filled homes as desperate prayers were whispered into the night.

Inside the constabulary office, the young officer currently in charge pressed his fingers against his temple, exhaustion weighing heavy on his frame.

'Why did I volunteer for this mess? I should have known better.'

He sighed heavily and bitterly, casting a weary glance toward the entrance, where chaos still reigned.

'I just hope Master returns soon and deals with this madness.'

Meanwhile, within the highly lit luxurious bedroom, Solaris gritted his teeth, his body convulsing as pain tore through him. The deep wounds burned like molten fire, his entire frame wracked with agony. His grip tightened against the wooden bed frame beneath him, his nails sinking into the lacquered surface. Sweat dripped from his temples, soaking the sheets beneath him.

Not only were the wounds deep, but the poison... 'The damned poison.' Solaris cursed silently.

Solaris clenched his jaw, fury crackling like lightning in his veins. 'Who on Lily's side is this powerful? He could actually hurt me.' The thought refused to leave his mind. He had seen everyone in that mansion—none seemed capable of producing such force. 'And who could be this powerful alchemist?'

He hissed under his breath, his expression grim. 'I must recover immediately. I must go back and see for myself.'

"Young Master," the Old Monk muttered hesitantly, wiping his sweat-covered brow. "I need to scrape the rotting flesh around your wounds. It has already spread. If I don't remove it, the poison will continue to eat away at your skin, and soon... I won't be able to stop it."

Solaris' nostrils flared in irritation. "Just do it."

The Old Monk swallowed hard. "Young Master... after scraping the wound, you won't be able to move. You need to rest for at least a month."

Solaris' eyes flashed with raw fury. "You know damned well that I need to participate in that ridiculous dance competition to secure my hold on Lily! And you're telling me to rest for a month?! Do you want to die?! I need to be back on my feet in three days!"

The Old Monk flinched. "Y-Young Master, I shall do my best," he stammered, though deep inside, he knew it was impossible.

Solaris narrowed his eyes. As if sensing the monk's reluctance, he growled, "What do you need to make me recover in three days?"

The Old Monk trembled as he replied, "A thousand-year-old ginseng... and a dragon marrow."

Solaris' rage burst like an untamed storm. "Isn't this the same as telling me to die?!" His voice boomed across the chamber, shaking the brightly lit chandelier.

Despite Solaris' wealth and his connections, these two items were nearly impossible to find. No one would part with such treasures—not even for mountains of gold.

The Old Monk said nothing and remained mum as he carefully continued treating the wounds, each scrape of the rotting flesh making Solaris twitch in agony.

"After you stabilize my wounds, take the three hundred gold bars in that box and find me those items," Solaris finally declared, his voice laced with fury.

The Old Monk paled slightly but nodded. "Yes, Young Master."

'Where in the world will I find those items?' The Old Monk thought bitterly. My life is truly pitiful.'

His mind drifted back to the night he met Solaris five years ago, on a bitterly cold winter evening. He had stumbled upon the unconscious boy, barely breathing, his body stiff with frost. Back then, Solaris had looked so innocent, so fragile. Pity had moved the monk's heart, and he had carried the boy back to the temple.

If only he had left him there to die.

His misery had begun the day he saved Solaris. The regret gnawed at him every second of every day. A sacred temple—and beneath it, an altar of evil. The thought alone made him grind his teeth.

The Old Monk worked tirelessly for hours, scraping the wounds and wrapping the bandages. He didn't even stop to drink water.

Before he could breathe, Solaris' cold voice cut through the silence. "Take the gold bars and find the items immediately."

The Old Monk stared at the heavy trunk in the corner of the room. "Young Master... I cannot carry all of them..."

Solaris ignored him, turning toward the door. "Someone! Come in."

The servant, who had been eavesdropping, directly pushed through the entrance. "Young Master," he bowed.

"Find someone to help carry the trunk and go with the Old Monk."

"Yes, Young Master."

After heading out, the young servant rushed to his quarters, hastily scribbling something onto a scrap of paper. He tucked it into his inner pocket, before seeking another male servant to assist with the trunk.

Once the two servants returned to Solaris' room, his voice was ice. "Leave immediately. Do not delay. Return in two days—with the items."

The servants hurried, carrying the trunk, following behind the Old Monk toward the waiting vehicle.

Just before stepping into the car, the young servant discreetly dropped his piece of paper onto the ground.

Goldie retrieved the fallen note, slipping it into his jacket as he returned to the shadows. 'Bribing the servant was worth it,' Goldie thought with a smile after reading the note.

Rockie immediately reported the information back to Shi Min.

Chapter 190: SHE'S GOING TO BE IMMORTAL

Lily gasped. "Big Brother, if Mom is breaking through, she's going to be immortal!"

Shi Min didn't hesitate. "Yes! We'll talk later. Go!"

Four Eyes felt his blood run cold, a shiver crawling up his spine as Lily's words echoed in his ears. 'Immortal.' The weight of that revelation slammed into his chest, making his pulse pound wildly. His eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets—was this truly what awaited Ling Li? Was this breakthrough more than just power? Was it ascension?

But then, dread clawed at his mind.

He recalled the passage he had once read in an ancient text—one that had shaken him to his core. The heavenly tribulation was not a gift, but a curse. It was how the heavens displayed their jealousy, punishing martial artists for reaching beyond their mortal limits. It wasn't simply a test—it was a reckoning.

If they couldn't withstand the wrath of the heavens, they would perish, erased from existence as if their strength had never been. But if they endured—if they survived the chaos, the lightning, the merciless agony—they would transcend, breaking through to a level beyond mortality.

His hands clenched into fists, knuckles turning white. Ling Li would face the storm. She would stand against the fury of the cosmos.

And he had never been more terrified.

Seeing his Stepfather's conflicted gaze, Shi Min comforted him, "Paps, you need to trust Mom. Go and keep Kim Kim and Chin Chin company; the lightning will start anytime from now."

Right after Shi Min finished his sentence...

It began.

The sky split.

“Paps, let’s go!” Shi Min said loudly as he rushed with Four Eyes, almost pushing him to the twins’ nursery, followed by Mushu.

Thunder clapped with an ear-shattering force, shaking the entire mansion and reverberating beneath their feet.

A bolt of lightning, bright enough to blind, struck the roof of the alchemy with terrifying precision.

Shi Min barely had time to register the sight before running inside the twins’ nursery with Four Eyes and Mushu.

The twins were crying. Once they saw their father, both of them simultaneously called, their short arms reaching out for their father, “Pa...pa.... carry... carry,” They both said in tears.

Seeing how scared his two little ones were, Four Eyes hurriedly took them both in his arms and coaxed them, temporarily forgetting his worries for his wife.

Inside the alchemy chamber, Ling Li opened her eyes.

She smiled in satisfaction.

‘Success,’ was the single word behind her smile.

Ling Li stood amidst the roaring storm, her expression calm, unwavering. The heavens raged above her, bolts of lightning splitting the sky, yet she remained motionless — unshaken, untouched by fear. She had long since transcended mortality, stepping beyond the constraints of life itself. She was immortal.

But no one knew.

Not her family. Not her closest allies. Only Otako and the seven masked men had glimpsed the truth of her existence. To everyone else, she was powerful — yes — but merely standing at the precipice of immortality, not someone who had already crossed that threshold.

Ling Li had hidden it well.

The form she had presented to her loved ones had always been restrained, her aura carefully suppressed, her cultivation masked to appear a level lower than her true physique. But now, as the tribulation bore down upon her, she felt the weight of her deception lingering in her mind.

‘Why not reveal it now?’

‘Why continue hiding when the heavens themselves acknowledged her strength?’

As another deafening clap of thunder cracked across the sky, her decision solidified. She let go of her restraint.

She would show them now while the opportunity is present.

Ling Li closed her eyes, her breath steady, welcoming the divine punishment meant for mortals who dared to defy fate. Yet, instead of resisting the devastating energy, she embraced it, pulling it into her being.

Each lightning strike that tore through her body did not burn, but it strengthened.

The energy coursed through her veins, merging with her essence, refining her already perfected form. Her long silver hair shimmered under the electric glow, dancing wildly with the storm's fury. The ground beneath her trembled, unable to withstand the sheer force of her presence.

This was no mere breakthrough.

This was a revelation.

The heavens had tried to punish her.

But she would show them, and the world, that she had already ascended beyond their judgment.

As Ling Li stood amidst the remnants of her heavenly tribulation, the storm still crackling faintly above, an air of divinity cloaked her entire being. The soft glow surrounding her seemed to pulse—gentle yet commanding, radiating power beyond human comprehension. The silvery strands of her hair flowed like liquid light, cascading down to her ankles and shimmering under the moonlit sky.

She exhaled slowly.

She had done it.

The pills, the potions, the elixirs—all successfully crafted. Ling Li gathered them and safely kept them in her space ring.

The energy from the tribulation had integrated into her essence, reinforcing her body. Ling Li extended a hand, feeling the warmth of her qi weaving through her veins — stronger, richer, purer.

A knowing smile tugged at her lips.

As the sky calmed down, Shi Min stood from the chair, "Mom should be out soon," He walked out of the room, followed by Mushu and Four Eyes with both twins in his arms in hurried steps.

Pharsa also stepped out of the room, and everyone followed suit.

When the group arrived at the alchemy door headed by Shi Min, the team leader of the Samurai men bowed, “Young Master, Madam should be out in a while.”

Shi Min silently nodded.

Ling Li stood straight and turned, her steps light but regal, carrying an ethereal grace as she approached the alchemy door.

Outside, Shi Min, Mushu, and Four Eyes stood waiting with the rest, their expressions tense, anticipation thick in the air.

The seven Samurai remained on guard in perfect discipline. Their dark-clad figures contrasted starkly against the brilliance of Ling Li’s presence.

The door creaked open.

And in that moment — they all froze.

For a heartbeat, the world stood still.

Ling Li stepped out, her presence overwhelming. She was no longer the woman they knew — she was something ... greater.

A deity.

A legend.

A being who had defied the heavens.

Shi Min's breath hitched. His lips parted slightly in astonishment, his mind struggling to reconcile the woman before him with the mother he had always known.

Ling Li was breathtaking.

Her skin, luminous like porcelain, infused with celestial light.

Her silver hair cascaded freely, dancing gently with the wind.

Her eyes were calm and serene, yet carrying the weight of infinite wisdom.

Shi Min was the first to break the silence, his voice barely above a whisper, filled with awe. "Mom... you're... awesome." He almost stammered.

Then, as realization fully settled in, his voice grew stronger, filled with admiration and certainty. "Mom, you have become immortal. And the God of Alchemy at the same time."

A collective gasp followed.

Mushu straightened, eyes flickering with respect. Pharsa, standing nearby, pressed a hand to her chest, feeling the rush of qi resonating from Ling Li's body—a force so powerful it was almost suffocating.