

PROTEGE 341

Chapter 341 341: RENS' NEEDLE TECHNIQUE TRAINING

At the heart of the temple stood Shensei, a figure of quiet authority, tall and lean, clad in simple, worn-out robes that flowed like water around him. His obsidian eyes held a sharp intensity as he regarded Ren, a silent acknowledgment of her arrival. Without a word, he extended a scroll toward her, its parchment worn and whispering secrets of the ages.

"Memorize this," he instructed, his voice resonant and calm.

Ren unrolled the scroll, and an intricate tapestry of diagrams unfurled before her. Her gaze danced over the delicate illustrations of pressure points, qi channels, needle angles, and routes of poison dispersal — every detail a spider's thread of knowledge woven into the fabric of her mind. With her photographic memory, she absorbed it all in a heartbeat, each line etching itself into her consciousness like ink on sumptuous silk. Having her photographic memory, it's not an issue.

Shensei observed her, a quirk of approval on his lips. "You learn fast," he noted.

Ren met his gaze, determination set in her features. "I remember everything, but my qi is still weak."

His expression shifted, focus sharpening as he contemplated her dilemma. "Then we strengthen it. But first — precision."

The First Trial

Ren stood before a wooden mannequin, meticulously carved to resemble a warrior, its surface etched with glowing meridian lines that shimmered like the veins of the earth. In Shensei's weathered hands, a set of silver needles sparkled, each one pulsating softly with an ethereal stream of spiritual energy.

"Strike the heart point," he instructed, his voice steady and commanding. "But take care not to disturb the lung channel."

With a deep, centering breath, Ren focused her entire being on the task ahead. She flicked her wrist with precision, sending the needle soaring through the air — a perfect arc, slicing through the dusk light with grace. Yet, it landed a hair's breadth away from the heart point, a whisper of distance that felt like an abyss.

Shensei raised an eyebrow, a mix of concern and expectation. "Again."

Determined, Ren tried again. And again. Each attempt brought her closer, her qi trembling as it navigated the channels of her body, desperate to guide the needle with the force she willed.

By nightfall, her fingers throbbed with blisters, the skin glistening with sweat that dripped down her brow, a testimony to her relentless effort. Shensei's voice broke through the weariness. "You possess the mind of a master. But your body must catch up."

With unwavering resolve, Ren bowed, her spirit unyielding. "I won't stop."

Qi Conditioning

Under the tranquil embrace of the moon gate, Ren settled into a meditative posture, her legs folded beneath her like the petals of a blossoming flower. Her palms opened toward the heavens, welcoming the energies of the universe. Guided by Shensei's patient instructions, she entered into the depths of qi breathing — each breath slow, deliberate, and painfully transformative.

At first, her meridians fought against her, remnants of a past devoid of vigorous practice manifesting as stubborn blocks. Yet, she pressed on, heart and soul immersed in her quest. She envisioned the strength of her mother, Ling Li, the unyielding resolve of Shun, and the joyous laughter of the twins, all intertwining in her mind like threads of silk.

As she imagined standing beside Shun — no longer merely as his partner but as his equal — a sense of empowerment began to wash over her. Gradually, she felt her qi stir, like a dormant storm awakening within her.

Needle as Weapon

On the third day, Shensei unveiled a new challenge: combat drills that breathed life into the training grounds. Ren took her stance against a temple disciple — masked, swift, and unforgiving in their movements. With each dodge, roll, and strike, she unleashed her needles with purpose, aiming for precision at vital pressure points.

Her memories illuminated her path, instincts sharpened under the weight of experience, but midway through each attack, her qi faltered, leaving her vulnerable. Pain seared through her as she was knocked to the ground, the earth cool and unyielding beneath her.

Shensei, a towering figure against the fading light, loomed over her. "You know where to hit. Now you must learn how to hit."

Ren clenched her fists, flames of determination burning bright in her eyes. "I will."

Back at Peonies Castle

Meanwhile, back at the castle, the atmosphere buzzed with fervor as the others honed their skills relentlessly. Shi Min immersed himself in the art of lightning absorption, each crackle of energy echoing his anticipation for the impending tribulation. El Padre and El Capitan drilled the younger warriors, their movements sharp and fluid, instilling stealth and counterattack techniques into their eager minds. The twins, surprisingly disciplined, sat in serene meditation beside Lily, synchronizing their breaths with hers, seeking tranquility amidst the chaos.

Above them, Ling Li's chamber pulsed with radiant light — each rhythmic fluctuation a beacon of the elixirs being forged, time slipping away like grains of sand through desperate fingers.

Everyone could feel it.

The pressure.

The promise.

The storm was approaching.

The Art of Body Conditioning Pills

Ling Li shifted her attention to the second cauldron, her hands deft and sure. She ground the revered Millennium Ginseng and Ganoderma into a fine powder, their earthy scents filling the air, blending with the sweetness of Lingzi extract and the shimmering Gold Essence. The Ice Soul Dragon scale tempered the flames, ensuring a delicate dance between cooling and strengthening unfolded within the vessel.

Outside, the gathering crowd of cultivators grew. Some hovered in the clouds, cloaked in the shimmer of invisibility talismans. In contrast, others lay in wait among the thickly wooded forests, eyes brimming with anticipation for their moment to strike. The Five Shah lingered in the shadows, their presence like an unseen storm brewing on the horizon.

A lone figure from the Black Mist Sect attempted to sneak past the aura of power surrounding the chamber. In a heartbeat, he vanished, swallowed whole by the malevolent mirror seal, his essence absorbed into the void, a stark warning for any who dared to approach recklessly.

Chapter 342: SANCTUM OF THE DIVINE ALCHEMIST

Boosting Pills

Ling Li meticulously added Panax Ginseng, Dragon Morrow, and Xirang to the cauldron, each herb curling and twisting as they met the shimmering liquid below. A single drop of Phoenix Heart Blood splattered into each batch, igniting the mixture into a blaze of radiant color. The flame surged fiercely, casting a golden luminescence that flickered and danced against the vaulted dome of the chamber, as if the very air was alive.

An immediate surge of energy pulsed outward, a shockwave of qi that radiated from the cauldron, causing the nearby mountains to tremble in response. Birds, startled by the disturbance, took flight in a flurry of wings. At the same time, the rivers, silenced by the intensity of the moment, mirrored the stillness of time itself.

But peace was short-lived — the Bone Lantern Clan had returned, and this time, they came with reinforcements, the air thick with malice and anticipation. Yet, they never reached the door to the sanctum.

In a sweeping motion, the Shah of Wind summoned a howling cyclone that tore through the ranks of the approaching clan, scattering their formation like autumn leaves caught in a tempest. The Shah of Flame unleashed an inferno, reducing their protective talismans to mere ash before they could even flicker to life. In a final, decisive gesture, the Shah of Void erased their leader with a whispered incantation, leaving nothing but silence in the wake of annihilation.

Inside the chamber, Ling Li moved with grace and precision, shaping each pill with her delicate qi threads, the jade boxes gleaming as they were sealed, each one imbued with the essence of her focused intent.

Enhancing Pills

With an unwavering spirit, Ling Li began her meticulous work on the enhancing pills, her hands deftly refining the exquisite Thousand-Year Black Jade, glimmering Ice Lotus, and ethereal Azure Bone. A mystical void flame flickered around her, casting a kaleidoscope of colors that danced like spirits in the air. As she focused, the chaotic noise of the outside world faded, replaced by a deep serenity that enveloped her. Each deliberate push and pull of her qi sculpted the ingredients with unwavering precision, molding each pill into perfect hexagonal shapes. Intricate mental focus charms were woven into the pill surfaces, glimmering with an otherworldly light that pulsed gently with her intent.

Outside, the atmosphere was thick with an unsettling tension, ripe with the anticipation of impending chaos. The Crimson Fang Sect, cunning as ever, slipped in through the shadows with their shadow puppets gliding soundlessly like whispers in the dark. Yet the Shah of Light, a vigilant guardian, unleashed a gaze so potent that it shattered the illusions, laying bare the sinister figures lurking beneath their disguised façades. The Shah of Earth, quick to act, summoned ancient forces, causing the earth itself to shudder as the passageway they had painstakingly carved beneath the annex collapsed with a menacing roar, echoing through the air like the low growl of a waking beast.

At her post, Pharsa reinforced the outer seals with nimble fingers, crafting layers of glowing enchantments that swirled around her like a protective cocoon. Meanwhile, Mushu coordinated their defensive grid with sharp efficiency, his voice steady and clipped amidst the brewing storm, embodying the calm at the eye of chaos as he orchestrated their strategies with the precision of a master tactician. His subordinates were also responsible for collecting and disposing of the bodies dropped by the Five Shahs. At the same time, Pharsa usually referred to the act as 'Raining-Men.'

Healing Potions and Pills

Ling Li deftly brewed a potent concoction with Lingzi, the delicate Snow Ginseng, and the mystical Ice Soul, melding them into a shimmering liquid base. A dash of Gold Essence was introduced to hasten the healing of wounds, its radiant sheen adding warmth to the otherwise cool mixture. She adjusted the temperature with a subtle wave of her qi, maintaining a steady simmer while the potion glowed a vibrant blue, pulsating with the essence of life itself.

The thicker mixture was skillfully compressed into pills, sealed tight with blood resonance charms that hummed softly, resonating with the heartbeat of vitality. Outside, the Hollow Sky Sect attempted to manipulate the weather, summoning unnatural storms to disrupt the elemental harmony within the chamber. But the Shah of Storms, undeterred, redirected the jagged bolts of lightning, sending them crashing back to the enemy camps. Their tents ignited into flames, and with them, their morale crumbled like brittle paper underfoot.

Final Fusion: The Storm Outside the Flame

Ling Li approached the Nirvana Elixir cauldron once more, her footsteps echoing through the stillness of the chamber, as if the very air thickened with anticipation at her presence. The atmosphere was not merely quiet but infused with an almost sacred reverence, a hush that felt like the universe holding its breath. The fusion matrix within the cauldron shimmered with a steady glow, pulsing rhythmically — a heartbeat resonating in the stillness, each pulse a whisper of transformation and rebirth.

With deliberate grace, she extended her hands, and her soul flame erupted into life — a mesmerizing swirl of white and gold, ethereal and vivid, shimmering across her fingers like living fire. She gently guided this radiant energy into the cauldron, skillfully enfolding it around the elixir core, tightening it with the precision that only an immortal's mastery could command.

The orb that emerged from the cauldron hovered above, resplendent and quivering, illuminated by the incandescent essence of Nirvana itself. This was no mere potion; it was a promise etched in light — a second chance at existence, a rebirth, and hope—a resurrection glittered in its depths.

The tension in the chamber hummed with electric anticipation, each breath saturated with potential. The walls vibrated, resonating with an energy that rippled outward, as if the very stones themselves sensed the momentous occasion unfolding. Outside, the world felt the shift.

As the final moments drew near, the Five Shah stood watch, a vigilant bastion against the encroaching darkness. Silent, lethal, and resolute, they formed an unyielding barrier against the shadows that lurked just beyond their perception.

The Fluctuation: A Beacon of Greed

A powerful energy fluctuation surged across Shanghai once more, sweeping through the city like a tidal wave of radiant qi. Cultivators abruptly paused mid-meditation, their focus shattered. Martial sects halted their drills, confusion rippling through their ranks. Families hurried into war rooms, drawn together by an instinctual unease.

Chapter 343: RAINING MEN AND RISING FLAME

The source of this powerful energy fluctuation was unmistakable.

Peonies Castle.

And the energy emanating from it was extraordinary.

It was ancient, refined, divine.

The kind of essence that could only arise from a saint-level alchemist meticulously refining an elixir potent enough to alter the very fabric of fate.

The Calculations of Greed

Those who grasped the intricacies of alchemy understood the profound truth. To refine such an elixir demanded:

Immense cultivation — not merely brute strength, but a profound spiritual depth. Rare ingredients — each one a treasure of untold worth. Mental fortitude — vital to endure the overwhelming strain of

fusion. Talent — not just raw power, but exquisite precision. Risk — the pervasive threat of failure loomed large, a specter of backlash, soul damage, or even death.

Even the most seasoned ancient martial artists tread cautiously around such refinement, only daring when necessity bore down with suffocating weight. The costs were exceedingly high. The dangers are formidable.

But Ling Li was forging ahead.

And in the shadows, the greedy stirred, their eyes glinting with avarice, catching a whiff of opportunity ripe for the taking.

The Fracturing Begins

Sects snapped like ancient wood, cracking under the strain of betrayal and ambition.

Families, once united by blood and tradition, found themselves in rending divisions that echoed with whispered accusations and hidden agendas.

In the dim light, some elders clung to caution, their faces pale with the specter of Ling Li's wrath looming over them. Others, ensnared by greed's intoxicating embrace, unleashed shadowy assassins and stealthy scouts into the night.

The Crimson Fang Sect shattered into three factions, each representing a divergent path: one embraced the cautious silence of the wise, another championed the delicate threads of diplomacy. At the same time, the last opted for the ruthless clamor of violence.

The Bone Lantern Clan dispatched their elite shadows into the darkness, whispers of their prowess ringing in the air. Yet, as the sun set, none returned, swallowed by the abyss.

Among the Hollow Sky Sect, hours turned to lifetimes as disputes raged. Yet, the hunger of youth could not be contained — their younger disciples, buoyed by arrogance and ambition, took matters into their own hands, believing they alone could seize the elixir and elevate themselves beyond their forebears.

The Five Shah Respond

Outside the chamber, the Five Shah remained sentinel, unyielding and spectral.

Their silence spoke volumes.

Not a blink disrupted their watchful gaze.

They flowed like still water, poised and purposeful.

The First Shah — time rippled under his command, ensnaring intruders in endless loops of their own terror.

The Second Shah — qi currents bent to his will, turning attackers' own energies against them, leading them to implode under the weight of their ambition.

The Third Shah — gravity twisted maliciously, crushing would-be formations into mere whispers of a plan.

The Fourth Shah — sound vanished like a breath of wind, leaving communication a futile wish.

The Fifth Shah — light succumbed to his mastery, cloaking Peonies Castle in an impenetrable veil.

Every attack met a chilling silence.

Each assassin was extinguished before their blades could taste victory.

Yet still, more came.

From her vantage point, Pharsa observed with a mix of amusement and dread— "more raining men."

The defeated assassins "...." they fell without so much as a whisper, unaware of the lines of fate unraveling around them.

Inside the Chamber: The Kiln Awakens

Ling Li glided toward the kiln, the very air around her shimmering with anticipation.

With deliberate grace, she nestled the Nirvana Elixir orb within, igniting the final phase of its meticulous refinement. The kiln, hewn from celestial stone, glowed in resonance, its runes pulsing in rhythm with her qi.

She fine-tuned the flame — first void, then crackling lightning, followed by a frost-laden ice — cycling through elemental phases, forging the elixir's essence into something transcendent.

Her gaze remained locked onto the kiln.

Her breath was a quiet testament to resolve.

Awareness of the chaos outside pressed against her consciousness, yet it held no sway over her focus.

The Weight of the World

Mushu sprang into action, coordinating defenses with sharp, clipped commands that cut through the turmoil. Pharsa mirrored his urgency, her hands aglow with layered enchantments, each gesture imbued with the vibrant pulse of magic. The castle itself responded, a fortress alive with power, thrumming with every surge of energy that threatened to disturb its sanctity.

The Immortal Flame: Ling Li's Final Step

Within the sealed alchemy chamber, time unraveled, twisting in on itself.

The air thickened with palpable qi, vibrating with an electric tension that charged the atmosphere. The kiln pulsed with scorching heat, its runes illuminating the room like constellations scattered across a night sky. And at the heart of this sublime chaos stood Ling Li — not merely an alchemist, but a force of nature.

Her long silver hair, nearly trailing the ground, danced freely, swirling in intoxicating arcs as though imbued with will. Each strand sparked with starlit reflections, entrapped in the warmth of the flickering soul flame that danced upon her fingertips.

Radiating a golden luminescence — soft yet blinding, akin to dawn breaking through a tempest — she stood adorned in robes spun from celestial silk. They clung to her form with ethereal elegance, fluttering gently in the stilled air as if to reclaim the tranquility that the moment demanded.

Although her eyes were shut, beneath her lids, her pupils glowed faintly — two golden rings rotating with a solemn cadence, mirroring the intricate fusion matrix igniting within the kiln.

The Nirvana Elixir floated above the flame, now perfected into a small, vibrating orb. It pulsed with an energy of rebirth, each beat resonating like the drums of destiny echoing against the chamber walls.

With both hands raised, fingers forming an ancient seal known only to the immortal realms, Ling Li's soul flame surged into the sky, enveloping the orb in a cocoon of divine fire. The kiln responded, its sigils flaring to life with an ancient power that pulsed like a heartbeat of the universe.

The elixir condensed.

The kiln roared in anticipation.

And the world itself seemed to hold its breath.

Because when the Nirvana Elixir finally emerged, it would not only alter Shi Min's fate.

It held the power to reshape everything.

Outside, the Five Shah sensed the shift.

The energy surge was unlike anything they had ever witnessed in their eternal vigil.

Even they, embodiments of unimaginable power, felt a sovereign urge to kneel before its might.

Chapter 344: THE ELIXIR THAT SHOOK THE WORLD

The World Watches

Beyond the towering castle walls, ominous clouds gathered, swirling into a tempest of darkness. An electrifying energy fluctuation rippled through the landscape like a celestial shockwave, sending tremors coursing through the mountains and silencing the once-bustling rivers. Creatures of all kinds, feeling the weight of an unnameable dread, hastily retreated into the safety of their hidden caves.

Cultivators across the realm abruptly dropped their weapons in mid-practice, caught in a moment of stunned reverence. Ancient elders gasped in astonishment, their weathered faces a blend of fear and awe, while disciples wept tears of both hope and despair.

“She’s completing it,” murmured an aged master from the Jade Serpent Sect, his voice laced with disbelief.

“It’s the Nirvana Elixir...”

It’s real! It’s the Nirvana Elixir!!!” His voice faltered. He almost fainted from too much emotion.

In the shadows, lurking factions stirred, their hearts pounding as the realization set in. They understood the implications — an elixir capable of defying the very grip of death, a potion that could rewrite destinies. And the insatiable hunger for such power consumed them.

The Final Surge of Greed

Despite the echoes of countless failed attempts and the haunting silence surrounding missing scouts, the lure of the elixir proved too intoxicating to resist. Sects that once stood united began to fracture: elders clashed with their own disciples, and once-bonded brothers turned against one another, blinded by the relentless allure of the fabled elixir.

A desperate coalition of rogue cultivators formed a last-ditch assault, convinced that in her moment of culmination, Ling Li would be vulnerable. They could not have been more mistaken.

The Five Shah Unleashed

The Five Shah emerged with a fierce, indomitable resolve.

The First Shah conjured a temporal blade that sliced through the air with deadly grace, freezing attackers mid-motion in a state of panicked disbelief.

The Second Shah enveloped the battlefield in a dome of inverted qi. This shimmering barrier reflected all offensive energy back to its source with relentless force.

The Third Shah unleashed a cataclysmic tremor, collapsing the very ground beneath the invaders, swallowing them whole into an abyss that seemed to devour light itself.

The Fourth Shah cast a profound silence over the battlefield, extinguishing all magic with a simple gesture, rendering spells as powerless as whispers lost in a storm.

The Fifth Shah cloaked the castle in a divine mist — a thick veil of ethereal fog that blinded all who dared approach, stripping them of their bearings.

The attackers screamed — an anguished symphony of fear and rage — before they vanished without a trace.

Inside the Chamber: Completion

Within the sanctuary of her chamber, Ling Li's soul flame flickered and waned. The orb floated downwards, a celestial body descending into her palm, now fully refined into a perfect Nirvana Elixir, glowing with a vibrant luminescence that whispered promises of resurrection and rebirth.

She opened her eyes, and a cascade of golden light burst forth, illuminating the room with an unearthly glow. Her expression was a serene portrait of calm, yet her aura crackled with an unstoppable, thunderous force.

She had achieved the unimaginable.

And as the night deepened and the winds howled outside, the world stood on the precipice of transformation, forever altered by what was about to unfold.

The Return of the Flame

As the sun surrendered to the horizon, its vibrant hues of amber and violet bathed Peonies Castle in a breathtaking embrace. The heavy doors of the alchemy chamber, long sealed in secrecy, groaned open with a reluctant sigh.

Ling Li emerged, a figure ethereal against the twilight canvas. Her long silver hair cascaded behind her like a flowing river of moonlight, each strand capturing and reflecting the gentle glow of lanterns suspended in the air. Her robes, once unblemished, now glimmered with residue from her elemental endeavors — glints of gold from the ethereal Nirvana flame, wisps of icy mist from the soul fusion, and a delicate, flickering crimson hue reminiscent of Phoenix Heart Blood. Her eyes, fathomless and serene, belied the tremendous weight of ten days spent laboring amidst the divine.

The courtyard held its breath in silence.

Then, one by one, her family and allies rose, the air thickening with emotion.

Shi Min was the first to approach, his gaze a tapestry of awe and concern. “Mom,” he said softly, his voice a soothing balm, “you’ve been in seclusion for ten days. You haven’t eaten. Let’s talk after dinner.”

Ling Li blinked slowly, her lips curving into a faint, tender smile. It was only then that she felt the gnawing emptiness in her stomach — a ravenous hunger she had overlooked in her relentless quest for perfection.

Her head nodded in agreement. “You’re right.”

Dinner and Updates

The dining hall radiated warmth and conviviality, the air rich with the mouthwatering aromas of roasted duck, vibrant steamed vegetables, and Fatty's beloved dumplings, which seemed to dance on the table. Ling Li took her place at the head of the table, her presence anchoring the room like a beacon of hope and strength.

As she savored her meal, the chatter around her flowed like a comforting river, filling her heart with warmth.

Shi Min recounted the harrowing final confrontation with Solaris, his voice a steady drumbeat, punctuated by adrenaline coursing through his veins. "He chose self-destruction over defeat. We didn't even have to strike," he said, eyes glinting with the thrill of victory.

Lily let out a relieved exhale, her shoulders finally relaxing. "I can sleep at last without peering through the windows every minute," she confessed, the tension melting away.

Ren excitedly shared her progress with Shensei. "I've committed every needle technique to memory! My qi's still weak, but I'm definitely on the mend," she beamed, a spark of determination igniting her expression.

Shun, Nicu, and Ailun animatedly recounted their latest sparring sessions, their voices rising in excitement, each recounting more intensely than the last, drawing appreciative nods and laughter.

Fatty boasted about his newfound abs, a proud grin plastered across his face, while Chatty countered with playful jibes, claiming they were merely shadows at best.

Ling Li absorbed every word, her gaze soft, her heart swelling with a profound sense of belonging fulfilled by the shared moments.

Chapter 345 345: ALCHEMY AND ANARCHY

Four Eyes remained silent, his gaze unwaveringly fixed on Ling Li. The ache of his wife's absence weighed heavily on him, an unspoken longing that had grown insatiable over the past ten days.

Meanwhile, the twins, brimming with joy and curiosity, indulged in their meal, their hearts full but unsure of how to share their own stories with their beloved mother.

The Living Room: Revelation

After the last morsels of dinner were consumed, Ling Li beckoned everyone into the intimate embrace of the living room.

The air was thick with anticipation, illuminated by the gentle glow of floating lanterns that danced softly in rhythm with protective wards humming a soothing melody. Ling Li stood at the center, her space ring emanating a faint luminescence that mirrored the magic surrounding her.

With a graceful wave of her hand, an astonishing array of jade boxes and crystal vials materialized around her, each one pulsating with a vibrant essence of refined qi — true masterpieces of alchemical artistry.

Gasps of awe reverberated through the room like music.

"These," Ling Li began, her voice a serene yet powerful whisper that filled the space, "are the fruits of ten arduous days of seclusion. Each pill, each elixir, is crafted with meticulous precision, sacrificial intent, and profound dedication."

Her hand glided forward to reveal the first gem — the Nirvana Elixir, a radiant orb of shimmering light that floated effortlessly above her palm, almost as if it were breathing.

"This is the Nirvana Elixir. Should Shi Min falter during his tribulation, this single vial can call him back from the brink of despair. But its power is finite — it can only grant such a second chance once."

She moved fluidly to the following collection.

"These are the body conditioning pills," she explained, her voice imbued with urgency. "They work to realign your meridians, fortify your bones, and enhance the flow of your qi. Their effects are intense, even painful, but they are undeniably effective."

Then came the boosting pills. "For speed, reflexes, and unimaginable strength. The essence of Phoenix Heart Blood ignites them, ensuring their energy resonates deeply with your very soul."

Ling Li's gaze shifted, highlighting the enhancing pills. "These can elevate clarity, sharpen perception, and deepen spiritual understanding. Crafted with void flame and sealed with charms of mental focus, they invite transcendence."

A small collection of healing potions and pills shimmered in the dim light. "For grievous wounds, internal injuries, and even soul fractures. Each vial pulses with a vitality that feels almost alive. Such as this Revival Pill that has a remarkable dual advantage:

Firstly, it serves as a source of nourishment for the body. Just a single pill is enough to mend a myriad of injuries, whether they be visible wounds on the surface or hidden ailments within. With the intake of two pills, the body experiences a profound rejuvenation, restoring vitality and strength to its fullest potential.

Secondly, this extraordinary pill acts as a powerful detoxifier, adept at combating the effects of poisons. A single pill offers a protective shield for the heart, fortifying it against harmful toxins. However, with the consumption of two pills, the body undergoes a complete cleansing, purging itself of any lingering poisons and returning to a state of pure health."

Ling Li paused for a moment, allowing the weight of her words to settle into the hearts of her audience.

"These are not mere medicines. They are heaven-defying creations. That is precisely why the world, with all its darkness, covets them."

Turning her gaze to everyone, she continued, "You all witnessed it yourself — the assassins, the sects converging with insatiable greed."

Everyone nodded, understanding the gravity of their situation.

Ling Li pressed on, her voice steady and unwavering. "Alchemy transcends just cultivation. It embodies raw talent, unparalleled precision, and unyielding sacrifice. Each refinement extracts a toll on the soul, while every failure invites perilous backlash. Even the most powerful immortals tread with caution."

She locked eyes with each person present, an unspoken connection bridging their fears and hopes.

"Many desire to steal rather than to refine. Everyone recognizes the truth: what I have crafted here holds the potential to alter the fates of entire nations or even the rest of the world."

A heavy silence enveloped them, thick with the enormity of her revelations.

Finally, El Padre broke the stillness with quiet admiration. "And you achieved this all alone."

Ling Li's lips curled into a warm smile. "Not alone. You all safeguarded my endeavors. And now, we stand together as protectors of one another."

The Distribution: A Warrior's Banter

The living room was bathed in a warm, inviting glow from the softly flickering lanterns that adorned the walls, casting gentle shadows that danced like specters in the corners of the room. The air was thick with

an almost palpable aura — the lingering qi of Ling Li's solitary meditation, still humming with energy, as if the room itself were alive with whispers of ancient wisdom.

Before her, on a low table crafted from rich mahogany, rows of exquisitely designed jade boxes and delicate crystal vials sparkled with a spectral vibrance — each a meticulous creation of alchemy, each imbued with a purpose as unique as the soul it was destined to assist.

Ling Li, a vision of serene strength, stood at the head of the room, her silver hair flowing like molten moonlight down her back, shimmering with an ethereal glow that contrasted beautifully with her rich, earth-toned robes. Her presence was both radiant and grounded, a living testament to the wisdom she embodied.

With an elegant sweep of her hand, she quieted the murmurs of anticipation that had built up in the room. "Recognize each one of them," she intoned, her voice a calm yet commanding presence that resonated in the hearts of those gathered as she handed out their portions. "And don't get them mixed up. Every pill is crafted for your specific constitution. Misuse could be dangerous."

The group leaned closer, their eyes wide and filled with awe, each person a silent testament to the reverence they felt in her presence, as they each received their share.

Ling Li says:

You've read this far? Good. That means your spiritual focus is improving.

Now be a good disciple—vote, comment, and leave a review.

And if you're feeling generous, a little gift might help me brew stronger cousins for the next chapter.

Don't slack off. I'm watching.

Chapter 346 346: THE DISTRIBUTION: WARRIOR'S BANTER

El Padre, stepping forward with the grace of a seasoned warrior, crossed his arms with an air of authority. His voice cut through the tension, sharp and commanding. "Remember — each pill is of utmost importance and painstakingly rare. If not for Madam's unwavering generosity, care, and diligent effort, you would never have had the privilege to witness such remarkable medicines in your lifetime, let alone hold them."

His words hung in the air like a solemn declaration, heavy with sincerity.

Then, as if pulled by an unseen string of curiosity, Chatty tilted his head, a playful squint in his eyes. "Wait... El Padre's not getting any share?"

The entire room froze, an electric silence falling like a thick fog.

El Padre turned slowly, the corners of his mouth twitching in mock annoyance. "You! Hmph!"

The room erupted in a soft chorus of anticipation, eyes darting between the two.

Ling Li, unable to suppress a chuckle, covered her mouth with her hand, the sound ringing like the gentle chime of a distant bell. El Capitan, usually a figure of stoic silence, let out a rare, warm laugh, his broad shoulders shaking with uncharacteristic mirth.

Ling Li intervened, her tone light and teasing, still firm. "Rest assured, El Padre and El Capitan do not require any of the medicines I provided. In fact, both of them ascended to immortality much earlier than I did."

A collective gasp rippled through the room, the air thickening with astonishment.

Chatty's mouth fell open, his jaw hanging slack as he struggled to comprehend the revelation. "Immortal?! You mean — like, actual immortal like Madam?"

El Padre puffed up with pride, the golden embroidery on his coat glistening in the lantern light like a crown of honor. "Of course."

Beside him, El Capitan, ever the shadow in the background, shrugged modestly, but the flicker of pride in his eyes betrayed his facade.

Buoyed by the lively atmosphere, Chatty leaned forward with unbridled eagerness. "Then... can we see how you look in your immortal form?"

El Padre seized the moment with finesse. "In your dreams," he quipped, adjusting his collar with the kind of theatrical flair that made his retort all the more delightful.

The room erupted in bursts of laughter, a symphony of joy that chased away the shadows of worry.

Even Mushu, known for his seriousness, cracked a smile, his expression softening, while Pharsa rolled her eyes playfully, the corners of her lips betraying the amusement she couldn't contain. The twins giggled, perched on the couch like playful sprites, and Fatty clapped his hands with the exuberance of a delighted child, his infectious laughter filling the room.

In that moment, the collective tension of the past ten days unraveled, dissolving like mist under the morning sun.

And within that laughter, that shared warmth, the family rediscovered what they were truly fighting for — not merely survival, but the unbreakable bond they shared with one another.

A Mother's Gift: The Nirvana Elixir

The living room enveloped them in an intimate silence, the atmosphere thick with reverence and anticipation. Lanterns flickered like distant stars overhead, casting a warm, golden glow that danced over the polished wooden floor. The jade boxes and crystal vials Ling Li had gracefully presented pulsed softly, radiating an aura of refined qi. Yet, every gaze in the room was irresistibly drawn to the small, luminous box cradled delicately in her hands — The Nirvana Elixir.

Ling Li glided forward, her long silver hair flowing behind her like a comet's radiant tail, each strand glimmering with an ethereal light. Her robes shimmered with echoes of soul flame, embodying both elegance and power. Her expression exuded calm mastery, but her stormy, ancient eyes were locked on Shi Min, unwavering.

With a serene yet powerful gesture, she extended the radiant box toward him, their eyes locking in an understanding forged by trust and courage.

"Prepare yourself. Your tribulation is on the horizon."

Shi Min froze, as if caught in a tableau of time. His breath hitched in his throat as his gaze fell upon the jade container. Small and unassuming on the outside, yet the profound energy emanating from it was palpable — warm, potent, and intoxicatingly sacred, sending shivers cascading down his spine.

His fingers trembled, quivering like leaves caught in a gentle breeze, as he reached out hesitantly. He didn't grasp the box at once. Instead, he looked back up at his mother, his voice shaky with emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. "Mom... I made you worry. I'm sorry."

Ling Li's gaze softened, her lips parting in a tender sigh, yet she remained silent, allowing him to gather his thoughts.

Shi Min pressed on, his voice a low tremor filled with guilt and reverence. "Thank you. I know creating this elixir was beyond anyone else's capability. But gathering the materials... it must've been — "His words faltered, the enormity of his mother's sacrifices rendering him momentarily speechless.

Ling Li stepped closer, holding the box with a grace that seemed to bridge their hearts. "Shi Min," she spoke gently, her voice a soothing balm, "I'm your mother. I would do anything to protect you. Not just you — all of you."

Her voice, while steady, shimmered with unshed tears — not of weakness, but of a parent who had borne witness to the trials of her child, her spirit unyielding yet tender.

Finally, Shi Min reached for the box, clutching it as if it were a priceless relic, fragile and imbued with memories. He bowed his head, pressing the box to his forehead in a gesture steeped in reverence. "We know, Mom. I understand. And I swear — I'll do my utmost to honor your gift and not let you down."

Ling Li moved, brushing a silken strand of hair from his forehead, her fingers lingering on his cheek like the caress of a gentle breeze.

"You never have," she whispered, her breath a lullaby laced with profound love.

In the stillness surrounding them, the others stood frozen in quiet witness. Fatty fought back tears, blinking rapidly and pretending to stifle a yawn. Lily held her breath as if the very air around them had thickened. Shun's hand tightened protectively around Ren's, both feeling the weight of the moment. Even El Padre turned his gaze aside, his jaw clenched with unspoken emotions.

Chapter 347 347: DANGER WILL LURK IN EVERY SHADOW

For in that delicate moment, it transcended the bond of mother and son. It was a promise forged in the fires of sacrifice, a vow sealed in the essence of qi, tempered by an unbreakable love.

As Shi Min held the Nirvana Elixir close to his heart, he felt an electrifying certainty — should the lightning strike, the heavens rage, or death stretch its grasp toward him, his mother had already faced the storm and triumphed. He would not squander her gift.

The living room, once alive with the radiant glow of laughter and warm reunions, now settled into a hushed reverence. Ling Li stood at its heart, her silver hair cascading like a glowing waterfall under the moonlight, casting a striking silhouette against the flickering lanterns. Her keen gaze swept across the expectant faces of her children, disciples, and allies, who gathered in anxious anticipation.

With a voice that resonated with both calm authority and an unyielding strength, Ling Li broke the heavy silence. "Listen up, everyone," she commanded, her tone shifting into that of a general ready to issue decisive orders. "Before you retire for the night, I need you to take one of the body conditioning pills. Starting tomorrow — until the 'Eye' opens in three weeks — your training, along with all food and drink, will be under the strict management of Butler Oda and the Seven Shah."

A collective shiver danced through the room, as if the very air had grown colder. Even the flickering flames of the lanterns quivered at the mention of the Seven Shah, their names attached to Otako, woven into the fabric of legend — each a master of their respective domains, each notorious for pushing warriors to the very brink of their capabilities.

Chatty, always the one to voice the concerns simmering among the crowd, stuttered, "W-Why? Why them?"

Ling Li's eyes softened momentarily, but her words remained a steady force. "From tomorrow on, your meals will be exclusively spiritual foods — each dish meticulously prepared for your individual constitution. These specially crafted meals will harmonize with the body conditioning pills to reshape your physical and spiritual foundations."

She paused, allowing the gravity of her statements to settle over the gathering like a heavy cloak.

"In order to achieve a breakthrough, you must step far beyond your comfort zone, beyond your limit. The enhancing and breakthrough pills are formidable in their potency — but they are rendered useless without the effort and dedication to harness their power. You must earn their effects."

Ren, seated beside Shun, raised her hand in cautious inquiry. "When do we take the breakthrough pills?"

Ling Li turned her thoughtful gaze upon her, her demeanor unwavering. "You'll be informed when the time is right. It varies for each of you, depending on your training productivity, qi flow, and mental resilience. Some may not need them and break through on their own."

An enveloping silence enveloped the room, thick with unvoiced concern. No one dared to challenge Ling Li's authority; Ling Li's presence loomed too large, her words too resolute.

The room had settled into a contemplative hush, the earlier warmth of reunion now supplanted by an almost electric sense of urgency hanging in the air. Ling Li stood at the center, her silver hair cascading like shimmering moonlight against her deep emerald robes, her presence both commanding and imbued with a serene grace.

She turned her piercing gaze to Ren, who sat upright, her posture a testament to her discipline, her eyes steady despite the flickering anxiety simmering just beneath the surface.

"Ren," Ling Li said, her voice calm yet resonating with resolve, "you will continue your training with Shinsei. He is aware of my intention for you — to learn the needle technique and to break through before the 'Eye' opens. He knows the path you must tread."

Ren nodded, her reply firm and crystalline as she whispered, "I understand."

But Ling Li was not done.

She stepped closer, the warmth of her presence nearly tangible, her gaze sharpening as it captured Ren's and then swept over the others gathered in the room. "Everyone, remember this — everything is arduous at the start. You reap what you sow; the harder you toil, the more you will harvest."

Ren's fingers curled slightly in her lap, each word sinking into her like the roots of an ancient tree seeking nourishment.

Ling Li's tone deepened, her eyes now radiating wisdom as they moved across the room, encompassing everyone. "When you step into the 'Eye,' it is not merely about finding a cultivation technique. Martial artists from rival sects and esteemed families will surround you. Competition will be fierce. Danger will lurk in every shadow. You risk injury in pursuit of your goals."

A palpable ripple of unease coursed through the group, faces tightening in response to the weight of her words. Shun's jaw clenched, muscles taut with determination. Chatty suddenly stilled, her fidgeting coming to an abrupt halt. Even Fatty leaned forward, his usual jovial demeanor replaced by an unusual seriousness.

Yet Ren's gaze remained unwavering, a flame of resolve igniting within her.

"I won't hold back," she asserted quietly, her voice steady and fierce in the stillness.

Ling Li offered a slight nod, her expression inscrutable, yet beneath it lay a profound understanding of Ren's determination. But she knew that sheer resolve would not be sufficient.

They still had three weeks to prepare.

Three weeks to refine their bodies, sharpen their minds, and fortify their spirits.

Ling Li recognized the delicate balance; overwhelming them with instruction would only serve to fracture their focus. She would guide them gently, step by step, day by day, until they stood ready to confront the daunting Eye.

For now, however, she let the silence envelop them like a shroud, thick with the promise of the trials to come.

"If there are no further questions," she continued, her voice softening slightly, "prepare to rest early. Training will commence at four in the morning and conclude at eight in the evening. Do not be late. You will train in various locations selected by the Seven Shah — each place chosen for its unique qi density and elemental resonance."

Chapter 348 348: LET ME CARE FOR YOU TONIGHT

The silence deepened, like the calm before a storm. Even Fatty, typically the first to break the tension with a jest, now wore a pale expression. The twins huddled closely together, their wide eyes reflecting

both fear and awe, while Shun nodded, a determined resolution settling in his heart as he mentally prepared.

"Alright," Ling Li concluded, her voice taking on a gentler tone. "You may go."

She then turned her attention to Shi Min, her gaze lingering on him like a beacon. "Shi Min, let's have a discussion tomorrow morning. There are many important matters I need to address with you."

Shi Min nodded, his expression grave. "Understood."

One by one, the group rose, bowing slightly and murmuring their goodnights before withdrawing. As they exited the room, the atmosphere felt heavy and charged — a quiet swirl of anticipation, apprehension, and the exhilarating promise of transformation. None among them would emerge unchanged from the trials that lay ahead.

After the Storm: Ling Li and Four Eyes

As the last faint echoes of footsteps receded down the corridor, silence enveloped the living room like a soft, velvet cloak. The lanterns glowed a warm amber, casting elongated shadows that danced across the polished wooden floor. Outside, the evening breeze whispered through the garden, its gentle rustle echoing the soothing rhythm of a world breathing out, momentarily at peace.

Four Eyes stood rooted in place, a silent sentinel in the dim light, his gaze fixed intently on Ling Li, who lingered near the window. Her silver hair shimmered like gossamer threads woven from moonlight, radiating an ethereal glow that illuminated the space around her.

He had missed her so profoundly — not just her presence, but the comforting warmth of her body against his, the gentle lilt of her voice, and the way she would lean against him when fatigue washed over her like a tide. Ten days trapped in the confines of worry, each moment spent imagining her solitary struggle in that chamber, exhausting every ounce of strength to create the elusive Nirvana Elixir, all while nurturing three tiny lives within her.

Drawing closer, he brushed a wayward strand of hair from her face, tucking it delicately behind her ear, his touch imbued with tenderness and reverence. "Finally," he breathed, his voice a rich tapestry of emotion. "You're mine again. Are you tired?"

Ling Li turned towards him, her eyes pools of warmth and serenity, her expression a serene moonlit night. She leaned into his touch, resting her head gently against his shoulder, a sanctuary found amidst the chaos. "I'm not very tired," she replied, her voice a soft melody that lingered in the air. "But I missed this."

With a tender determination, Four Eyes wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer as if to shield her from the weight of the world. "Let me carry you to our room," he offered, his tone imbued with soothing firmness. "You've done enough. Allow me the honor of drawing you a warm bath to help your body unwind."

Ling Li closed her eyes, savoring the enveloping warmth of his embrace, feeling the world around her fade into the background. "Mm," she murmured softly, her voice barely above the whisper of the night. "I'd like that."

Without hesitating, Four Eyes lifted her effortlessly into his arms, cradling her as though she were a fragile crystal effigy, a perfect blend of porcelain and moonlight. Ling Li's arms instinctively wound around his neck, her breath a warm caress against his collarbone.

As he began to carry her down the hushed hallway, the castle resonated with an aura of tranquility. For tonight, the outside world could hold its breath, its demands and chaos set aside, allowing them a moment of blissful respite.

A Serene Evening: Ling Li and Four Eyes

The hallway lay in tranquil stillness, bathed in the ethereal glow of moonlight streaming through intricately carved lattice windows. Four Eyes cradled Ling Li in his arms with an ease that belied the weight of the moment, her delicate form resting against him, her silvery hair spilling over his shoulder like silky threads of starlight.

Though she felt weightless in his embrace, he understood the hidden depths of her fatigue. Ten days of unyielding refinement had forged a bond between them — ten days spent in the crucible of soul flames, elemental convergence, and profound spiritual trials. Beneath all this, a quiet miracle unfurled within her — a triad of nascent beanies in her womb, their qi still fragile but unmistakably hers.

Pushing the door to their sanctuary open with his foot, Four Eyes stepped into a warm, fragrant embrace of the room. The bath awaited them — a refuge of opalescent steam wafting through the air, infused with the soothing aromas of lotus blossoms and rich sandalwood.

He gently set her down on the edge of their bed, his hands lingering at her waist, a featherlight touch that spoke of tenderness. "You're glowing," he murmured, his voice a gentle caress as he brushed his thumb along the curve of her cheekbone. "But I sense the toll it's taken. You shouldn't have borne it alone."

Ling Li leaned into his touch, her eyes softly lidded, her voice a melodic whisper. "I didn't feel alone. You were always with me... even when you weren't within the chamber's confines."

Four Eyes knelt at her feet, his forehead resting lovingly against her abdomen, a quiet testament to his concern. "And they were with you as well," he murmured, his hand resting protectively over her womb. "I worried each day — not only for your sake but for theirs too."

Ling Li's fingers wove through his hair, the gesture slow and deliberate, weaving reassurance. "They're resilient. Just like their father."

He lifted his gaze to meet hers, deep and tender. "And their mother is nothing short of a goddess."

A weary smile graced her lips, fatigue mingling with radiance. "Do not indulge me in flattery. I'm still smeared in ash and remnants of qi."

"Then allow me to wash away the remnants," he replied, his voice a low, intimate promise. "Let me care for you tonight."

Ling Li nodded slowly, her breath hitching with the weight of his words. "I would like that."

Chapter 349 349: THE PATH TO THE HIDDEN VALLEY

With a reverence akin to a sacred ritual, he helped her out of her outer robe, his movements unhurried yet tender. Her skin shimmered softly with the lingering qi, the marks of an immortal who had waltzed with the flames and emerged unscathed.

He led her to the bath, where the water undulated in a soft embrace as she stepped in, fragrant steam swirling around her like a diaphanous veil. She sank into the comforting warmth with a sigh of relief, her body finally allowed to relax.

Four Eyes settled beside the tub, his hand resting gently over hers, their fingers weaving an unspoken connection above the glistening water.

Time slipped away in silence. The soothing sound of water, the rhythmic cadence of breath, and the palpable pulse of shared intimacy created a cocoon around them.

Then, Ling Li broke the stillness with a whisper, "You know I'd endure it all again. For you. For Shi Min. For all of our kin."

Four Eyes leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to her temple, warmth radiating from the gesture. "I know. But tonight, let me be the one who gives."

With her eyes closed, she surrendered to the moment, allowing herself to be held — not as an immortal, not as a matriarch, but simply as Ling Li.

In that hushed, sacred sanctuary, the outside world melted away, leaving only the two of them intertwined in the depths of their love.

Between Lanterns and Breath: Ling Li and Four Eyes

The gentle heat of the bath had loosened the knots in Ling Li's muscles, but it was the soothing aura of Four Eyes that truly unraveled the tension woven deep within her. He tenderly dried her, enveloping her in a robe crafted from the softest cloud silk, transporting her to their bed as if she were made of ethereal starlight and fleeting memories.

The room was dimly lit, infused with a warm glow from a single lantern that painted golden shadows dancing upon the walls. Outside, the wind caressed the trees, whispering secrets of the night, while inside, time seemed to stretch, slowing to a languid pace.

Ling Li lay on her side, her silver hair cascading across the pillow like a celestial veil shimmering in moonlight. Four Eyes settled beside her, one arm cradling her head tenderly, the other resting lightly upon her waist, as his thumb traced delicate circles over her robe, anchoring her firmly in the present moment.

"You're quiet," he murmured, his voice a soothing balm, rich with warmth.

Ling Li turned to meet his gaze, her eyes filled with softness. "I'm just... here. With you. It feels good."

Leaning in, he brushed his lips lightly against her forehead, a tender kiss that spoke volumes. "I missed you: every single day, every fleeting hour. I wondered if you were pushing too hard. If you were in pain."

"I was focused," she replied softly. "But thoughts of you, of them, and what lies ahead never left my mind."

His hand moved with reverence to rest on her belly, a sacred gesture that spoke of the life they were nurturing together. "They're growing. I can sense it. Their qi is faint but tangible, like nascent stars waiting to ignite in the vast expanse of the universe."

A smile blossomed on Ling Li's lips, her fingers curling around his wrist in an intimate embrace. "They'll be strong. And they'll be loved fiercely."

Four Eyes inched closer until their foreheads touched, an electric connection sparking between them. "You have sacrificed so much — the Nirvana Elixir, the pills, the protection. You carried every single one of us within you."

"I'm their mother, and I'm your wife," she whispered, her voice bathed in warmth. "It is my duty, my honor."

He exhaled slowly, the warmth of his breath mingling with her skin. "And I am your husband. So tonight, let me bear you, let me be your strength."

With a sigh, she closed her eyes, surrendering herself to the warmth of his presence.

His fingers traveled softly to the delicate curve of her collarbone, tracing the faint shimmer of qi residue left behind by the soul flame. "You're radiant," he murmured, his tone softer now, filled with awe. "Not just from the elixir, but from the essence of who you are."

Ling Li opened her eyes, finding his gaze once more. "You always see me."

"I always will."

They lay enveloped in a comforting silence, the weight of the world slipping away into obscurity. No titles bound them; no responsibilities pressed upon their shoulders. Just two intertwined souls, breathing in harmony.

As the lantern flickered low, casting a gentle dance of light before darkness claimed the room, Ling Li whispered, "Stay close."

Four Eyes drew her into his embrace, her head nestled against the steady rhythm of his chest.

"Always," he promised. "Sleep deeply tonight, for tomorrow night, I plan to keep you delightfully awake." He teased, a playful glimmer in his eye.

Ling Li playfully swatted his chest, a blush creeping across her cheeks as she buried her face in his warmth. "You!" she exclaimed, laughter bubbling up within her.

And the night cradled them, a tapestry of dreams woven between heartbeats and whispered secrets.

Morning Orders: The Path to Hidden Valley

The first blush of dawn spilled like molten gold across the marble floors of Peonies Castle, casting long, shimmering streaks through the intricately carved lattice windows. A crisp morning air filled the halls, imbued with the sweet scent of dew-kissed grass and the delicate fragrance of blooming lotus blossoms from the lavish garden below. A gentle breeze stirred the silk curtains, whispering secrets of transformation as it danced through the corridors.

Ling Li stirred from the depths of slumber, her silvery hair cascading over her pillow like a cascade of moonlight. She instinctively reached out, her fingers brushing against the cool, empty space beside her. A soft smile graced her lips, a bittersweet acknowledgment of solitude.

Four Eyes was already gone.

Knowing him as well as she did, she could easily imagine his early rise; he had likely slipped away to join the strenuous training, already locked in combat with El Capitan or mentoring the younger disciples. His absence was not a sign of neglect but rather a testament to his unwavering dedication.

With a determined sigh, Ling Li rose, her essence flowing seamlessly as she concealed her divine aura, transforming back into a mortal guise. Every motion was fluid, a graceful dance of strength and resolve, despite the weight of ten days spent in solitary contemplation. She donned her flowing robes, the fabric swirling around her like ethereal mist, before descending the grand staircase that spiraled down into the heart of the castle.

Chapter 350 350: ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

At the foot of the stairs awaited Mushu and Pharsa, standing resolutely like twin sentinels guarding the entrance.

"Madame," Mushu intoned, bowing deeply, his voice honed with respect. "I will prepare your breakfast at once."

Ling Li paused, her gaze sharp yet warm, imbued with an underlying intensity. "Let Pharsa go. There is something I need to discuss with you."

Pharsa blinked, a flicker of surprise crossing her features, then nodded in understanding. "I shall take my leave," she said, turning elegantly toward the kitchen, her trench coat billowing behind her like the tail of a comet streaking through the cosmos.

Mushu straightened, instinctively tightening his posture as he perceived the shift in atmosphere.

Ling Li stepped closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, yet steady and resolute. "I will be sending Shi Min to the Hidden Valley for cultivation."

Mushu's brows arched slightly, a glimmer of surprise in his eyes, but he maintained his silence.

"I intend for you to accompany him," she continued, her voice unwavering. "You have lingered at the threshold of the Nascent Soul for far too long. The breakthrough pills infused with Azure Bone that I entrusted you with are potent. With the dense qi of the valley and your unwavering discipline, I trust you will succeed this time."

Mushu felt his breath catch in his throat, a potent mix of hope and apprehension swirling inside him.

He had dedicated decades to his training, faced wars that tested the very limits of his endurance, and guarded Ling Li through storms and whispers of death. Yet, the elusive step into the Nascent Soul realm had remained just beyond his grasp, like a shimmering mirage teasing him from afar.

Nevertheless, his first instinct was not one of ambition but of concern.

"Madam," he replied, his voice steady yet tinged with deep emotion, "I understand your intentions. But your safety remains my paramount concern."

Ling Li's expression softened, her eyes glimmering with understanding, though her tone held firm. "Do not fret for my well-being. I will commence the training sessions starting tomorrow, surrounded by Butler Oda and the Seven Shah. I will be secure."

Mushu hesitated, his jaw clenched tight as if wrestling with the conflict within himself.

Finally, he bowed deeply, his voice thick with emotion. "Then I shall accompany Shi Min. Thank you, Madam."

A wave of excitement surged through him, barely contained; his eyes sparkled, his shoulders lifted high, and his breath quickened, transforming his stoic demeanor into that of a youthful disciple teetering on the brink of discovery.

Ling Li chuckled softly, the sound as melodic as wind chimes swaying in a gentle spring breeze.

She turned, gliding toward the dining hall, her robes trailing behind her, capturing the first light of day, the soft shimmer of residual qi from her alchemical work catching and refracting like a thousand tiny stars.

As Mushu watched her retreating form, he felt a surge of not just gratitude but purpose unfurling within him.

The Hidden Valley beckoned in vibrant promise.

And this time, he would not return unchanged.

Breakfast Revelations: Fate in the Morning Light

Ling Li sat regally at the head of the breakfast table, where the soft steam spiraled from her perfectly shaped lotus bun, rising like a delicate ribbon in the tranquil morning air. Sunlight streamed through intricately carved windows, casting lace-like golden patterns across the polished wooden floor, transforming the room into a tapestry of light and shadow. The air was imbued with the intoxicating aromas of jasmine tea and warm roasted chestnuts, enveloping the moment in a serene embrace of quiet domesticity.

Pharsa stood nearby, her posture impeccably poised and alert, embodying her usual grace. But when Ling Li turned to her and spoke with a calm certainty, the atmosphere shifted.

"You're pregnant."

Pharsa blinked, confusion flitting across her features. "Oh."

A palpable silence enveloped them as her eyes widened in shock. "Wait — what did you say??? Are you talking to me?"

Ling Li chuckled softly, taking a delicate bite of her bun, her demeanor so casual as if she were revealing something trivial rather than life-altering. "Is there anyone else in the room who can be pregnant except you? It can't be Butler James."

At this, Butler James, who had been meticulously arranging the delicate tea set beside Pharsa, looked up, his eyes bulging in surprise. "You!"

Pharsa, unsettled, turned back to Ling Li, disbelief etched across her face. "So you really mean I'm pregnant?"

Ling Li nodded with a nonchalant hum, savoring her food as if the news were just another flavor on her palate. "Uhm."

Pharsa's eyes widened even further — then, as if the weight of the revelation crashed upon her, she fainted.

Butler James, ever the vigilant steward, managed to catch her just before she hit the floor, cradling her with a startled grunt. "Madam, she's out cold!"

Ling Li rose with a composed expression, amusement dancing in her eyes as she approached Pharsa. Extending two fingers, she gently tapped Pharsa's forehead, infusing her with a pulse of serene spiritual energy. A soft glow enveloped Pharsa's body, stabilizing her qi and nurturing the fragile fetuses within.

Yup. Fetuses.

Pharsa stirred, blinking rapidly as she slowly regained consciousness, her posture stiff like a marionette just released from its strings, and her mind whirling with the enormity of the revelation.

Ling Li resumed her seat, sipping tea with a tranquil expression, the warmth radiating through her as she regarded Pharsa with a knowing gaze. "Why are you surprised? It's not like you don't have a husband."

Pharsa continued to stare, as if she were still lost in a dream. "I just... I don't feel it's the right time. There's so much happening. So much still to be conducted."

Ling Li's gaze softened, but her voice retained its resolute tone. "Being pregnant is every woman's fate, and this is your destiny. The divination from before was clear — you're expecting triplets."

Pharsa's mouth opened, then closed, struggling to process the staggering impact of this news.

"Triplets?" she whispered in disbelief.

Ling Li raised an eyebrow, a hint of mischief lingering in her voice. "Don't you dare faint again."

"I... I..." Pharsa stammered, the words barely escaping her lips.