

PROTEGE 361

Chapter 361 361: BROTHER IS LIKE A PIANO?

Ling Li's own brow glistened with perspiration, a testament to the physical and spiritual intensity of the moment.

Though immortal, this process demanded extraordinary control. Ling Li needed to synchronize her spiritual frequency with Shi Min's evolving qi signature, adjusting dynamically as his body responded to the intricate treatment. It was akin to threading a needle in the middle of a tempest.

An hour slipped away, marked by the rhythm of their breaths and the silent pulse of energy in the room, before the final needle found its place.

Ling Li exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, her shoulders tense, her palms damp with exertion.

"The needles must remain for thirty minutes," she instructed, her voice a blend of authority and care. "Then I'll add the final set to seal the flow and guide the absorption."

Shi Min's voice emerged low and strained, a resonance of both pain and awakening. "It feels like... my body is being reconstructed."

Ling Li nodded, an understanding in her eyes. "That's precisely what's happening. Your meridians are being reshaped to withstand the energy of the Azure Dragon Bone. This needle is the only way to survive its formidable power. You must endure the pain."

The twins exchanged glances, their expressions brimming with newfound admiration.

He wasn't merely their big brother anymore.

He was transforming into something extraordinary, something more than they had ever imagined.

Golden Resonance: The Second Phase of Acupuncture

The room was an oasis of stillness, the air thick with an otherworldly energy that hummed softly like a distant melody. Golden needles, gleaming like stars in the night, were meticulously embedded in Shi Min's back, each one thrumming with spiritual vibrations.

Ling Li stood beside him, poised and serene, her breath a steady rhythm that contrasted with the electric tension swirling around them. Tiny beads of sweat shimmered on her brow, not from physical exertion but from the sheer, intense focus required to synchronize her spirit with Shi Min's.

Despite her status as an immortal cultivator, this intricate technique demanded flawless precision. Every needle served as more than a mere tool — it was a conduit, an ethereal bridge linking her qi to Shi Min's very essence. She had to match his spiritual frequency with every precise insertion, adjusting her energy flow in real time as his body reacted to the treatment. A mere fraction of a miscalculation could spell disaster—rupturing a meridian or destabilizing his dantian would mean catastrophic backlashes.

Kim Kim, and Chin Chin stood silently, their wide eyes reflecting a mix of wonder and concern, absorbing every subtle movement like sponges absorbing water.

Ling Li cast a brief glance at them, her voice steady yet laced with urgency. "Now begins the second phase. The first set of needles opened the primary meridian gates and stabilized his internal flow. But we must now guide that flow — channel it, refine it, and seal it to absorb the energy of the Azure Dragon Bone."

With a fluid motion, she summoned a second case from her ring — a smaller box yet crafted with extraordinary artistry. Inside lay seven platinum-threaded needles, each topped with glimmering droplets of condensed moonlight essence, casting an enchanting glow that danced in the dim light of the room.

"These are directional needles," she explained, her tone imbued with authority. "They don't merely stimulate; they guide. Each must be positioned in perfect alignment with Shi Min's elemental affinity and spiritual pulse."

Holding up the first needle, her fingers delicate yet strong, she declared, "This one will be placed at the Lingxu point, near the spine. It will draw the vibrant energy from the Azure Bone directly toward his dantian."

Shi Min flinched as the needle pierced his skin, sending a ripple of qi surging through his body, visible as a faint, shimmering aura that radiated from him.

Ling Li continued her work with unyielding focus. The second needle found its place at the Fenglong point, stabilizing Shi Min's stomach meridian, warding off the threat of nausea and internal rejection. The third needle struck the Jiquan point, near his shoulder, a careful placement designed to regulate his heart's rhythm and temper any emotional turbulence.

Next, the fourth needle settled at Shenshu, reinforcing the kidney meridian, a vital gateway for storing and filtering the surging spiritual energy. The fifth needle followed suit at Guanyuan, deeply anchored in the lower abdomen, fortifying the dantian in preparation for the upcoming absorption.

The sixth needle slipped into Yinliao, refining the flow between the liver and spleen meridians, ensuring a harmonious balance. Finally, the seventh needle, placed at Dazhui at the nape of his neck, sealed the upper flow, acting as a ward against qi leakage.

Ling Li's hands moved with the grace of a master calligrapher, each deft insertion followed by a soft, radiant glow as her spiritual energy coursed into the needle, imbuing it with purpose.

Shi Min trembled under the weight of the gathering energy, his breath becoming slow, measured waves. Muscle twitched involuntarily, his body overwhelmed as the force coursed through him — vast and relentless, like a torrential river forcing its way through a narrow straw. A strained whisper escaped his lips, "Mom..."

Ling Li placed a reassuring hand on his back, her qi wrapping around him like a soothing embrace. "You're doing wonderfully. Just a little longer," she replied, her voice a soft anchor in the chaos.

Turning her attention to the twins, she elaborated, "This is the most dangerous phase. His body is absorbing raw, ancient energy. If his meridians aren't flawlessly aligned, it could result in catastrophic rupture."

Kim Kim nodded solemnly, his youthful features serious. "It's like tuning an instrument. If one string is off, the entire symphony collapses."

"Exactly," Ling Li said, a flicker of admiration igniting in her eyes.

Chin Chin, her head tilted in thoughtful curiosity, chimed in, "So Big Brother is like a piano?"

"..."

Shi Min let out a groan of exasperation. "Please, don't compare me to a piano..."

Ling Li chuckled lightly, a warm sound that filled the room, but quickly refocused her concentration.

Chapter 362 362: LIKE A DRAGON INCARNATE

"The needles must remain in place for thirty minutes. After that, I'll apply the final seal — a tri-point formation that will lock the energy into his dantian and prevent any overflow." Ling Li said.

Seating herself beside him, Ling Li's hands began to glow a soft, ethereal light as she monitored the flow of energy within him.

Silence enveloped the room, thick with anticipation. Shi Min's aura pulsed around him, growing brighter, stronger, and more refined with each passing moment.

The twins watched in awe, their hearts swelling with a mix of pride and disbelief. Their brother was changing, transforming into something greater. And through it all, their mother was there, guiding him gently, steadily — one heartbeat at a time.

The Final Seal: Awakening the Core

The room thrummed with a quiet, sacred energy, as if it were alive and breathing, mirroring the profound transformation unfolding within its walls. Shi Min lay face down on a bed of plush silks, his body adorned with a delicate lattice of golden and platinum-threaded needles. Each needle vibrated softly, resonating with a spiritual hum that seemed to echo through the air. A shimmering aura enveloped him, as if reality itself was bending and warping to honor the transition occurring within his core.

Ling Li stood at his side, her expression a study in composure and intensity. With ethereal grace, her hands hovered just above his back, fingers glowing with a luminescent silvery light that illuminated the shadows around them. The second phase of the ritual had intricately stabilized his meridians, channeling the raw, ancient energy of the Azure Dragon Bone into the depths of his being.

Now, they were poised on the precipice of the most critical step.

"The final sealing formation," Ling Li murmured, her voice low and reverent, resonating with the weight of hidden knowledge, "is not merely a medical procedure — it's a sacred contract. It binds the energy to the cultivator's soul flame, ensuring it melds with him, transforming it from a foreign force into a familiar essence."

Nearby, Kim Kim and Chin Chin stood as silent sentinels, their wide, innocent eyes shimmering with disbelief and curiosity, tiny hands clasped together as if in prayer.

Ling Li summoned a final trio of needles — these were unlike any before them. Crafted from Starlight Iron, a celestial alloy harvested only during the rare celestial dance of a lunar convergence, they gleamed with an otherworldly brilliance. Each needle was engraved with micro-runes so finely etched that they sparkled like stars in a night sky, twinkling with a magic all their own.

"These needles," she intoned, her voice steady and full of purpose, "are known as the Three Harmonies. They symbolize the union of Heaven, Earth, and Self."

With reverence, Ling Li held the first needle aloft. "This is the Heaven Needle. It shall be placed at the Yintang point, nestled between the brows. It aligns the cultivator's spiritual consciousness with the celestial realm, allowing him to draw profound guidance from the heavens above."

As she gently inserted it, a hushed breath escaped her lips. Shi Min's body responded instinctively, initially tensing before relaxing, his aura flaring momentarily with a brilliant golden hue that illuminated the chamber.

"The second is the Earth Needle," Ling Li continued, her tone imbued with a melancholic strength as she prepared for the subsequent insertion. "It will be placed at the Qihai point, just below the navel. Its purpose is to anchor the energy to the physical form, ensuring the cultivator remains grounded amidst the spiritual tide."

With careful deliberation, she eased the needle into position, her fingers trembling slightly from the focused precision required. As the needle found its mark, a soft, resonant hum filled the air, weaving itself into the very fabric of the room as Shi Min's qi surged forth and stabilized like a river discovering its destined course.

"And finally," Ling Li pronounced, lifting the third needle with a grace that belied her exhaustion, "we have the Self Needle. This one is to be placed at the Shenque point, the navel itself. It binds the energy to the essence of his soul flame — his identity, his will, his truest self."

Pausing for a heartbeat, Ling Li's gaze lingered on Shi Min's face, an array of emotions flickering within her eyes before she inserted it.

The instant the needle pierced through, a shockwave of qi exploded outward — silent yet thunderous, imperceptible yet tangible. Lanterns flickered violently, shadows danced along the walls, and the atmosphere thickened with a palpable energy that vibrated through the space.

Shi Min gasped, his body arching slightly before descending back into stillness.

His aura, once wild and erratic like a tempest, now pulsed with perfect harmony — steady, radiant, and undeniably powerful.

Ling Li exhaled a tremulous breath, her knees nearly buckling from the weight of the spiritual toll it exacted. Beads of sweat traced delicate paths down her forehead, her breath shallow as she realized she had invested not merely her energy but her very essence into the formation itself.

The twins rushed to her side, concern etched across their youthful faces.

"Mom!" Kim Kim cried, steadying her arm with worry shining in her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Chin Chin asked, her voice barely above a whisper, trembling with unease.

Ling Li managed a faint smile, tired but resolute. "I'm alright. Just... a bit tired. This technique hasn't been utilized in over a century. It requires more than energy — it demands a legacy."

She turned her attention back to Shi Min, who now lay calm, his breathing deep and rhythmic, a peaceful countenance gracing his features.

"He's stable," she reassured them. "The energy is sealed. Now, his body will embark on a slow yet profound process of integration. Over the next few days, he shall enter a deep meditation. When he emerges... he will be transformed."

Kim Kim gazed at her brother with a mixture of awe and wonder. "He looks... like a hero from the ancient tales."

Chin Chin nodded vigorously. "Like a dragon incarnate."

Ling Li chuckled softly, the sound soothing yet tinged with emotion. "He's still your brother. But indeed... he is on the path to becoming something far greater."

Chapter 363 363: SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR MOM

Nestling beside Shi Min's bedside, Ling Li rested her hand gently on his shoulder, feeling the warmth radiating from him.

"You've done well," she whispered, her voice a tender caress. "Now, rest. The journey ahead is long — but you are ready."

The needles would remain for another hour, their purpose guiding and refining the flow of energy within him. Ling Li would vigilantly monitor Shi Min, but for now, the most perilous phase was behind them.

And in the profound silence that enveloped the room, a sacred atmosphere lingered — a sanctuary where legacy, love, and unbridled power converged.

Threads of Legacy: Ling Li's Reflection and Shi Min's Awakening

The room was enveloped in a serene stillness, illuminated by a soft, ethereal glow of spiritual light that danced gently along the walls. Golden and platinum needles shimmered delicately against Shi Min's back, each one pulsing rhythmically with the cadence of his breath like stars echoing in the night sky. Ling Li sat beside him, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder, her gaze distant and contemplative, as if she were peering beyond the veil of the present into the tapestry of destiny.

In this moment, Ling Li was not merely an observer of her son. She was a guardian of the future.

Ling Li's thoughts flowed like a tranquil river beneath the silvery moonlight, carrying her deeper into the possibilities of the future.

Ren, her eldest daughter, was on the threshold of a new chapter, soon to stand beside Shun as the First Lady of the nation. Ling Li had witnessed her growth, watching as Ren transformed from a quiet, contemplative child into a figure of poised brilliance and strategic insight. With a heart ablaze with

determination, Ren possessed not only her mother's grace and diplomacy but also an unyielding spirit. She would not simply support Shun; she would shape the very fabric of the nation alongside him.

As Ling Li's gaze shifted to Shi Min, now lying before her, a wave of pride washed over her. He was embarking on the sacred path toward immortality, a journey she had instilled in him since he was but three years old. Ling Li had guided him with patience, her heart swelling as she witnessed his silent endurance and steady growth. He had never succumbed to tears or faltered in fear. Now, as he transformed — his body absorbing the potent essence of the Azure Dragon Bone, his soul poised to ascend — Shi Min was becoming her shield, her legacy, and her pride.

Lily, her second daughter, was the quiet tempest among her children. Gifted with brilliance, intuitiveness, and an uncanny emotional attunement, she had inherited her mother's keen intellect and her father's unpredictable spark. One day, she would quietly steer the Li family's internal operations, the unseen machinery that kept their world pulsating with life. Ling Li couldn't help but shake her head with a smile tugging on her lips.

Nearby, the youngest twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, stood wide-eyed, their expressions brimming with awe. Though just two years old, they already radiated signs of exceptional intelligence. Kim Kim, with her analytical wit, and Chin Chin, with her empathetic insight — each had a remarkable photographic memory. Together, they promised to become formidable forces in their own right.

And then there were the triplets nestled in her womb, the promise of new beginnings. Ling Li placed a gentle hand on her belly, feeling the faint stirring of life, three tiny hearts beating in unison with her own.

Three more.

Three new threads intricately woven into the rich tapestry of her legacy.

Ling Li exhaled slowly, the weight of countless futures pressing upon her. So many paths lay before them, weaving through the fabric of existence, and she must prepare each one.

Her gaze returned to Shi Min, observing the tranquil scene unfold before her. The needles had lingered for nearly an hour, their energy intertwining with his essence, his aura now stabilized and flowing like a tranquil river. The final seal had held strong, and the vibrant energy of the Azure Dragon Bone had fully integrated within him.

With a graceful movement, Ling Li stood, her body flowing with the elegance of water despite the fatigue tugging at her limbs. She raised her hands, summoning a soft, radiant wave of spiritual energy that glimmered in the air. One by one, the needles lifted gracefully from Shi Min's body, dissolving into shimmering light as they returned to her enchanted ring.

Shi Min stirred, awakening from his transformation.

His eyes opened slowly, glowing with a soft, golden luminescence that seemed to emanate from within. He sat up, his breath steady and his posture regal, embodying an ancient strength.

Looking at his mother and then at his sisters, he spoke softly, a sense of awe punctuating his voice. "I feel... whole."

Ling Li's heart swelled, tears of joy glimmering in her eyes. "You are. You've crossed the threshold."

Kim Kim clapped her small hands in delight. "Big Brother is glowing!"

Chin Chin bounded toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "You're like a superhero now!"

Shi Min laughed, the sound rich and warm, pulling both girls into a loving embrace, their laughter sounding like the harmonious notes of a beautiful melody.

Ling Li watched them, her heart brimming with love and fulfillment.

From the ashes of their past, she had built this family.

And now, they were rising.

One by one.

Shi Min reached for his robe from the bedside, the fabric still warm from the herbal steam lingering in the room. As he stood, he glanced at his mother — her shoulders slightly slumped, her steps slower than usual.

"Mom, please rest," he said gently, his voice laced with concern. "I'll prepare a tonic soup for you to replenish your energy."

Ling Li paused at the doorway, her gaze soft but weary. "Thank you," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "Please take care of your sisters for me."

Shi Min nodded, watching her stride out with quiet grace. Even in exhaustion, she carried herself like a queen. He knew she would recover quickly — her cultivation allowed it — but still, he felt compelled to do something more. Something personal.

Chapter 364 364: THE SOUP IS MADE WITH CARE

Shi Min turned to the twins, who were already tugging at his sleeves. "Come on," he said with a smile. "Let's make something special for Mom."

They walked together through the quiet corridors of Peonies Castle, the twins skipping beside him like little shadows. When they entered the kitchen, the scent of dried herbs and polished wood greeted them.

Butler James, ever vigilant, appeared instantly from the pantry. "Young Master," he said, bowing slightly. "Do you need anything? Shall I call the chef?"

Shi Min shook his head. "No need. I want to cook a tonic soup for Mom personally. She's exhausted, and I want her to rest without worry."

Butler James's eyes softened. "I understand. Then please, let me know if you require any ingredients or assistance. I'll remain nearby."

He stepped aside respectfully, allowing Shi Min full access to the kitchen.

A Son's Offering: The Tonic of Gratitude

Shi Min rolled up his sleeves, his movements calm and deliberate. The twins climbed onto stools, watching with wide eyes as he began selecting ingredients from the apothecary cabinet—each herb chosen with care, each action infused with quiet devotion.

Most importantly, each herb was chosen not just for its medicinal properties, but for its harmonic resonance with Ling Li's cultivation stage, as if each herb sang its own unique note in a symphony of healing.

He fetched the rare herbs from his spatial ring, while the others were available from the kitchen's pantry.

This soup wasn't just a tonic.

It was a son's offering.

And a moment the twins would remember forever.

With his sleeves rolled up, his expression was a blend of calm determination and quiet resolve. The kitchen enveloped him in a serene stillness, broken only by the soft patter of the twins' small feet as they trailed behind, their wide eyes sparkling with curiosity that mirrored the vibrant world around them.

Shi Min arranged the ingredients meticulously upon the counter, the colors and textures forming a beautiful tapestry:

Snow Lotus petals, delicate and pale gold, whispered promises of restored spiritual vitality and alleviated qi fatigue.

Black Spirit Ginseng, finely shaved and glistening, exuded a warmth that replenished core energy and stabilized the flickering soul flame within.

Red Date slices, rich and ruby-hued, added notes of nourishment and comforting warmth to the mix.

Goji berries, vibrant and jewel-like, shimmered with vitality, enhancing eyesight and calming restless nerves.

Astragalus root, sturdy and earthy, beckoned with strength, promising to bolster the immune system and harmonize the flowing meridians.

A pinch of Phoenix Tail Mushroom powder, rare and fragrant, poured like powdered sunlight, known to restore aura balance in the hearts of high-level cultivators.

As he filled a clay pot with crystal-clear spring water drawn from the castle's underground reservoir, it seemed almost alive, enriched with trace minerals and imbued with a captivating spiritual energy. The

fire beneath the pot crackled eagerly, its flames dancing in anticipation as Shi Min added the ingredients one by one, each carefully timed addition a testament to his reverence for the process.

The twins stood transfixed, their gazes wide with awe.

"Big Brother, you cook like a master!" Kim Kim whispered, his admiration bubbling with each passing moment.

"Is this soup magic?" Chin Chin asked, her eyes sparkling like stars, full of wonder.

Shi Min allowed a gentle smile to grace his lips. "It's not magic. It's care. Every herb has a purpose. Every step is a promise," he replied, his voice a soothing balm.

He stirred slowly, allowing the ingredients to simmer and meld, releasing an enticing aroma that wrapped around them like a warm embrace — earthy, sweet, and infused with floral notes. It was the unmistakable scent of healing, legacy, and unconditional love.

After thirty minutes of anticipation, the tonic was finally ready.

Shi Min ladled it into a porcelain bowl, elegantly etched with the Li family crest, its rim adorned with protective runes that seemed to hum with energy. The bowl was placed upon a lacquered tray, accompanied by a silk napkin that caught the light with its soft sheen. Turning to the twins, he said softly, "Let's go."

Together, they moved through the hushed halls, Shi Min's hands steady as he balanced the tray, while the twins tiptoed beside him like little guardians of a sacred treasure.

In Ling Li's room, the air remained tranquil, the curtains drawn to create a peaceful sanctuary. She lay on her side, enveloped in soft, flowing robes, her hair cascading gently around her like a silken waterfall. Her face, serene yet pale, spoke volumes about her fatigue.

Shi Min entered quietly, the atmosphere heavy with a comforting hush.

"Mom," he said, kneeling beside her bed, his heart swelling with love. "I made you a tonic. Please drink it while it's warm."

Ling Li's eyes fluttered open slowly, a faint smile gracing her lips, a flicker of light igniting in her gaze. "You didn't have to..."

"I know," Shi Min replied, the sincerity in his voice resonating deeply. "But I wanted to."

With tender care, he lifted the bowl and assisted her to sit up gently. The twins climbed eagerly onto the edge of the bed, their reverence palpable in the stillness.

Ling Li took the bowl, inhaling the fragrant steam that wafted upwards, and her eyes softened with appreciation. "You used Phoenix Tail Mushroom?" she inquired, genuinely surprised.

Shi Min nodded. "Just a pinch. I know it's rare."

As Ling Li sipped slowly, the warmth of the tonic spread through her chest, soothing the exhaustion that had settled like a heavy fog after her acupuncture ritual. "This is perfect," she said, her voice a soft whisper against the stillness. "Thank you."

Shi Min smiled, his heart brimmed with joy.

Kim Kim leaned in, his small voice filled with wonder. "Mom, Big Brother said every herb is a promise."

Chin Chin chimed in cheerfully, "And the soup is made of care!"

Ling Li laughed softly, her fatigue melting away, replaced by warmth and gratitude. "Then I'm truly surrounded by promises and care," she said, pulling the twins into her arms, the bond between them radiant.

Having finished the tonic, she handed the empty bowl back to Shi Min, who adjusted the tray with a gentle smile. "Rest now, Mom. I'll take care of everything," he assured her.

Ling Li nodded, her eyes misting with emotion. "I know you will."

Chapter 365 365: TABLES OF TALES

As Shi Min left the room, the empty tray cradled in his hands, the scent of herbs lingered in the air, weaving a tapestry of love and devotion. The twins nestled beside their mother, cocooned in warmth and serenity.

It was a quiet moment — a simple instance in the grand design of life.

And yet, it was everything.

Ling Li drifted into a peaceful slumber, only awakening moments before dinner, just as the sound of laughter and chatter from her fellow trainees enveloped the air, heralding their return.

Four Eyes emerged from the steamy confines of the shower, droplets still glistening on his skin, when he noticed Ling Li stirring from her cozy cocoon of blankets.

"You're awake? Were you that exhausted? Butler James mentioned you skipped lunch, it's good that Shi Min made you some soup," he inquired, concern etching his features as he settled beside her, towel in hand, gently drying his freshly washed hair.

"I'm totally okay! With a bit of rest, I can recharge my energy swiftly. I'm back to full strength now," Ling Li asserted, her voice imbued with confidence.

"Glad to hear it, because I need you at your best tonight," Four Eyes murmured, leaning in to place a soft kiss on her neck. A shiver of warmth cascaded down Ling Li's spine, catching her off guard.

"You! You! You! Hmph! Let's go eat, I'm absolutely starving!" she declared playfully, shoving Four Eyes aside as she scrambled to her feet and dashed out of the room, her energy suddenly renewed.

With an amused shake of his head, Four Eyes chuckled as he watched Ling Li dart out like a startled rabbit.

As the couple entered the bustling dining hall, a vibrant scene unfolded before them. The long table was animated, filled with their family, friends, and disciples, as culinary delights were being served alongside merriment and hearty laughter.

The Table of Tales: Training with the Seven Shah

The brightly lit dining hall atmosphere thrummed with warmth and camaraderie. The air was rich with the aromas of spiritual cuisine, dishes infused with the essence of cultivation. Ling Li, seated at the head of the table, radiated a commanding presence, her maturity and poise like a beacon. Beside her, Four Eyes settled into his chair, freshly scrubbed and quietly observant, a content smile adorning his face.

Fatty, already half-consumed in his third bowl of nourishment, leaned back with a heartfelt sigh of satisfaction. "I swear, Shah Pyrrha, the Shah of Flame nearly roasted me alive today! We spent the afternoon running through flaming rings while chanting resistance mantras. Shah Pyrrha said, We warriors need forging in flame to be invincible! I thought I'd lose my eyebrows for good!" he exclaimed, animatedly gesturing.

Laughter erupted around the table. "You still have them," Lily teased, "although they look a tad... crispy."

Rubbing his forehead, Fatty replied, "I'm telling you, he's merciless! But I can feel the difference. My qi flow feels smoother, and my stamina has doubled."

Shun nodded emphatically, his eyes alight with the thrill of shared experiences. "Shah Liora, he said he is the Shah of light. Shah Liora also mentioned that he specializes in perception, clarity, and breaking through barriers. For the whole day, he had us breaking through illusions today. He conjured up a false battlefield and had us navigate it blindfolded. I walked smack into a tree," he shared, a grin of embarrassment spreading across his face.

"You did?" Chin Chin giggled, her eyes widening. "Did it hurt?"

"Only my pride," Shun quipped, winking.

Lily chimed in, her voice brimming with excitement. "Shah Aeris taught us aerial footwork today. He said speed and qi-lightened movement should be learned to fight like the wind, untouchable and ever shifting. I floated for three whole seconds before landing flat on my face!"

"You floated?" Chin Chin gasped, her admiration palpable. "That's incredible!"

"Not so incredible when you crash into a bush," Kim Kim muttered, nursing her elbow.

Across from Ling Li, Shi Min wore a serene smile, his aura still glowing faintly from the earlier acupuncture session. His eyes, however, carried a keen sharpness. He looked at Jack and asked, "Little Jack, what did you learn today?"

"Ehem, I was with Nicu and Ailun. Master Veyron, ah, he is the Shah of Dusk. After he finished giving instructions to Master Chu Yan, he confined Micu, Ailun, and me in a shadow dome for meditation. Complete isolation — no sound, no light. It was... intense," he ventured thoughtfully.

"What did you discover?" Lily asked, curiosity piquing.

Jack paused, gathering his thoughts. "I confronted my fears. My doubts. And then... clarity emerged. I found my path forward."

Ling Li's gaze softened; she recognized the evolution within him — not just in physique, but in spirit. He was transforming.

Four Eyes leaned in closer, eager to share his own experiences. "Shah Kael put me to the test this afternoon, sparring against three disciples without any aura or enhancements. Just pure swordsmanship. I haven't felt this drained in years."

"But you still beat them, didn't you?" Fatty inquired, an eyebrow raised.

Four Eyes shrugged, a smirk playing on his lips. "Eventually. They were surprisingly good. Kael's training is honing my instincts to a fine edge. He is worthy of his title, The Shah of Steel."

Chin Chin raised her hand excitedly. "Can I train too?"

Ling Li's smile brightened. "Soon. You and Kim Kim will start with needle techniques. Then we'll discover where your affinities lie."

"Yay!" Chin Chin clapped in delight. "I want to be just like Big Brother!"

Kim Kim nodded enthusiastically, her eyes sparkling. "Me too! I want to learn everything!"

Chatty, added with earnestness, "Shah Thalos had me balancing on shifting terrain while reciting cultivation formulas. It was far more challenging than it sounds."

Chatty groaned, rolling his eyes. " Then, I just got kicked by Fatty during sparring. Then Madam made me fight without Cannonball. I dropped my sword within a minute."

Another outburst of laughter filled the room.

"You're making progress," Ling Li affirmed with a nod. "But you depend too heavily on external resources. It's essential to learn how to stand on your own."

Chatty nodded earnestly. "I will strive to do better, Madam."

The conversation flowed like the delicious spirit-infused broth, weaving stories and laughter between mouthfuls of fluffy steamed lotus buns and roasted phoenix root. While the food nourished their bodies, it was the sharing of experiences that nourished their bonds.

Chapter 366 366: THE PEACOCK'S ANNOUNCEMENT

As Ling Li surveyed the table, looking into the faces of her children, disciples, and warriors, pride swelled within her. Each person was growing, each one forging their unique path, and she, as their matriarch, would continue to guide them all graciously and resolutely.

As the final dishes, glistening with remnants of delectable feasts, were whisked away, and the last sips of fragrant spring-infused tea faded into whispers, Chatty rose with a flourish. He cleared his throat with theatrical clarity, commanding attention as the clinking of cups and low murmurs hushed into a reverent silence.

A Toast to New Life

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he proclaimed, puffing out his chest like a proud peacock, feathers ruffled and vibrant. "Before you retreat to your chambers, I have an announcement of utmost significance!"

Seated beside him, Pharsa groaned softly, burying her face in her hands, a mix of embarrassment and amusement coloring her cheeks, like the petals of a cherry blossom.

Chatty's grin widened, his voice climbing in excitement, joyful like a spring breeze. "As of this morning, I, Tong Xue — affectionately known as Murphy and Chatty, the most charming man in Peonies Castle — have officially been promoted to the esteemed rank of Father!"

A ripple of gasps threaded through the room, followed by a chorus of jubilant cheers.

"Pharsa is pregnant!" he exclaimed, his arms soaring above his head as if he'd just won a grand tournament. "With triplets!"

Applause erupted like fireworks, filling the air with warmth and joy. Ren clapped heartily, Lily let out a delighted squeal, and the twins bounced up and down on their chairs, their laughter mingling like music.

"Congratulations!" Fatty called out, raising his cup high like a trophy. "To Murphy and Pharsa!"

"To Murphy and Pharsa!" the room echoed, a harmonious chorus of celebration.

Pharsa peeked out from behind her hands, her cheeks tinged with a rosy hue, yet a smile danced on her lips, radiating happiness.

Chatty took a grand bow, the embodiment of humility entwined with charm. "Thank you, thank you. I graciously accept your praise — a toast to us all!"

Fatty leaned back, a mischievous smile curving his lips. "Do you think you can handle the challenge of triplets? Can you truly measure up to Chu Yan, who managed a set of twins and then triplets in succession?"

Laughter erupted around the table, a symphony of joy.

Chatty's proud demeanor shattered momentarily. "Yeah — Chu Yan had both"

"Back-to-back," Fatty boasted, basking in the amusement of the crowd. "And he didn't even announce it like a rooster!"

Chatty slumped slightly in his seat, the weight of friendly competition settling upon him. "Well... I still have time to catch up."

Four Eyes, who had been quietly savoring his tea, suddenly leaned forward, puffing out his chest with a cocky smirk. "Actually, I've already done better."

All eyes turned to him, curiosity piqued in the gathering.

Ling Li raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "You did?"

Four Eyes nodded with a confident grin. "What? Twins, done. Triplets. Confirmed. Currently in progress."

The room erupted once more, a cacophony of excitement.

Fatty dropped his chopsticks. "Indeed!"

Kim Kim and Chin Chin squealed in delight. "More babies!"

Chatty cast a mock glare of betrayal toward Four Eyes. "You stole my thunder!"

Four Eyes shrugged, a playful light in his eyes. "I didn't say anything. You just crowed too soon."

Ling Li chuckled, shaking her head with affectionate exasperation. "Alright, enough of this boasting. Let's not transform the dining hall into a nursery ward just yet."

As the laughter began to fade and the last bites were savored, Ling Li stood, her presence commanding yet warm.

"Tonight has been a celebration of joy," she declared, her voice steady and profound. "Tomorrow, we continue along our chosen path. Rest well, nourish your bodies, and prepare your minds. The future arrives swiftly."

Everyone rose, bowing respectfully, a gesture of unity and gratitude.

With murmured goodbyes, the family and disciples began to disperse — some seeking solitude to meditate, others longing for rest. At the same time, whispers of babies and forthcoming battles danced in the corridors.

Ling Li lingered for a moment, observing as they faded into the shadows.

So many lives intertwined.

So many legacies to uphold.

And she would protect them all.

Steam and Study: Shun and Ren's Evening Ritual

The door to their chamber clicked softly shut behind them, enveloping Shun and Ren in a tranquil oasis that invited concentration and calm. They moved in graceful harmony, their footsteps whispering against the polished wooden floor as they approached the writing desk, where a meticulously arranged stack of bound scrolls and annotated volumes awaited their eager minds — an offering from their ever-dedicated Tutors, Ma and Chen.

Ren gently lifted the top scroll, her fingers tracing the elegant, flowing calligraphy. Nestled beneath it was a note that radiated nurturing wisdom:

"To the future leaders of our nation: two hours of daily study is essential. We will continue to send curated materials tailored to your roles. May wisdom guide your decisions." — Ma & Chen

Shun's lips curved into a warm smile as he reached for a leather-bound volume embossed with intricate patterns, titled Diplomatic Protocols of the Eastern Alliance. "They never miss a day," he remarked, his voice imbued with appreciation.

Ren chuckled softly, selecting a scroll that detailed the intricate dynamics of Crisis Management and Civil Response. "And they never send anything light," she replied with a raised eyebrow, the weight of their studies evident in the gravity of her tone.

The couple shared a fleeting moment of amusement before turning their attention to the bathroom, where the air was already thick with warmth, and the intoxicating aromas of sandalwood, lotus root, and crushed snow chrysanthemum danced invitingly. The herbal bath had been prepared earlier by the attentive attendants, its surface shimmering with steam, promising tranquility and vitality through qi-enhancing essences meant to relax weary limbs and awaken the intellect.

With practiced grace, they undressed, each fold of their robes a seamless choreography, before placing their tomes on a polished bamboo tray, its surface gleaming in the soft light. The obsidian stone tub awaited them, large enough to cradle two, adorned with silver runes that glimmered faintly, maintaining an aura of spiritual harmony.

Chapter 367 367: THE VIEL OF DESTINY

Ren stepped into the tub first, letting out a soft gasp as the warm water enveloped her, akin to being wrapped in a comforting cloud. Shun followed closely, easing himself beside her with his book nestled in his hands.

For a few blissful moments, they allowed the heat to seep into their muscles, the fragrant herbs working their way through their meridians, coaxing away the day's fatigue.

Silence settled around them, punctuated only by the soft rustle of pages turning. They began to read, their eyes gliding over the text with increasing intensity.

Ren's gaze darted across the scroll, her brow knitting together in concentration as she delved into the nuanced strategies for managing civil unrest. "This section on psychological containment is utterly fascinating," she murmured, her voice tinged with intrigue.

Shun turned the page, his tones low but resonant. "The Eastern Alliance employs a three-tier diplomatic approach. I wonder if we could adapt it for our border negotiations."

As minutes drifted by, they read in quiet communion, occasionally sharing thoughts that ignited the air between them, interspersed with the comforting silence that only deep understanding can foster. Steam curled around them like a soft, silken veil, blurring the edges of the outside world.

Ren leaned her head against Shun's shoulder, her expression contemplative. "Do you think we'll be ready?"

With a gentle touch, Shun closed his book and set it aside on the tray. "We already are. We're learning, we're growing, and we're doing it together," he assured her, his voice steady and filled with encouraging warmth.

A smile blossomed on Ren's face, her fingers intertwining with his beneath the surface of the water, the connection between them as profound as the knowledge they were absorbing.

In this serene sanctuary, the herbs worked their gentle magic, calming their bodies while the books nurtured their minds. Here, in this quiet enclave, the future President and First Lady, and their team, readied themselves — not solely for power, but for a calling enriched by purpose and shared vision.

A Promise Before Dawn: Ling Li and Shi Min

The corridor outside Shi Min's quarters lay in serene stillness, bathed in the soft, silvery glow of moonlight that filtered through the intricate lattice windows, casting delicate patterns on the wooden floor. Ling Li stood before the door, her flowing hair billowing gently like wisps of cloud in a serene sky. Her face, a canvas of emotions, remained inscrutable as she raised her hand to knock — once, firm and full of purpose.

The door creaked open to reveal Shi Min, his presence illuminated by a faint, lingering aura from the earlier acupuncture session. His eyes, wide with surprise, sparkled with an unspoken affection. "Mom? Is everything alright?" he asked, stepping aside, his heart already racing in anticipation.

Ling Li stepped inside, her gaze sweeping the room with the meticulousness of a hawk surveying its territory before settling on her son. "Everything is fine. I just wanted to know... are you leaving early tomorrow?"

Shi Min nodded, a mix of determination and excitement flickering across his face. "Mushu and I plan to set off before dawn's first light. We need to enter the Hidden Valley quietly — else the extended branches will swarm us like bees drawn to nectar, buzzing with questions, demands, and trouble."

A soft laugh escaped Ling Li, her eyes glinting with playful recognition. "You've always detested the Elders' meddling."

"They're like vultures, hovering around any sign of a breakthrough," Shi Min muttered, a hint of disdain lacing his words.

"Then head straight to your great-grandfather. No one dares to disturb him," Ling Li advised sagely, her voice steady but laced with maternal concern.

"That's actually the plan," Shi Min affirmed, his tone resolute.

Ling Li paused, her fingertips delicately brushing the edge of a wooden table, its surface bearing the scars of time. "Be careful. And remember to take the Nirvana Elixir before you enter the cultivation chamber. It will stabilize your soul flame and shield your meridians during the transition."

A flicker of unease shadowed her features, and Shi Min, catching it, stepped closer, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"I promise," he said, his voice low yet filled with a fierce determination, "I will return immortal."

Ling Li's lips trembled slightly, betraying the tempest of emotions within her, but she managed a nod. "I know you will."

With that, she reached up and enveloped him in an embrace — tight, fierce, and protective, her arms forming a fortress around him, her heart drumming with silent prayers and fervent hopes.

Shi Min held her just as tightly, feeling the weight of her love, anxiety, and unyielding aspirations — a living tapestry woven from years of sacrifice and strength.

In that moment, time seemed suspended — mother and son, warrior and healer, a legacy entwined with the promise of the future.

Eventually, Ling Li pulled back, her eyes shimmering with pride, though veiled by the mist of unshed tears. "Go rest. You have a long journey ahead."

Shi Min nodded, the quiet resolve etched on his face. "Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight, my son," she replied softly.

With a final lingering glance, Ling Li turned and walked down the corridor, her steps deliberate yet graceful, each one echoing the weight of her hopes.

Shi Min remained where he stood, watching her retreating figure against the moonlit backdrop, the promise of immortality burning steadily within his chest, a flickering flame ignited by love and possibility.

The Path to the Ancestor: Hidden Valley Awakens

Shi Min rose before the first breath of dawn, the stars still clinging to the sky like scattered embers. He moved with quiet purpose, his clothes already folded and waiting beside the bed. The air was cool, tinged with the scent of dew and distant pine. Outside, Mushu stood ready, his silhouette sharp against the misty courtyard.

They exchanged a silent nod.

No words were needed.

Tonight marked the beginning of Shi Min's final trial.

As they stepped beyond the castle walls, their figures vanished into the night — two shadows swallowed by the veil of destiny.

Back at Peonies Castle, Ling Li stood alone in the foyer, her arms wrapped around herself. The lanterns flickered behind her, casting long shadows across the polished floor. She watched the darkness where her son had disappeared, her heart heavy.

She had trained him.

Healed him.

Guided him.

But now, she could only watch.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she pressed them to her lips, whispering a silent prayer to the ancestors. Protect him. Let him return whole. Let him return immortal.

A single tear slipped down her cheek, quickly wiped away.

She turned and walked back inside, her steps slow, her spirit braced.

Chapter 368 368: ENTERING THE INNER SANCTUM

The Bamboo Illusion

Before the sun broke the horizon, Shi Min and Mushu reached the edge of the Hidden Valley. The terrain shifted subtly — from less wild to more sacred. The trees grew taller, their leaves whispering secrets in the wind. The qi in the air thickened, humming with ancient resonance.

They moved silently, bypassing the outer sanctuaries where younger elders meditated. Their destination lay deeper — where the oldest of the Li Clan had retreated into the Heavenly Dao, their bodies half-merged with the spiritual plane.

The deeper they went, the more surreal the landscape became.

Finally, they reached the Bamboo Forest — a place Shi Min recognized from childhood stories. His great-grandfather's domain lay beyond it, hidden behind layers of illusion and spiritual defense.

They walked for nearly an hour.

The bamboo stalks swayed gently, but the path never changed.

"Young Master," Mushu said, his voice low but tense, "I think we're roaming in circles."

Shi Min stopped, his eyes narrowing. "I know. It's an illusion. A spatial loop. I'm trying to find the anchor point."

He scanned the forest, then pointed to two bamboo stalks standing side by side. "Can you see the difference between these two?"

Mushu stepped closer, his eyes sharpening. He examined the stalks — they were all the same height, same color, and same texture.

But then...

"Wait," he said, reaching out. "This one... It's fake. It looks real, but the qi signature is hollow. I didn't even doubt it until now."

Shi Min nodded. "That's the anchor. Watch."

He gripped the false bamboo and pulled.

The stalk dissolved instantly into a swirl of golden mist.

The forest shimmered.

The illusion shattered.

Suddenly, the landscape shifted — bamboo stalks rearranged, the path straightened, and just ahead, nestled between two ancient stone lanterns, stood a modest wooden gate carved with celestial runes.

Beyond it lay a courtyard of moss-covered stones, a koi pond reflecting the pale sky, and a small pavilion surrounded by flowering plum trees.

Shi Min exhaled slowly.

"We're here," he said.

Mushu bowed slightly. "Your great-grandfather's domain. No one else could've found it."

Shi Min stepped forward, his heart steady, his spirit braced.

The final trial awaited.

And the ancestor was watching.

The Bamboo Gatekeeper: Meeting Li Tianyuan

As the illusion dissolved and the forest rearranged itself into its true form, Shi Min and Mushu stepped into a courtyard that felt suspended between worlds. The air was thick with ancient qi, vibrating softly against their skin. Plum blossoms hung motionless in the breeze, as if time itself had paused in reverence. A koi pond shimmered nearby, its surface reflecting not just the sky — but the weight of legacy.

At the heart of this sacred space sat Li Tianyuan, cross-legged on a meditation mat beneath a canopy of flowering bamboo. His silver hair was neatly tied, his posture relaxed yet regal. Though not the oldest, his presence carried the quiet authority of centuries. His aura was steady, his gaze sharp — like a blade sheathed in velvet.

He opened his eyes the moment Shi Min crossed the threshold.

"Shi Min," he said, his voice warm and resonant, like a temple bell. "You broke the illusion faster than I expected."

Shi Min bowed deeply, his tone respectful. "Grandfather. I recognized the anchor point. The qi signature was hollow."

Li Tianyuan chuckled, stroking his neatly trimmed white beard. "That illusion was layered with mirrored qi and spatial loops. Most would wander for hours. You unraveled it in under sixty minutes. Impressive."

Mushu bowed beside him, still catching his breath. "It was flawless, Elder. I didn't suspect a thing."

Li Tianyuan's eyes twinkled. "That's the point. The Hidden Valley guards its secrets well. But you've earned your entry."

Shi Min stepped forward, his gaze steady but curious. "Grandfather, were you the one who taught my mother how to consult the heavens?"

Li Tianyuan paused, then shook his head with a faint smile. "No. That art is older than me. If you're interested, you'll need to seek out your great-great-grandfather."

Shi Min blinked. "I... still have a great-great-grandfather?"

Li Tianyuan laughed heartily, the sound echoing through the courtyard like wind through hollow bamboo. "Not just that. Let me think... The Oldest Elder is five generations above me. That makes him your seven-great-grandfather."

Shi Min's mouth parted in disbelief. "Seven-great..."

"He's nearly eight hundred years old," Li Tianyuan said, eyes gleaming with reverence. "The oldest living member of the Li Clan. He's more spirit than flesh now, but still very much alive — and still very much watching."

Shi Min was speechless, his thoughts racing to grasp the scale of his lineage. Mushu's jaw nearly dropped. "Eight hundred years... That's..."

"Unbelievable?" Li Tianyuan offered with a grin. "He's the one who perfected this art, but it's your great-great-grandpa who taught your mother how to read the stars, speak to the wind, and listen to the silence between realms. But if you want to learn the art and also learn the history behind it, it's best to look for seven-great-grandpa."

Shi Min's awe deepened. "Where can I find him?"

Li Tianyuan's expression turned solemn. "He resides in the Celestial Cavern, beyond the Valley's inner sanctum. He doesn't entertain visitors lightly. They say we young people are too noisy." He snorted, clearly amused.

Shi Min's lips twitched. 'Great-grandpa, you're over a hundred years old, and I'm in my early thirties. Who exactly is young?'

"You'll need permission to enter the Old Man's Cavern," Li Tianyuan added. "And preparation. He tests more than your cultivation — he tests your soul."

Shi Min nodded slowly. "Then I'll earn it."

Li Tianyuan smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Good. But first, we begin your trial. At sunset, you'll enter the cultivation chamber. Until then, rest. Meditate. Let the Azure Dragon Bone settle."

Shi Min bowed again. "Thank you, Grandfather."

Li Tianyuan turned to Mushu. "My assistant will guide you to your designated chamber. I wish you success."

"Thank you, Elder Li," Mushu said with a bow, still visibly shaken by the revelations.

As Shi Min turned to sit and begin his meditation, the weight of his lineage settled around him — not as a burden, but as a mantle. The air around him pulsed with quiet power, and his heart beat in rhythm with the Valley itself.

And somewhere deep within the Valley, in a place untouched by time, a seven-great-grandfather stirred.

Chapter 369: SHI MIN'S MEDITATION AND TRIAL

The Stillness Before the Storm

The courtyard remained hushed as the day unfolded, its silence broken only by the soft rustle of bamboo leaves and the occasional ripple across the koi pond. Shi Min sat cross-legged beneath the plum tree, his back straight, his breath slow, his mind sharpening like a blade.

The Azure Dragon Bone pulsed faintly within him — an ancient force coiled in his core, waiting.

He closed his eyes.

His thoughts drifted past the illusion he'd broken, past the conversation with Li Tianyuan, past the awe of discovering his seven-great-grandfather still lived. All of it faded into the background as he sank deeper into meditation.

His spiritual sense expanded.

He felt the qi threads of the valley — woven through stone, water, and wind. He traced them, one by one, aligning his own flow with the rhythm of the land. His dantian glowed faintly, the Azure Bone's energy swirling like a storm held in glass.

Mushu watched from a distance, seated quietly near the pavilion. He didn't speak. He didn't move. He observed, knowing this moment was sacred.

Li Tianyuan had retreated into his chamber, leaving Shi Min to prepare alone.

As the sun dipped toward the horizon, the courtyard shifted.

The air grew heavier.

The light dimmed to amber.

And the ground beneath Shi Min's feet began to hum.

A soft chime echoed from the inner sanctum — clear, resonant, ancient.

Mushu stood. "It's time."

Shi Min opened his eyes.

They glowed faintly with golden light.

He rose without a word, his clothes fluttering slightly as the qi around him surged. Mushu led him through a narrow path behind the pavilion, where a stone gate carved with celestial runes awaited.

Li Tianyuan stood beside it, his hands clasped behind his back.

“This chamber,” he said, “was built by your great-great-grandfather. It’s designed to test not just your cultivation — but your will, your clarity, your soul.”

Shi Min nodded. “I’m ready.”

Li Tianyuan studied him for a moment, then raised his hand. The runes on the gate flared to life, glowing blue and gold. The stone parted with a low groan, revealing a circular chamber carved into the very heart of the mountain.

Inside, the walls shimmered with spiritual inscriptions. At the center stood a meditation platform surrounded by floating crystals — each one pulsing with elemental energy.

Shi Min stepped inside.

The moment he crossed the threshold, the gate sealed behind him.

The temperature dropped.

The air thickened.

And the Azure Dragon Bone within him awakened.

He sat at the center, closed his eyes, and began to channel.

The crystals responded instantly, flaring with light and releasing waves of elemental force. Fire, water, wind, earth, lightning—all surged toward him, testing his control, his balance, his endurance.

Outside, Li Tianyuan and Mushu watched the chamber glow.

“He’s strong,” Mushu whispered.

Li Tianyuan nodded. “But strength alone won’t be enough. He must become the bone. He must become the storm.”

Inside, Shi Min’s body trembled — but his spirit held firm.

The trial had begun.

And the path to immortality was now open.

The Trial Begins: Azure Bone Awakening

The stone gate sealed behind them with a low, resonant hum, isolating Shi Min and Mushu in their respective chambers deep within the Hidden Valley's sanctum. Though the architecture was ancient, the interior bore the sleek precision of modern cultivation design—reinforced alloy walls etched with spiritual circuitry, biometric panels, and qi regulators embedded discreetly into the floor.

Mushu was escorted down a separate corridor by one of Li Tianyuan's assistants—a quiet, silver-haired cultivator with a tablet in hand. His chamber was smaller than Shi Min's but no less formidable. The walls were lined with elemental stabilizers, and a central platform pulsed with soft blue light.

"This chamber is calibrated for Nascent Soul ascension," the assistant said. "You'll be monitored remotely. If your soul destabilizes, we'll intervene."

Mushu bowed respectfully. "Understood."

He stepped inside, the door sliding shut behind him. Alone now, he exhaled slowly, his fingers trembling slightly. He had trained for this moment for years. This time, he would either ascend — or fracture.

Shi Min and the Azure Bone

Shi Min stood at the center of his chamber, surrounded by floating elemental crystals. The air was dense with spiritual pressure, but he remained calm. He reached into his ring — a sleek, matte-black band embedded with micro-runes — and pulled out the final fragment of the Azure Dragon Bone.

It pulsed faintly in his palm, glowing with a deep, oceanic blue. The energy within it was ancient, volatile, and alive.

He placed it gently on the platform before him.

Then, from a hidden compartment in his jacket, he retrieved a small vial — the Nirvana Elixir. The liquid inside shimmered like molten silver, its scent faintly floral with a trace of ozone. His mother had crafted it herself, layering it with soul-stabilizing herbs, qi harmonizers, and a drop of her own spiritual essence.

He stared at it for a moment.

My mother made this for me. She didn't sleep for ten nights.

He uncorked the vial and drank.

The elixir slid down his throat like silk, then exploded in his chest with a rush of warmth. His meridians lit up, his soul flame steadied, and the Azure Bone responded — its glow intensifying.

Shi Min sat cross-legged, placed his hands on his knees, and closed his eyes.

The trial began.

Phase One: Elemental Convergence

The crystals around Shi Min flared to life.

Fire surged first — hot, aggressive, testing his endurance. Flames licked at his aura, trying to destabilize his qi flow. Shi Min gritted his teeth, channeling the Nirvana Elixir's stabilizing effect to hold firm.

Water followed — cool, deceptive, trying to drown his soul flame in emotional residue. Memories surfaced: his childhood training, his mother's tears, his own doubts. He breathed through them, letting the water pass without drowning.

Wind sliced next — sharp, chaotic, probing his mental clarity. Thoughts scattered, illusions flickered. He focused on the Azure Bone's pulse, anchoring himself to its rhythm.

Earth pressed down — heavy, grounding, testing his physical vessel. His muscles trembled, his bones strained, but his posture remained steady.

Lightning struck last — pure, raw energy, meant to ignite the Azure Bone's core. It hit him like a shockwave, and for a moment, his vision went white.

But he didn't break.

He absorbed.

He adapted.

He endured.

Chapter 370: DAY'S OF ANXIOUS WAITING

The Azure Bone began to dissolve before Shi Min's eyes, its radiant energy unraveling into shimmering threads of pure power that spiraled gracefully toward his dantian. Shi Min's body radiated a soft ethereal glow, his aura expanding like a vibrant halo. At the same time, the flickering flame of his soul surged with renewed intensity.

Outside the chamber, Li Tianyuan stood as a silent observer, his brow furrowed as he watched the monitor's readings spike dramatically. "He's entering Phase Two," he murmured, a hint of awe in his voice. "The bone is accepting him."

In contrast, Mushu faced the daunting Trial of Transformation within his own chamber, a space deliberately designed for struggle rather than solace. The door sealed behind him with a soft hiss, encasing him in an environment of stark sterility. Matte steel walls loomed ominously, reinforced with spiritual alloy and lined with pulsating qi stabilizers and soul monitors, each throb echoing a steady rhythm. The floor beneath him was etched with intricate concentric rings of soul circuitry, glowing faintly like a heartbeat, anticipating an impending surge of energy.

Mushu stood resolutely at the heart of the platform, his breath steady yet shallow, each inhale a battle against the tension coiling in the air.

'This is it,' Mushu thought, the gravity of the moment washing over him.

Years of relentless training and countless hours of perfecting his craft had led to this pivotal instant. Ascending to Nascent Soul was not merely a breakthrough; it was a crucible of transformation — a rebirth. One miscalculated move could rupture his soul, leaving him an empty shell... or worse.

With a deep breath, Mushu lowered himself into a cross-legged position, his fingers quivering slightly as he activated the intricate soul ignition array embedded in the floor. A radiant ring of light flared to life around him, scanning his meridians and meticulously mapping his spiritual core with a deep, resonant hum that vibrated through his very being.

Then, the pressure enveloped him.

An immense wave of qi surged upward from the platform, crashing into his chest with the relentless force of a battering ram. Mushu's body arched involuntarily, breath snagged in his throat, as his soul flame flickered precariously — unstable, erratic, like a solitary candle flickering in a tempest.

'Focus. Anchor. Don't panic.'

Mushu compelled his breathing into a steady rhythm, drawing upon the foundational techniques that his Master, Ling Li, had drilled into him with singular, relentless intensity. He visualized his soul flame — small, fragile, yet undeniably alive. Layer by layer, he wrapped it in the fabric of intent, memory, and indomitable will.

The chamber responded in kind.

The qi pressure intensified, doubling in ferocity as the world around him seemed to blur and spin. The roar in his ears grew deafening, and his body felt as though it were being torn asunder, molecule by molecule, his bones vibrating with an overwhelming spiritual friction. Sweat cascaded down his back like rivulets of molten silver, his heart thundered against his ribs, a wild drumbeat against the storm.

But Mushu refused to shatter.

Inside, he howled — not vocally, but within the very depths of his soul. A surge of defiance welled up, an indomitable refusal to succumb to failure. It was a vow to the heavens: 'I will ascend.'

The soul flame steadied, flickering defiantly in the midst of chaos.

The ignition array pulsed once more — brighter, deeper, resonating with a newfound intensity. And deep within Mushu's core, a second flame began to flicker — nascent, fresh, and ravenous. It clawed upward, yearning for space, form, and identity.

Outside the chamber, Li Tianyuan observed intently, his assistant by his side, eyes fixed on the fluctuating readings. They rose sharply, dipped low, then stabilized, an ominous dance of forces at work.

"He's struggling," the old man murmured, the lines of concern etched across his face deepening. "But he is close."

The assistant nodded, fingers flying across the tablet's screen. "His soul flame remains steady. If he can hold on for another thirty-six hours, the second flame will stabilize."

Li Tianyuan turned away, his expression inscrutable as he strode back to his own chamber, his robes swaying behind him. He resumed his meditation, a silent determination settling over him.

'Days of anxious waiting lie ahead,' he thought, heavy with anticipation. 'But if they both succeed... the Li Clan's glory will rise to a new level again.'

Phase Two: Soul Fusion and the Azure Awakening

The elemental storm had finally subsided, leaving a tranquil silence in the chamber. Shi Min sat motionless at its heart, his form enveloped in a soft, cerulean glow that pulsed softly, like the rhythmic heartbeat of the earth itself. Wisps of energy from the Azure Dragon Bone swirled around him, delicate and alive, twinkling like the ribbons of a dancer caught in a gentle breeze, drawn inexorably towards his dantian with magnetic grace.

Shi Min's breath was shallow yet steady, the quietude of the moment wrapping around him like a warm embrace, where his consciousness teetered between clarity and an ethereal trance.

Then, as if the very fabric of reality had shifted, the chamber transformed. The floating crystals, once vibrant and illuminating, dimmed as their luminous duties came to an end. In their stead, a gentle force began to stir — ancient and profound, carrying an intimacy that permeated the very air. The soul imprint of the Azure Bone had awakened.

A deep, resonant hum vibrated through the stone floor, sending tremors spiraling along Shi Min's spine. The atmosphere thickened, not with the sharp edge of elemental force, but with the weight of ancestral memory — echoes of the Azure Dragon's will flowed into Shi Min's mind, assaulting his senses with a chaotic blend of instincts, raw rage, and timeless wisdom.

Shi Min's eyes flew open, wide and alert. He was no longer enveloped by the chamber's confines; instead, he found himself standing in a vast expanse suspended between sky and storm, as clouds danced fiercely above him. Below his feet, an abyss of air stretched infinitely, and far in the distance, a majestic silhouette emerged — scaled, serpentine, and regal in bearing.