

PROTEGE 371

Chapter 371: THE INNER DEMON

The Azure Dragon, a being of overwhelming magnificence. Its eyes blazed like twin suns, deep and knowing, illuminating the space around them with an ancient wisdom. It circled him, its presence inundating him, an aura that pressed against his very soul like an unstoppable tidal wave.

"You seek to claim my legacy," the dragon's voice reverberated through his mind — not a sound, but a thought that resonated through every fiber of his being.

Shi Min stood with unfaltering determination. "I don't seek to claim it. I seek to honor it. To become worthy of it."

The dragon's gaze narrowed, its immense wisdom examining the essence of Shi Min. "Then prove it."

With that declaration, the sky split open. A deluge of spiritual force surged down upon him — visions of battles fought in celestial realms, echoes of betrayals, acts of sacrifice, and an unyielding vigilance filled his senses. The dragon's soul was not merely a reservoir of power; it was a heavy mantle of burdens carried across the ages. It was a raging storm tempered by duty, a formidable strength forged in the fires of solitude.

Shi Min's knees buckled under the intensity. His mind reeled with the weight of the memories, yet he did not succumb to the onslaught. Drawing from the stabilizing warmth of Nirvana Elixir, the unwavering faith of his mother, and the indomitable strength of his own will, he anchored himself.

"I am not here to borrow your strength," Shi Min gritted through clenched teeth. "I am here to carry it forward."

The dragon paused, its immense form radiating ancient power. And then, slowly, it lowered its magnificent head.

"Then take it."

The colossal creature dissolved into pure, radiant light — an explosion of brilliance that surged towards Shi Min's chest, flooding his meridians and merging seamlessly with his soul flame. His body convulsed, his aura flared, and the chamber outside erupted into a blinding pulse of blue energy.

Outside, Li Tianyuan's eyes sprang open wide. "He's entered fusion," he whispered, awe-stricken. "The Azure Dragon is accepting him."

Inside the chamber, Shi Min hovered inches above the platform, suspended within a luminous cocoon of energy. His veins glowed with an otherworldly light, his breath deepened with newfound strength, and his soul flame — now intertwined with the dragon's essence — radiated a stunning hue of deep azure, edged with glimmering gold. Phase Two had reached its climax. Yet, the final trial still awaited.

Ling Li's Vigil: The Pulse of the Azure Dragon

Night had deepened over Peonies Castle, casting elongated shadows that danced across the intricate marble corridors and quiet courtyards. Ling Li lay cocooned in warmth, yet her mind remained restless, tethered to the Hidden Valley by an unseen but powerful bond. She had donned comfortable clothes and taken a restorative tonic, but her spirit buzzed with anticipation.

Suddenly, she sat upright, her heart racing. A pulse — faint yet unmistakable — throbbed through her chest. Not a threat. Not a fear. But something ancient. Something sacred.

Closing her eyes, she reached inward, extending her spiritual sense like a fine thread reaching across vast distances. The qi around her shifted, responding to her silent call as the air grew still, the lanterns dimming in reverence.

And then she felt it — a surging power, ancient and coiled, awakening from its slumber.

The Azure Dragon Bone.

Her breath hitched, fingers curling tightly into the sheets as the resonance of the bone pulsed with life, intertwining with her son's soul flame. It was no longer dormant; it was alive and making its choice.

Ling Li rose and crossed to the window, her bare feet gliding silently over the polished floor. Outside, stars twinkled faintly, and the wind carried the delicate fragrance of plum blossoms. Her gaze drifted toward the distant mountains, toward the Hidden Valley, toward Shi Min.

"He's entered fusion," she whispered, her voice trembling not with dread, but with that profound sense of awe.

She pressed a hand to her chest as her own qi began to stir in response. The Nirvana Elixir she had crafted was taking effect. She felt its stabilizing threads woven into Shi Min's aura, holding him steady against the tempest of the dragon's essence merging with his own.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, yet she held them at bay, a smile blooming on her lips.

"He's ready."

And deep within the Valley, the Azure Dragon roared — a sound that resonated not in defiance, but in acceptance, echoing through the very fabric of existence.

Phase Two: The Demon's Grip

The fusion with the Azure Dragon Bone had finally found its equilibrium, anchoring Shi Min in a state of suspended defiance. His body hovered in the center of the chamber, cocooned in an ethereal glow of azure light that pulsed like a heartbeat. Around him, the once-vibrant elemental crystals had dimmed, their luminescence a mere whisper of power.

Meanwhile, the soul imprint of the Azure Dragon nestled deep within Shi Min's core, a slumbering giant. However, tranquility would not reign in this sanctuary for long.

A dark veil descended, thickening the air with an oppressive weight. The temperature plummeted, turning the atmosphere icy and suffocating. Then, the cocoon began to fracture — not from an outside invader, but from an inner turmoil awakening.

The inner demon.

It didn't announce itself with fury or chaos. It crept in like a whisper — a flicker. A shadow crept through the corridors of his mind, quiet at first — a flicker of doubt, a whisper of fear. But soon, it crescendoed, morphing into a piercing taunt that felt achingly personal. This was no ordinary demon; it was the embodiment of his insecurities.

Shi Min's breath caught, his heart racing as he felt the shift. He was no longer ensconced in the chamber, floating among celestial energies, but plunged into a haunting memory.

He stood in the training courtyard when he was five years old, the sunlight harsh on his young skin as he faced Ling Li. Her expression was inscrutable, but the sharpness of her voice cut through the air like a blade. "Again. You're too slow. You'll never survive the Hidden Valley like this!" The words echoed, reverberating through time.

Chapter 372: THIS ISN'T REAL

Shi Min flinched, the memory twisting and warping like a distorted reflection. Now he was twenty, trapped in the relentless downpour, blood mixing with rainwater, surrounded by elders whose whispers were daggers. "He's talented, but unstable. Too emotional. Too soft." Their disdain dripped from their words like venom.

The shadows deepened, and he could hear them louder now, taunting him.

"You'll never be enough."

"You're only here because of your mother."

"You're not worthy of the Azure Bone."

Frustration flared within Shi Min as he clenched his fists. "This isn't real." But the demon thrived on his denial.

It coalesced into a grotesque likeness of himself, twisted in doubt, its hollow eyes gleaming with malice. "You think you're ready?" it sneered, the words dripping with scorn. "You think you've earned this? You're just a child clinging to your mother's shadow."

Shi Min's aura erupted, a vibrant surge of defiance. "I'm not her shadow!" he roared.

The demon's laughter rippled through the air, cruel and mocking.

"You are.

You've always been.

With every step you take and every trial you face, they whisper her name — not yours."

With another blink, the scene morphed again, transforming into a nightmarish version of Peonies Castle. The once-majestic walls were cracked and crumbling, and the sky above burned a deep, ominous red. The air was thick with the stench of failure, and before him loomed a figure cloaked in swirling black smoke — his own face, distorted and sinister.

"You really thought you were ready?" the demon taunted, its voice a venomous hiss. "You fused with the Azure bone, and now you think you're worthy?"

Shi Min's fists tightened, a storm brewing within. "You're not real."

"Oh, I'm very much real," the demon spat, each word a knife. "I am every moment of your self-doubt, every memory of your failures. I am the ghost of your mother's burdens you could never lift."

Images flashed around Shi Min — Ling Li, shielding him from the spiritual backlash, standing with unwavering solitude before the Elders, her hands trembling yet determined as she crafted the Nirvana Elixir.

"You're weak," the demon hissed, barbing his words with malice.

"You're your mother's burden."

Shi Min's breath caught in his throat, despair coiling around him like a serpent. The cocoon surrounding him flickered uncertainly, his soul flame dimming as though the very essence of his being were at stake.

The demon advanced, towering over him like a dark omen.

"Give up. Let me take over. I'll be stronger. I'll be ruthless. I'll be everything you're too afraid to be."

Shi Min's vision blurred as despair threatened to consume him. Yet amid the shadows, there were flickers of light — Ling Li's face, weary yet proud; Mushu training by his side, fierce and unwavering; Ren, his fingers intertwined with Shi Min's beneath the plum tree, radiating silent encouragement.

Then, he saw himself — not perfect, not invincible, but resolute. Fighting. Growing.

"I'm not perfect," Shi Min uttered, his voice barely a whisper.

The demon hesitated, its mocking grin faltering.

"I'm not the strongest," Shi Min said, rising slowly, determination igniting within him. "But I am mine. And I won't let you define me!"

With a feral roar, the demon lunged forward. Shi Min didn't retreat or dodge; instead, he embraced the darkness.

In that instant, the illusion shattered with a brilliant burst of light. The cocoon erupted, radiant and unyielding, fortified not just by the power of the Azure Dragon but by the unbreakable spirit of his reclaimed will.

Outside, the monitor flickered into stability, casting a steady glow across the chamber. Li Tianyuan released a measured breath, the tension in his shoulders easing. "He broke through his inner demon," he announced, his voice a mixture of relief and admiration.

The assistant's eyes widened in disbelief. "He... embraced it?"

Li Tianyuan offered a solemn nod. "That's the only way to defeat a true inner demon. Not through denial, but by acceptance," he explained, each word weighed with the gravity of hard-earned wisdom.

Inside the chamber, Shi Min awoke, his eyes snapping open. They shone with a piercing azure, the color edged in gold like a radiant sunrise breaking through a stormy horizon. Phase Two was complete, the air thick with anticipation — the storm was brewing.

The Master's Gaze: Otako Walks the Line

The morning sun stretched its golden rays across the training ground, casting elongated shadows that danced upon the earth. Yet, the air felt unnaturally still, as though the world itself was holding its breath in anticipation. Today was different; Otako had arrived.

Ling Li, cloaked in her formidable persona, Otako in her Samurai Mask, stepped onto the field with an otherworldly intensity that crackled in the air, like the prelude to a tempest. Otako's samurai cloak billowed softly with each deliberate step, although no wind stirred. Otako glided forward, each movement imbued with a grace that seemed to defy the very laws of physics.

Adorned in a striking Samurai mask and a flowing cloak that ripples like shadows in the night, Otako moves through the world like a phantom. The intricate designs of the mask obscure features and expressions, leaving onlookers captivated by the enigma it conceals. The cloak, rich with deep hues and whispered tales, adds an air of mystique, swirling around them as they navigate through the crowd. No one can discern whether Otako is a man or a woman; the mystery deepens with every step, leaving a trail of curiosity and intrigue in their wake.

The moment Otako made his entrance, every trainee froze in place as if turned to stone. Spines straightened, breaths froze in throats, and even the breeze dared not disturb the electric atmosphere.

Chatty swallowed hard, his sword trembling in his clammy grip. The Enfield, Cannonball — his trusted ally — was absent, left behind in the forge for training. Without it, he felt exposed, vulnerable, as if he were standing before a tempest without shelter. Panic clawed at him. 'What if Otako decides to punish me?' The mere thought made him want to sink into the ground.

Before anyone could muster a reaction, the Seven Shah instinctively dropped to one knee in flawless synchrony. "Good morning, Master," they intoned, their voices harmonizing like a well-tuned instrument.

Chapter 373: SHOW ME YOUR SKILLS

The trainees, caught in a whirlwind of anxiety, scrambled to follow suit, kneeling awkwardly with movements filled with trepidation.

Otako's gaze swept over them like a finely honed blade, effortlessly dissecting their fear. "Rise," he commanded, her voice low yet resonant, echoing across the training ground with an authority that felt almost divine. "As you were."

The trainees hesitated, caught in a web of uncertainty — 'should they stand, bow, or flee?'

The First Shah, known as the Shah of Light, stepped forward, radiating a serene confidence. "Stand up. Continue with the training. Focus." His words sliced through the tension, snapping them into action.

They rose, resuming their drills, but their movements lacked fluidity. Tension clung to them like a shroud of fog, weighing them down.

Otako began to walk around the perimeter, her hands clasped neatly behind her back. He said nothing, yet his silence roared with the ferocity of a summer storm.

Otako's gaze moved methodically from trainee to trainee, assessing with a keen, discerning eye. Jack, sprinting through the agility course, faltered under his penetrating stare. His footwork wavered, nearly throwing him off balance.

Otako remained silent, but his brow arched slightly — a moment that sent heat rushing to Jack's cheeks. He corrected his form, summoning every ounce of determination to push harder.

Nicu, the youngest among them, was honing his skills in energy projection. His attempts flickered wildly, unstable like a candle in a tempest.

Otako paused behind him, his powerful presence radiating. "You're leaking too much intent," he observed, his voice smooth yet steely. "Control is not about force. It's about precision."

Nicu bowed so quickly he nearly met the ground face-first. "Yes, Master!" he stammered, determination quelling his nerves.

Then came Chatty. Attempting a sword form, he found himself faltering, grip askew, stance too wide. Otako halted mere steps in front of him, and the world shrank to the two of them.

"!!!!"

Chatty's heart raced, a drum beating furiously in his chest, his knees quaking in fear.

Otako said nothing, simply bore down on him with her unwavering stare.

When the silence became unbearable, he blurted, "I—I apologize, Master! I left the Enfield in the forge. I didn't mean—"

With a subtle but commanding gesture, Otako raised a hand, and Chatty froze mid-sentence.

"You are not your weapon," Otako spoke, each word deliberate and laced with unyielding truth. "You are the one who gives it purpose. If your sword defines you, then you are already defeated."

Chatty's eyes widened, realization washing over him in a wave of warmth. "Y-Yes, Master."

"Again," Otako instructed, his tone a blend of encouragement and challenge.

Chatty bowed deeply and resumed the form — this time with a measured pace, focused and present, as though he were carving the air with intention.

As Otako continued her measured walk, the Shah of Flame and the Shah of Iron exchanged knowing glances. They had witnessed this transformation before — this artful dismantling of fear, this forging of indomitable resolve. Otako's presence alone reshaped the battlefield, a force of nature in her own right.

By the time Otako reached the far end of the field, the trainees moved with renewed intensity. Their fear hadn't dissipated; instead, it had been transmuted into something sharper, more potent.

Discipline.

Focus.

Purpose.

Stopping beside the Shah of Light, Otako spoke with quiet appreciation. "They're improving."

He nodded in agreement. "They fear you more than they fear failure. That's a start."

A subtle smile tugged at Otako's lips, barely a whisper of emotion. "Fear is temporary. Clarity is permanent."

Otako turned his attention back to the field, her eyes narrowing, the challenge igniting within her.

"Let's see who breaks first."

The Duel of Shadows: Otako vs. Four Eyes

The training ground was steeped in an eerie silence, as if the very air held its breath. Otako approached Four Eyes, who was engaged in an intense spar with the Shah of Dusk. The Shah, enveloped in his signature twilight aura that danced like shadows under the setting sun, instinctively stepped back the moment Otako raised a single hand — two fingers extended with deliberate elegance, the remaining hand tucked resolutely behind his back.

Without uttering a word, the Shah of Dusk bowed, his inscrutable expression shrouded in the mystery of dusk.

Otako turned to Four Eyes, his piercing gaze cutting through the fading light like a blade.

"Show me your skills," Otako commanded, his voice deep and resonant, echoing with authority. "Don't hold back."

Otako's left hand remained firmly behind his back, a testament to his unyielding confidence. At the same time, his right hovered casually at her side, fingers relaxed but ready.

Four Eyes swallowed hard, his heart racing with a mix of anticipation and fear.

Four Eyes had prepared for this moment, pouring his soul into training for countless hours. Yet now that it had arrived, the weight of it pressed heavily on his chest.

With determination burning in his core, Four Eyes activated his dark aura. A swirling ripple of shadows burst forth, coiling around his limbs like tendrils of smoke, thick and potent. The lenses of his glasses shimmered in the dim light, mirroring Otako's imposing silhouette. The ground beneath him quaked slightly, fissures spider-webbing outwards as the frigid air bubbled with his escalating energy.

Still, Otako remained a statue of calm.

He didn't flinch.

He didn't blink.

He didn't even summon his qi.

With a surge of adrenaline, Four Eyes launched himself forward. In the blink of an eye, he vanished, reappearing behind Otako with a sweeping kick laced in shadow. Otako tilted his head ever so slightly, an almost imperceptible movement, and the strike narrowly missed its target.

Undaunted, Four Eyes unleashed a whirlwind of rapid-fire strikes, each cloaked in dark energy, each strike faster, sharper, more ferocious than the last.

Otako countered with a fluidity that seemed otherworldly, parrying with the barest of motions — one hand still lurking behind his back, the other barely shifting to deflect the onslaught.

The trainees were transfixed, their eyes wide in disbelief.

The Seven Shah stood stoic, their gazes narrowed, meticulously dissecting every clash of movement.

With a swift spin, Four Eyes launched upward, driving a rising strike toward his opponent, his aura flaring into a jagged blade of darkness.

Otako caught it — effortlessly — with just two fingers.

The dark blade hissed against his skin, vibrating with pent-up energy, yet it failed to cut through.

Chapter 374: SHOW ME YOUR FLAME

Four Eyes gasped, disbelief washing over him.

Otako's gaze intensified. "You're relying too heavily on fear. Your aura is feeding off it, weakening your resolve."

With a gentle twist of his fingers, Otako shattered the blade into nothingness.

Four Eyes stumbled back, panting, his aura flickering uncertainly around him like a sputtering flame, struggling to stay alight.

Otako stepped forward, just a single step, yet it felt like an avalanche descending. The pressure in the air dropped like a lead weight, and the ground beneath Four Eyes split and cracked. His knees buckled under the immense force, his aura recoiling in terror.

But he refused to fall.

With a primal roar, Four Eyes summoned every ounce of willpower to stabilize his aura, forcing himself to stand tall against the tide of despair.

Otako paused, assessing the determination etched across Four Eyes' face.

Then, for the first time, he raised his hand.

A thin thread of pure dark aura extended from her palm, silent and graceful, yet radiating a deadly intent. It snaked through the air like a predator, wrapping around Four Eyes' aura, probing and testing, pressing against his defenses.

Four Eyes gritted his teeth, channeling his resolve.

He didn't falter.

He pushed back.

The two auras clashed with a cataclysmic force — Four Eyes' wild and tempestuous; Otako's refined and absolute. The collision sent shockwaves rippling across the field, uprooting grass and sending several trainees tumbling to the ground.

And then there was silence.

Otako withdrew his aura, the air settling once more into a heavy stillness.

Four Eyes collapsed to one knee, gasping for breath, drenched in sweat, yet still holding onto his consciousness.

Otako studied him, a contemplative light in her darkened eyes.

Then he nodded, the slightest acknowledgment of Four Eyes' resilience.

"You didn't break," Otako said, his voice steady. "Good."

With that, Otako turned and walked away, his coat surging like a shadowy banner behind him.

The Shah of Dusk stepped forward, placing a steady hand on Four Eyes' shoulder. "You survived. That's more than most could hope for."

The trainees stared in awe, their admiration palpable as they bore witness to the gravity of the moment.

And Four Eyes — still kneeling, still trembling from the weight of the encounter — smiled through the tendrils of pain that gripped him.

He had faced the test of Otako and emerged, not unscathed, but alive.

Aftershock: The Forging of Four Eyes

Four Eyes remained kneeling on the barren ground, his breath escaping in jagged gasps, limbs trembling as if holding the weight of uncertainty. The duel had concluded, yet an indelible change stirred within him.

He could feel it.

His dark aura, once a chaotic tempest swirling unpredictably, now pulsed with an orchestrated rhythm — refined, tempered, sharper than tempered steel. No longer did it lash out in wild bursts; instead, it flowed gracefully, attentive and obedient to his command.

His gaze fell upon his hands.

The shadows that danced about his fingers resembled silken threads rather than mere smoke. His mastery had deepened beyond measure; his resonance had undergone a profound transformation.

'What did he do to me?'

Otako hadn't merely pushed him to his limits.

Otako had forged him.

In the visceral collision of their auras, Otako had subtly reshaped the essence of Four Eyes' spiritual signature — burning away the layers of excess fear, sealing the fractures in his spirit, and weaving in a thread of his own mastery into the very fabric of Four Eyes' soul.

No one had noticed.

Not even the Shah of Dusk.

But Four Eyes felt it.

And he would never return to who he once was.

Trial by Flame: Shun Steps Forward

Otako turned away from Four Eyes, his silence heavy with unspoken truths, and made his way to the far end of the field where Shun was immersed in a series of intricate fire drills, all under the keen gaze of the Shah of Flame.

As Otako approached, the Shah of Flame stepped aside with a respectful bow, an acknowledgment of the gravity that accompanied Otako.

Otako's piercing gaze locked onto Shun, an unyielding challenge.

"Show me your fire," he commanded, his voice calm yet tinged with authority. "Don't hold back."

Shun bowed, and then his eyes narrowed into focused slits; he had anticipated this moment.

With a surge of resolve, Shun activated his flame aura — a lustrous explosion of crimson and gold that burst forth from his core, swirling around him like a living inferno. The air around them shimmered, and the temperature soared; nearby trainees instinctively recoiled from the heat.

Yet Otako stood unperturbed.

With a fluid motion, Otako raised one hand — palm open, fingers relaxed — a stark contrast to the raging tempest around them.

Then Shun charged.

His initial strike was a blazing punch, enveloped in resolute spirals of heat. Otako sidestepped effortlessly, the flames grazing his coat without leaving a trace.

With fierce determination, Shun spun, unleashing a barrage of flame shards — each fragment airborne, precise and lethal.

Otako, unfazed, raised his hand.

A surge of dark aura erupted from Otako's palm, engulfing the incoming flames mid-flight. The collision set off a shower of sparks, but Otako stood untouched, an immovable shadow in the chaos.

Shun growled, his aura intensifying and radiating brighter.

He stomped the ground, summoning a towering pillar of fire that erupted beneath Otako's feet, a grand display of power.

For a fleeting moment, Otako was swallowed by flames.

Gasps echoed among the trainees.

Then, as if the fire were merely a curtain, it parted.

Otako emerged unscathed, his aura pulsing with quiet authority, an embodiment of control.

"You're too focused on spectacle," Otako stated, his tone sharp. "Fire isn't born from rage. It's shaped by intent."

Shun gritted his teeth. "Then let me show you again."

Shun clasped his hands together, forming a compact sphere of flame — small yet dense, vibrating with unstable energy. With a fierce cry, he hurled it forward.

Otako didn't evade.

He caught it.

The sphere hissed menacingly in his grasp, frantically seeking escape.

Yet Otako closed his fingers around it.

The flames imploded, their furious energy dissipating into the air.

Shun dropped to one knee, breathless, his aura sputtering precariously.

Otako studied him, the shadows deepening in his gaze.

Then Otako nodded.

"You possess great power," Otako stated. "But you're still merely chasing it. Learn to wield it, rather than pursue it."

Otako pivoted and left Shun on his knee, immersed in the lingering heat and realization.

Chapter 375: REN'S TRANSFORMATION

The Summit and the Flame

The Shah of Flame stepped forward, placing a grounding hand on Shun's shoulder, his grip firm and steady.

"You didn't fail," he said, his voice a calming balm. "You merely glimpsed the summit."

Still kneeling amidst the haze of heat, Shun blinked up at him, sweat trickling down his brow. "What do you mean?"

The Shah crouched beside him, his voice low but resonating with clarity. "Most trainees burn out in a frantic scramble to reach the peak. You didn't. You arrived at the summit and beheld the vast expanse above you."

Shun cast his eyes downward, trembling fingers still marked by the duel. His flame aura flickered faintly around his knuckles. "I couldn't even touch him."

"That's the essence of it," the Shah replied. "Otako isn't merely a master. He's the measure of what you can become. He doesn't compete to conquer you — he fights to unveil you."

Shun's breath caught in his throat, realization dawning.

The Shah continued, "Your flame is powerful, yet it still roars with chaos. You fight as if fire itself seeks to consume everything. Yet true fire doesn't just annihilate — it refines, discerning what is worth burning away."

Shun's gaze lifted, slowly drawn to where Otako now stood, an enigmatic figure, watching another trainee with inscrutable eyes.

"I thought I was prepared," he whispered, vulnerability surfacing.

"You are," the Shah assured him, "ready to embark on a new beginning."

Shun's flame aura pulsed once more — faint, yet steadier, like the first glimmer of dawn.

The Shah of Flame rose and extended his hand.

Shun accepted it.

As he stood, Otako turned slightly, a fleeting glance brushing past them. For just a heartbeat, Shun felt the weight of that gaze — not as judgment, but as recognition.

Otako had seen him.

And that alone ignited something profound within.

Forging the Vessel:

In the wake of Otako's departure, the training ground began to settle back into its familiar cadence. Yet, in the secluded northern wing of a spiritual temple — where the biting wind barely penetrated, and the obsidian-tiled walls absorbed the whisper of sound — Ren sat cross-legged in profound silence.

Her breath was a calming tide, steady and rhythmic.

But her body trembled, a delicate dance of anticipation.

Across from her, Shinsei knelt with his eyes shut tight, one hand hovering just above her chest like a guiding star, the other resting upon a lacquered box filled with glinting spiritual needles and vibrantly crushed herbs. The air between them shimmered with an ethereal quality, threads of internal energy weaving between master and disciple, slow and deliberate, like finely spun silk in a breeze.

Ren's cultivation was low — far too low.

Her meridians were constricted, her qi pool shallow as a sun-parched creek. She possessed undeniable talent — an ember waiting to ignite — but lacked the sturdy foundation to support it. With the impending opening of the 'Eye' drawing ever closer, time slipped through her fingers like sand.

Shinsei had reached a critical decision.

He would forge her body himself.

The Ritual of Reinforcement

Earlier that fateful morning, Shinsei had meticulously performed a series of acupuncture treatments. Each needle, forged from spirit-tempered silver, gleamed under the dim light, etched with intricate micro-runes that whispered promises of transformation. With surgical precision, he inserted them — along Ren's spine, her wrists, her ankles, her temples — each one purposefully placed to open the congested channels and awaken the dormant flow of qi.

Ren endured the process without a whimper.

Even as waves of pain surged like winter storms.

Even while her vision threatened to blur into shadow.

Now, as she sat serenely in meditation, Shinsei began to weave his internal energy into her being — gentle pulses of refined qi, precisely calibrated to synchronize with the rhythm of her breath. He had also prepared his potent blend of medicinal cuisines — an extraordinary concoction of soul-root, phoenix bark, and lunar moss, ground into a smooth paste and expertly applied to her pressure points.

The herbs waxed cold, then flared warm, then chilled once more, like the heartbeat of the earth itself.

Ren's body shuddered beneath the onslaught.

Her skin flushed with color, the very essence of life itself.

Her aura flickered like a candle battling against a tempest.

But she stood firm.

The Master's Vigil

Shinsei opened his eyes, piercing through the veil of concentrated energy. He scrutinized her closely.

Ren's qi was responding—slowly, painfully— was reacting nonetheless. The spiritual cuisines were beginning to weave their magic. The acupuncture had opened the gates, and his energy was now stabilizing the torrent.

Yet, Shinsei knew it was not enough.

With deliberate care, he reached into his robe. He retrieved a small vial — Moonfire Essence, a rare elixir distilled from the petals of a flower that bloomed but once every decade. He had kept it safely tucked away for a moment precisely like this one.

With a smooth motion, he uncorked the vial and allowed a single drop to fall onto Ren's forehead.

The effect was instantaneous — a dazzling surge.

Ren's aura ignited — briefly, violently — before settling into a deep, resonating hum. Her meridians expanded, as if breathing for the first time, and her soul flame flickered alight with new vigor.

Shinsei exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"She'll be ready," he murmured softly, a note of determination tinging his voice. "She has to be."

Ren's fingers trembled, a whisper of movement.

Her eyes remained closed, shielded from the world outside.

But inside, she felt it.

The change.

The forging.

The beginning.

Ren's Awakening: Within the Forge

Within the serene stillness of her being, Ren drifted deeper into herself.

She felt the presence of the needles — each prick a delicate firework of heat and light, threading through her meridians like whispered secrets igniting possibility. She felt Shinsei's energy — a steady,

deliberate current flowing into her like a second heartbeat, wrapping around her very essence. And she felt the Moonfire Essence, blooming upon her forehead like the blossoming of a third eye, awakening her senses in a symphony of wonder.

Yet more than those, Ren became profoundly aware of herself.

For too long, her body had felt like a cage — fragile, slow, and unworthy of the vast power she yearned to wield. She had watched as others surged ahead, their auras wild and brilliant like wildfire, while her own flickered dimly like a solitary candle flickering in a storm.

Chapter 376: I AM NOT WEAK

But now...

Now, a transition was unfolding.

Ren felt her qi stir — not in chaotic bursts, but in smooth, deliberate waves. Her meridians, once constricted and brittle, began to stretch and expand, embracing the energy flowing through them. The spiritual cuisines burnt through the blockages, dissolving years of doubt, fear, and waiting like mist before the dawn.

Visions flooded her mind.

The sharp sting of her first failed meditation.

The day she had wept in the rain, convinced she'd forever lag behind.

The moment she met Shinsei, who looked upon her not with pity, but with an unfathomable well of possibility.

Then the pain surged once more.

Ren's bones ached as if rebelling against the radical change.

Her skin burned with vibrant energy.

Her soul flame flickered violently, threatening to collapse under the weight of transformation.

But she held on, fiercely.

Not through sheer strength.

But through an unwavering choice.

'I want this.'

Ren's breath deepened, swelling with resolve.

Her aura pulsed, resonating with newfound power.

And then — Ren felt it.

A thread of energy unlike any she had ever touched before. It was not Shinsei's. It wasn't the Moonfire Essence. It was hers. Pure. Quiet. Fierce.

It rose from her core like a whispered defiance, bold and unyielding.

'I am not weak.'

The needles glowed with an unearthly light.

The herbs ignited with the ferocity of a new dawn.

Her soul flame stabilized, intense and luminous.

And for the very first time, Ren did not perceive her body as a cage — but as a magnificent vessel, ready to harness the tempest of power within.

The Breakthrough: Shinsei's Realization

The chamber remained enveloped in an eerie silence. Shinsei had just placed the final shimmering drop of Moonfire Essence on Ren's forehead, bracing himself for the subtle stabilization he anticipated — nothing more.

Ren's body had been a fragile creation, her cultivation painstakingly slow, her foundation a delicate web of potential. He had prepared himself for the gradual ascent of her progress, not the sweeping wave of a miracle.

But then, an astonishing surge of energy radiated from her.

Not a flicker. Not a mere pulse.

A fierce, unrelenting surge.

The spiritual needles ignited with a white-hot brilliance before dissolving into a cascade of shimmering light. The medicinal energies flared briefly, their vibrant essence wholly absorbed by Ren's expanding soul flame. It doubled, then tripled, unfurling in dazzling waves. Her meridians, once mere channels, transformed as they widened, reshaping themselves in a dance of raw power.

Shinsei's breath hitched in his throat.

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing with an intensity that could pierce the veil of reality, hands hovering just above her glowing aura.

This isn't stabilization...

This was a magnificent breakthrough.

Ren's qi signature blossomed — no longer a faint whisper lost in the void but a cohesive, radiant force, alive and throbbing with energy. The very air in the chamber quivered and shifted, bending toward her as if drawn by the irresistible gravity of her transformation.

Shinsei stood slowly, a sense of reverence washing over him.

"She's done it," he whispered, awe-laden words spilling forth. "She's broken through."

He hadn't expected it. He hadn't mapped out a path for this.

But Ren had chosen to transcend.

Ren's Realization: Becoming the Flame

Within the depths of her being, Ren felt the pivotal shift.

It wasn't a theatrical explosion.

It was a serene unfolding.

Like awakening from a long, torturous dream to find the pain had evaporated.

Her soul flame no longer flickered like a candle in the wind — it burned with an unwavering ferocity. Her qi, once labored and sluggish, surged like a rushing river, fierce and uncontained. Her body, which had fought against her, now embraced her essence as if welcoming an old friend.

With newfound determination, Ren opened her eyes.

The world appeared sharper, each hue more vivid, each detail more pronounced.

The air danced around her, lighter than a whisper.

Her limbs felt strong, free from the shackles of tremors.

Ren rose slowly, astonished by the soft luminescence enveloping her skin. "Did I...?" she barely managed to murmur.

Shinsei, her gaze, his voice in a low, reverent timbre. "You broke through."

Ren scrutinized her hands, a trail of disbelief mixing with burgeoning exhilaration.

Ren sensed the difference — not only in her power but in an unmistakable clarity of purpose. Her aura responded eagerly to her thoughts; each breath became a conduit for qi, flowing effortlessly through her. For the first time, her body felt wholly and unmistakably her own.

"I didn't think I could," she breathed, vulnerability mingling with hope.

A faint smile graced Shinsei's lips. "You didn't think. You chose."

Tears brimmed in Ren's eyes, but she held them back.

Instead, she bowed her head in deep gratitude. "Thank you, Master," she whispered, voice thick with emotion.

Refinement Begins: The Needle Path

Ren's breath had settled into a tranquil rhythm.

Her body, once frail and uncertain, now pulsed with an enduring strength that radiated from her core. She felt the seismic shift — not just within her qi but coursing through her bones, her blood, the very essence of her self-identity. The breakthrough had ushered in a new dawn. Yet Shinsei's expression remained calm and measured, brimming with wisdom honed over countless years.

Shinsei rested a firm hand on Ren's shoulder — a grounding, reassuring gesture.

"Then," Shinsei said, his voice deep and resolute, "let's commit ourselves to perfecting the needle technique."

"...."

Ren blinked in surprise, hope flickering like a candle as she had anticipated praise, triumph, and celebration.

Instead, she was met with a challenge.

And somehow, that challenge ignited a fire within her.

She bowed slowly, her heart swelling with determination. "Yes, Master."

With deliberate grace, Shinsei strode to the lacquered box, retrieving a fresh set of spiritual needles — thinner, sharper, inscribed with intricate runes. These were not instruments of healing; they were tools for refinement.

Turning back to Ren, he spoke with authority. "Your body has opened, but it remains raw. Unshaped. The breakthrough has granted you access; now, we will sculpt the vessel."

Ren straightened in her seat, her aura responding to his words like a flower reaching toward sunlight.

Shinsei began the next phase of her transformation.

He placed the first needle at the base of her neck — a precise placement between two renewed meridians. The moment it pierced her skin, Ren felt her qi spiral inward, folding gracefully into itself, reminiscent of a lotus poised to bloom.

Chapter 377: I WANT TO CONQUER THIS

Trial of the Needle: Ren's First Test

The chamber had fallen into a profound silence, heavy with anticipation. Ren sat cross-legged on the cool, polished floor, her body tingling with a vibrant energy that coursed beneath her skin like electricity. The spiritual needles, each a shimmering conduit of power, remained firmly embedded in her flesh, their intricate runes glowing softly like embers in the dark. Her earlier breakthrough had opened the gates to her potential, but now loomed the ultimate challenge: 'Was she capable of wielding the extraordinary forces she had awakened?'

Before Ren stood Shinsei, arms crossed over his robes, his gaze inscrutable and intense. A fabric of shadows cloaked his figure, giving him an air of ancient knowledge.

"Your body is no longer resisting," Shinsei stated, his voice deep and resonant. "But mastery is a skill acquired through discipline. We begin with precision."

He gestured towards the far wall, where a series of training targets hovered mysteriously. Small, ethereal discs etched with swirling spiritual glyphs floated in a staggered formation, each pulsating with a unique elemental signature: the caress of wind, the steadfast embrace of earth, the flickering dance of flame, and the shrouded depth of shadow.

Ren rose slowly, feeling as if she were shedding the weight of gravity itself. Her limbs felt lighter, her breath deeper, as she approached. The needles embedded in her skin thrummed in unity with her heartbeat, their runes glowing with an inner light.

At Shinsei's command, the first disc activated, unleashing a vivid burst of wind qi that propelled it erratically through the air like a wild creature.

"Focus your energy through the needles," he instructed. "Channel your intent with clarity. Strike only the core."

Ren centered herself. She closed her eyes momentarily, visualizing the intricate map of her body — meridians and nodes intertwining like the delicate threads of a spider's web, guiding the flow of her qi. She felt the needle's pulse at her wrist sync with her heartbeat, the rhythm of her energy. Gently, she directed her qi through it, extending her hand as if reaching into the fabric of reality itself.

A thin, silver thread of energy shot forward, silent and precise. The disc hung momentarily in the air before it fractured into a cascade of shimmering light.

Shinsei nodded, a flicker of approval crossing his features. "Well done. Again."

The second disc ignited — earth-based, heavy and slow, yet fortified like an ancient fortress. Ren adjusted her stance, redirecting the flow of her qi through the needle at her ankle. With a fluid motion, she launched a spiraling strike, the energy twisting mid-flight like a darting serpent, piercing through the disc's outer shell to hit the glyph at its heart. It crumbled dramatically, sending fragments scattering.

Then came the third disc, ignited with the essence of flame, darting unpredictably and crackling with heat. For a fleeting moment, Ren hesitated. Her energy wobbled, a fraying thread in the fabric of her resolve.

Anxiety gripped Ren as the needle at her navel pulsed erratically. But she gritted her teeth, focused her breath, and embraced the warmth within. This time, she no longer fought the energy; instead, she allowed it to flow through her like a river finding its course.

The strike landed, and the disc burst into a shower of harmless sparks, illuminating the chamber with fleeting brilliance.

Shinsei's eyes narrowed — not in criticism, but in calculation, as if he was weighing the depths of her potential.

Shinsei raised his hand once more, and the final disc activated — shadow-infused, cloaked in illusion, and flickering between dimensions like a mirage.

Ren's aura flared with the fervor of a thousand stars. She could feel the needle at her temple ignite, a beacon guiding her focus. This strike required not sheer force but a profound clarity.

She closed her eyes, her mind diving deep into a well of intuition. She envisioned the disc — not with sight, but through a heightened sense of perception that transcended the ordinary. Gathering her energy, she struck sharply.

The disc shattered, the pieces dissolving into nothingness.

The chamber fell into an attentive silence.

Ren lowered her hand, her breath steady, her aura calm as twilight. Shinsei stepped forward, carefully removing the needles one by one, each with a subtle twist of his own qi to seal the channels they had opened.

"You have not just passed," he said, a hint of pride lacing his voice. "You have adapted."

Ren bowed deeply, a rush of gratitude sweeping through her.

"Master, I want to conquer this," she declared, determination hardening her gaze.

Shinsei nodded, a flicker of approval in his eyes. "Tomorrow, we begin the moving drills. You will learn to fight with the needles in place."

A spark ignited in Ren's eyes — not of arrogance, but of purpose. She was no longer trailing in someone else's shadow. She was becoming the master of her own destiny.

The Night of Stories: A Table of Flame and Shadow

The dining hall thrummed with a warm, pulsing energy, alive with the echoes of laughter and conversation. Lanterns floated gently overhead, casting a soft golden glow that danced across the long wooden table, where family, friends, and trainees gathered like a constellation of familiar stars. The comforting aroma of steaming broth and roasted roots filled the air, wrapping around the room like a cozy embrace. But it was the warmth of their voices that truly illuminated the space — each word and chuckle a thread weaving them closer together.

Ling Li stepped into the room, her heart swelling with joy, and her gaze immediately locked onto Ren. Her eyes widened, sparkling with uncontainable pride. "Ren, you had a breakthrough!"

Ren turned towards her Mother, a radiant smile spreading across her face. "Yes, Mom! Finally!"

Ling Li rushed forward, enveloping her daughter's face with both hands, her own eyes shimmering with unshed tears of joy. "I knew you would. I felt it in the wind this morning, whispering promises of your success."

Shun, seated beside Ren, squeezed her hand with unspoken pride. "She didn't just break through. She shattered expectations," he added, his voice a gentle affirmation of his fiancée's triumph.

Chapter 378: MY BODY IS OVER HEATING

Ren felt warmth bloom in her cheeks, but she didn't pull away from the affection showered upon her.

One by one, family, friends, and fellow trainees stepped forward, their faces alight with genuine congratulations — some offering hearty claps on the back, while others bowed in deep respect. Even Chatty, nursing his bruises from a recent duel with Otako, managed a triumphant grin. "Now you're ahead of me. I demand a rematch!"

Ren laughed, warmth flooding her heart. "Only if you bring the Enfield this time!"

Ling Li raised her cup, her expression unreadable, yet her eyes shimmering with affection. "To breakthroughs earned, not given," she declared, a toast to the resilience of the human spirit.

Everyone joined in, raising their cups high, the clink of ceramic echoing like a joyful melody.

As the meal settled into a comfortable rhythm, the stories began to flow, entwining lives and dreams around the flickering table of flame and shadow, casting a glow that would linger long after the night had faded.

Training Tales Around the Table

Jack leaned forward, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as he recounted his experience. "The Shah of Wind," he began, "made me chase a delicate feather swirling in the midst of a cyclone. I honestly thought it was an impossible task. But it turned out to be a test of patience, not speed."

Nicu, still flushed from the intensity of his earlier lesson, chimed in, "The Shah of Iron commanded me to hold a stance for three excruciating hours. I cried out in agony. He didn't even bat an eye. But now, even in stillness, I can feel my qi pulsing within me."

Chatty groaned theatrically, rolling her eyes. "Otako just stared at me for what felt like an eternity — ten agonizing seconds — and I thought I was going to wither away. That counts as training, right?" Laughter bubbled up around the table, a warm respite from their daily grind.

Four Eyes, usually more reserved, finally broke his silence. "When Otako's aura brushed against mine... it was like a revelation, an electric pulse that shifted something deep inside me. I don't know what he did, but now my shadows obey my every command."

Ling Li, her expression a blend of pride and understanding, nodded subtly. "He must have forged that connection. It's what we've come to expect from him."

Then, Shun cleared his throat, his demeanor shifting as he shared his tale. "I confronted Otako with flames dancing around me, believing I could overwhelm him. But he caught my fire, effortlessly, with his bare hand."

Ren's eyes widened in disbelief. "He really did?"

Shun nodded gravely. "And then he told me that I was pursuing power, rather than learning to wield it."

Ling Li smiled, a glimmer of admiration in her eyes. "That sounds just like him. He never wastes a word."

The room fell into a contemplative hush, the weight of their experiences settling over them like a thick blanket.

Then Ling Li stood, raising her cup high, her voice resonant with warmth. "To all of you. You've confronted your deepest fears, faced the sting of failure, and danced with fire. And yet, here you are. That means you're ready. The 'Eye' in Hidden Valley will open soon. What you've gained will be tested. But tonight — tonight, you rest."

Everyone exchanged glances, their hearts swelling with a mixture of emotion and camaraderie.

For the first time in weeks, laughter echoed through the room, free from tension, buoyant and genuine.

The Bath and the Needle: Ling Li's Care

Steam unfurled languidly from the herbal bath, curling in delicate wisps that carried the intoxicating aroma of crushed moonroot and phoenix bark. Four Eyes sat submerged to his shoulders, his skin shimmering with moisture, while his aura pulsed softly against the water's undulating surface like ripples in a serene pond.

Ling Li stood beside him, her sleeves rolled up, revealing arms that spoke of strength and dexterity. The golden needle glimmered between her fingers, catching the flickering candlelight as if it were a shard of the stars themselves.

"It's good you're here," she remarked, her voice a harmonious blend of calm authority and brisk determination. "Allow me to perform acupuncture to amplify the effects of the herbal infusion. Though Shinsei has forged your body, nurturing it properly is still important."

Four Eyes cracked open one eye, allowing a plume of steam to shroud his expression. "I sense my energy surging lately... and it feels almost unbearable, like my very essence is burning."

Ling Li hesitated, her cheeks warming under the soft glow of the candlelight. She touched her nose, suddenly self-conscious. "Ah... that may be on me."

Four Eyes tilted his head, curiosity sparkling in his gaze. "Your fault?"

Clearing her throat, Ling Li gathered her thoughts. "I hadn't anticipated just how much your body would absorb. The spiritual cuisines, the medicinal infusions, the marrow broth... I may have overdone it on you."

A soft chuckle escaped Four Eyes' lips, the sound smooth like rippling water. "So it's from being too healthy that I'm overheating?"

Ling Li shot him a warning look, her demeanor sharpening. "Don't let that go to your head. Your meridians remain unbalanced. Sit still."

Kneeling beside the bath, her fingers moved with the grace of a skilled artist as she positioned the glinting needle toward his shoulder. The golden point whispered against his skin before piercing it with a gentle caress of qi. A sudden wave of coolness surged through his chest, as if the excess heat had found a hidden path to escape.

Ling Li placed the second needle deftly at the base of his neck, then the third — just above his sternum. Each insertion awakened different layers of his internal system, redirecting the tempest of excess energy, harmonizing its flow, and reinforcing the herbal bath's spiritual absorption.

Four Eyes exhaled slowly, feeling his aura settle like a stone sinking through still waters. The fiery heat receded - a little.

Ling Li observed him intently, her fingers poised delicately near the fourth needle. "You're stabilizing more swiftly than I anticipated. That's a positive sign. But take it easy. Your body is adapting to multiple influences at once — Shinsei's forging, Otako's imprint, and my medicinal crafting."

He nodded, eyes drifting shut once more. "I trust you."

Chapter 379: THE HEAVENS WILL TAKE NOTE

Ling Li blinked, surprise giving way to a gentle smile. She placed the final needle just below Four Eyes' navel and sat back, her expression a mix of hope and caution.

The bath radiated a soft glow, the herbal concoction coming alive in vivid hues, swirling with energy. Four Eyes drifted into meditation, his breathing deep and even, a tranquil rhythm in the harmonious symphony of steam and flickering candlelight.

Ling Li remained beside him, her gaze lost in the rising steam, thoughts swirling silently. 'He's evolving faster than I ever imagined. Yet, he's still mine to protect.'

The Shift Beneath the Surface

The herbal bath enveloped Four Eyes in a swirling haze, its steamy warmth infused with the rich essence of moonroot and the crisp aroma of phoenix bark, each breath heavy with the subtle glow of Ling Li's golden needles. Four Eyes sat at the center of this ethereal sanctuary, his breath tranquil and deliberate, his form cradled between the soothing heat and profound serenity surrounding him.

Yet beneath the calm exterior, a transformation stirred.

It began as a mere flicker — a whisper of energy that danced beneath his diaphragm, a gentle pulse reverberating behind his sternum. His qi, once a tumultuous torrent, now began to spiral inward, coiling around itself like waves drawn gravitatively to an unseen shore.

He delved deeper than his dantian; he sensed a core within — a sacred convergence where intent and instinct intertwined like two ancient lovers. The golden needles Ling Li had carefully placed were not merely harmonizing his energy; they were intricately reweaving his spiritual lattice, stitching together the scattered remnants left by Otako's indelible imprint and Shinsei's formidable forging. The

submerged heat of the bath relaxed the taut muscles of his body, but the profound metamorphosis was decidedly internal.

As Four Eyes settled into this new rhythm, his aura began to hum.

Not a resounding clamor.

Not an explosive display.

But a melody of coherence.

He could feel the transformation deep within him.

His once-erratic, dark aura — volatile and reactive — transformed. It now responded to thought — a quiet whisper of intention rather than a tempest of emotion. It curled graciously around his limbs, no longer an armament of defense or retaliation, but an eager partner in understanding.

Four Eyes blinked open his eyes, the steam swirling around him like an enchanted mist that blurred the borders of reality, yet his vision pierced through with clarity.

He raised one hand above the water's surface.

A delicate thread of shadow unfurled with it — slender, graceful, elegantly precise.

He had not summoned it with force.

He had invited it with reverence.

And it answered.

Ling Li, seated beside the bath, observed him with an unwavering gaze. Her silence was substantial; she made no interruptions, her fingers resting lightly upon her lap as she remained a steadfast sentinel of wisdom, her expression an enigma unto itself.

Four Eyes turned towards her, his voice a low murmur. "I feel... balanced."

Ling Li inclined her head, a knowing glimmer in her eyes. "That marks the beginning. Not of power, but of mastery."

He lowered his hand, and the shadow dissipated like mist caught in the dawn's first light.

The bath cooled, a gentle reminder of the transformation's culmination.

Yet inside Four Eyes, something he hadn't felt in years was surfacing anew.

Peace.

The Warning: Ling Li's Truth

With a gentle twist of her qi, Ling Li withdrew the final needle, sealing the channel with a deft flick of her fingers. The steam that once filled the air had thinned to a wisp, allowing Four Eyes to sit in stillness, his aura now a tranquil beacon, his breath flowing steadily.

She studied him intently, her gaze unwavering.

Then, in a voice imbued with gravity, she spoke softly. "You've just broken through," she said. "However... there's a grave concern. On your next breakthrough, you will face the heavenly tribulation."

Four Eyes opened his eyes slowly, absorbing the weight of her words as they hung ominously in the atmosphere like thunder waiting to crack the sky.

He fell silent, uncertainty gnawing at him.

Ling Li continued, her voice steady but laced with a cautious undertone. "Your body has been forged by Shinsei, imprinted by Otako, and intricately layered by my remedies. You've advanced beyond the natural order. The heavens will take note."

Four Eyes frowned, a storm of worry brewing within. "But I'm not ready."

Ling Li nodded slowly, acknowledging the truth of his fears. "No one is truly ready. Not for what lies ahead. The tribulation is not merely a tempest; it's a judgment — a test of your intent, your foundation, your very soul."

He glanced down at his hands, now steady, imbued with newfound strength. "I never asked for this."

"No," she replied gently. "But you have earned it."

A heavy silence draped itself between them, thick as fog settling over the ground.

Then, in a whisper that barely broke the stillness, Four Eyes asked, "What happens if I fail?"

Ling Li's expression softened, her gaze turning compassionate. "You won't."

He looked up, hope igniting within him.

She offered a faint smile. "I will ensure you are ready. We will fortify your meridians, deepen the flame within your soul, and train your aura to withstand even elemental pressures. You will learn to anchor your intent under the scrutiny of the divine."

He nodded slowly, resolve firming in his chest.

The bathwater rippled around him, responding to the quiet determination emanating from within.

"I'll do whatever it takes," he affirmed, his voice resolute.

Ling Li stood, gathering her needles, the task at hand illuminating the purpose she carried. "Good. Remember, the heavens do not consider the effort you've put into your training. They value the authenticity of your truth."

She turned to leave, pausing momentarily to cast a final glance back.

"And Chu Yan," she added, her expression serious yet hopeful, "when the lightning strikes... don't run. Stand tall. Let it see you."

"I know," Four Eyes declared confidently as he emerged from the lush embrace of the wooded tub, droplets of water cascading down his toned body. He vigorously dried himself with a soft towel, the fabric absorbing the remnants of his warm bath, before lifting Ling Li effortlessly into his arms. With a playful glint in his eyes, he gently laid her down on their plush bed.

Chapter 380: I'M READY WHEN YOU ARE

***** R18 ***** MATURE CONTENT *****

"You!" Ling Li gasped, momentarily taken aback by Four Eyes' brazen boldness, her cheeks flushing a soft pink.

As he began to peel away the delicate layers of her clothing, he leaned in closer, his breath warm against her ear. "Honey, I have always followed your lead, without a moment's doubt or hesitation. But every night, this burning desire within me craves to be expressed, and I cannot allow you to deny me this," he whispered, the sincerity of his voice intertwining with passion.

Four Eyes didn't give Ling Li a chance to speak and captured her mouth with a passionate kiss. At the same time, his hands moved onto Ling Li's bosoms, kneading and cupping each one, and pinching the nipples once in a while, which made Ling Li moan.

Four Eyes continued kissing down to Ling Li's neck and on to her bosom, which Four Eyes knew was Ling Li's weakness. He sucked each of Ling Li's boobies whole. At this time, Four Eyes placed his cock at Ling Li's wet folds, both of them moistening each other.

As Four Eyes gazed at Ling Li's beautifully rounded pregnant belly, a surge of uncertainty washed over him. He hesitated, unsure of how to position himself without causing discomfort to his beloved wife and their little ones.

"Honey, do you think I might hurt you and the babies if I come in from this angle?" Four Eyes asked softly, his voice laced with concern. Tonight was the first time he had honestly noticed how much Ling Li had blossomed, her belly now a testament to their impending journey into second parenthood.

Ling Li's chuckle filled the room, a warm sound that instantly softened Four Eyes' heart. The worry etched on his face melted away as she met his eyes, a playful glint dancing in his eyes.

"Why don't we change things up a bit?" Ling Li teased, her voice light with mischief. Before Four Eyes could respond, she skillfully rolled him over, positioning herself atop her husband with a confident smile.

Despite his stupefied state from the surprise maneuver, "Ah, nothing is more beautiful than this moment," Four Eyes moaned, the pleasure of their connection sweeping through him as he took in the sight of Ling Li's radiant smile and the gentle curve of her body.

"Ugghhhhhh... Honey, yes. Take me for a wild ride." Four Eyes said in a husky voice, his eye filled with desire.

Ling Li rode atop Four Eyes as if she were a wild abandon of a seasoned cowgirl, the thrill of the untamed earth beneath them igniting her spirit. Ling Li's form surged with each powerful stride, her long hair cascading like a waterfall in the breeze, glinting under the sunlight as she tossed her head back in joyous defiance. The raw energy of the hunt coursed through her veins, turning the wilderness into a playground of excitement and freedom.

"Ugghhhhhh..."

Ugghhhhhh...

Aaahhhhhh..."

Four Eyes, his gaze fixed intently, found himself entranced by Ling Li's otherworldly beauty. Her graceful features shimmered with an enchanting glow, igniting an undeniable yearning within him. In a moment of unrestrained passion, he boldly drew Ling Li closer, his hands tracing the curve of her figure, urging her with an intensity that matched the fervor of his desire.

"Yes, Honey...

Faster... yes!

Just like that!

Ugghhhhhh..."

"Chu Yan... I'm coming!" Ling Li cried.

"Come for me, Honey. Let your cum water me," Four Eyes said in between breaths.

"I'm coming..."

Four Eyes, all his muscles bulging, closed his eyes as he felt the hot cum released by Ling Li. His nose twitched. The smell of Ling Li's cum always makes him feel crazy, so he wants to eat Ling Li whole.

"Ugghhhhhh..."

Ugghhhhhh...

Ling Li!" he called out, his voice reverberating with urgency.

Ling Li's breath hitched in her throat; she had never heard Four Eyes address her by her full name before. It sent a shiver of intrigue down her spine.

"Yes, what do you wish to say?" Ling Li replied softly, her gaze locked with her husband's, filled with unspoken desires.

With a low grunt, Four Eyes urged her, "Show me just how wild you can be..."

A playful smirk danced across Ling Li's lips, her pulse quickening with the thrill of the moment. She's a medical practitioner and is acutely aware of the human body's secrets, instinctively knowing how to stir the deepest desires within. In an instant, Ling Li transformed into her ethereal, immortal form. Her long silver hair flowed like liquid moonlight, cascading around her shoulders with an otherworldly grace. In her hand, she wielded a leather whip, its surface gleaming provocatively in the dim light.

"Are you ready for what comes next?" Ling Li taunted, snapping the whip through the air with a crack that resonated like thunder.

Four Eyes, already awash in a sea of desire, felt his excitement surge. "I'm ready when you are!" he declared, his voice filled with a feverish anticipation.

Ling Li flashed a mischievous grin, her eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief as she lifted the whip high above her head. With a swift, practiced motion, she swung it downwards, the crack of leather slicing through the air, landing sharply on Four Eyes' sole. The sound echoed around them, a sharp reminder of her authority, as the whip curled around his foot with an unmistakable thud, sending a jolt of surprise up between his legs.

Four eyes grunted, his cock almost wanting to burst to release.

"Ugghhhhhh..."

Ling Li swung her whip again, landing on the side of Four Eyes' other sole.

"Ugghhhhhh..."

Honey... faster...

I'm coming... deeper! Deeper!

Yes!

Aaahhhhhh...

Ugghhhhhh..."

Four Eyes came, and he doesn't want it to stop. He wants to freeze time at this moment.

"Do you want more?" Ling Li asked with a smirk.

"Ling Li... I love you! And yes! I want more..."

The night unfolded in an intoxicating blend of whispers and soft moans, as the husband and wife lost themselves in each other's embrace. Their passionate murmurs danced through the dimly lit room, a symphony of desire that echoed around them. Each heartbeat and gentle caress intensified their connection, creating an electric atmosphere that wrapped around them like a warm blanket. In that fragile moment, every sensation was magnified, and the thrill of their union was forever imprinted in their hearts, a cherished memory that would linger long after the stars faded from the sky.