

## PROTEGE 381

Chapter 381 381: EAT FIRST. SURVIVE LATER

Morning Whispers and Mischief Brewing

The first light of dawn spilled through the diaphanous silk curtains, casting a gentle glow that danced across the room where Ling Li lay nestled beneath a cascade of soft covers. Her lashes fluttered like delicate wings, a sigh escaping her lips as she stirred, the ache of too little sleep and the lingering haze of indulgence weighing heavily on her limbs.

Beside her, Four Eyes lay awake, his gaze fixed tenderly on her with a quiet smile lifting the corners of his mouth. His arm draped around her waist, warm and possessive, as if he feared that even in slumber, she might slip away.

As Ling Li blinked the remnants of sleep from her eyes, he leaned in closer, his voice a soothing whisper amidst the stillness of the early morning. "It's still very early," he murmured, concern lacing his tone. "Why don't you sleep a little longer? You've hardly had any rest."

A playful snort escaped Ling Li's lips, her voice sharp yet softened by affection. "And whose fault was it that I drifted into the wee hours? Hmph!"

Four Eyes chuckled softly, pulling her back into his embrace, his grip a blend of firmness and tenderness that radiated warmth. "We both enjoyed it greatly, didn't we?"

Ling Li's cheeks flared crimson, blooming like fragrant petals kissed by the sun. Flustered, she shoved him away with a playful squeak, scrambling from the bed as her silk robe trailed behind her like a wisp of

cloud. Just the thought of their wild act the night before sent her heart racing, and she slammed the bathroom door shut, her pulse thrumming in her ears.

Four Eyes chuckled loudly, the sound rolling through the air, rich and unapologetic. "She runs like a scaredy cat," he quipped to himself, a grin spreading across his face.

Moments later, Ling Li emerged from the bathroom, her hair hastily swept into a loose knot, her expression masking the remnants of embarrassment, though her ears still glowed a soft pink. She busied herself with her belongings, moving with a brisk efficiency, as if she could outrun the heat blooming in her cheeks.

Four Eyes sat up, his amusement unwavering as he watched her. "Why are you waking up so early?" he asked again, his voice now a tender murmur.

Ling Li didn't meet his gaze as she fastened her belt, her tone resolute. "The twins have been pestering me to take them to training with you," she replied. "I promised them today."

She paused, her expression shifting to something more serious. "I also need to have a word with Butler Oda about Chatty's training. His aura has been acting up since Otako's imprint."

Four Eyes' brow furrowed slightly, the lightheartedness fading from his eyes. "I can take the twins with me. Why don't you sleep a little longer?"

Ling Li turned to him, her gaze sharp. "You'll be training. I fear those two will create chaos if left unmonitored."

He opened his mouth to argue, but thought better of it. Memories of the twins flitted through his mind — how one had transformed a spiritual formation into a makeshift trampoline, how they had once attempted to feed a soul beast moonroot dumplings, and the time they nearly flooded the courtyard with a wayward water technique.

With a resigned sigh, he conceded, "Fair point."

A triumphant smirk graced Ling Li's lips. "Exactly."

Four Eyes rose, stretching his limbs as his aura flickered around him like a shimmering veil. "Then I'll ensure they don't get near the weapons rack."

Ling Li arched a brow knowingly. "Or the alchemy lab."

He groaned exaggeratedly. "Or the beast pens."

She nodded, a teasing smile blooming on her lips. "Now you're learning!"

They exchanged a look filled with equal parts exasperation and affection, their silent bond palpable in the quiet morning air. Outside, the courtyard was already beginning to stir; the 'Eye' would soon open, ushering in a day filled with training, mischief, and the delightful chaos of family life.

## The Breakfast Briefing: Fire Before the Storm

The morning sun streamed through the lofty windows of the grand dining hall, casting a warm, golden glow that danced across the polished wooden surfaces and steaming platters. The air was thick with the tantalizing aromas of medicinal cuisine — ginseng broth perfumed with earthy undertones, phoenix marrow dumplings glistening with rich, savory broth, and spirit-infused rice that seemed to shimmer with an otherworldly light. Every dish was a carefully crafted remedy, meant to bolster the body and sharpen the senses.

The room buzzed with life and energy. Family members, staunch allies, and eager trainees filled every seat, their voices intertwining in a lively symphony of laughter, playful jabs, and animated chatter. The twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, practically radiated contagious energy as they flitted from chair to chair, their tiny bodies bouncing with excitement as they poked at steaming dishes and peppered the room with their relentless questions.

"Will Otako really throw lightning at us?" Kim Kim asked, eyes wide with excitement.

"Can we ride the soul beasts today?" Chin Chin chimed in.

"Is it true the Shah of Dusk can vanish into shadows?" Kim Kim asked again.

Their curiosity was a vibrant, infectious force, but their volume danced dangerously close to chaos.

Four Eyes, perched at the end of the table, shot them a warning glance, his brow furrowing slightly. "Eat first. Survive later," he advised, his voice steady amidst the clamor.

Shun, leaning comfortably back in his chair, chuckled as he tossed a plump dumpling into his mouth. "They're more dangerous being Otako's men," he teased, eliciting a round of laughter from those nearby.

Ren, seated quietly beside Ling Li, wore a thoughtful expression, her fingers idly tracing the rim of her bowl. She was still grappling with the weight of her recent breakthrough, the quiet pressure of expectation settling on her like a heavy cloak.

Then, with an elegant poise that drew every eye, Ling Li stood.

An immediate hush fell over the room, the vibrant chatter dying as if snuffed out by her mere presence. She commanded attention — not with loudness or force, but with a precise serenity that held everyone in rapt silence.

Chapter 382 382: RECOVERY AND REFLECTION

"I'd like to remind you," Ling Li began, her tone crisp and unwavering, "that the intensity of your training will increase day by day."

Forks froze mid-air; conversations sputtered to a halt, tension coiling in the air like an electric current.

"These three-week sessions," she continued, her gaze steady and all-encompassing, "are designed to prepare you for the opening of the 'Eye' in Hidden Valley. The stronger you are, the greater your chances of acquiring high-level cultivation techniques — and the lower your chances of getting hurt."

A ripple of tension passed through the assembled crowd, even the twins straightening their postures instinctively.

Ling Li began to pace slowly, her eyes sweeping across the faces turned toward her, each one reflecting a cocktail of determination and anxiety. "Cultivation techniques are ranked into four tiers: Mortal, Earth, Heavenly, and Divine — those legendary techniques that some only dream of."

She paused for effect, letting the weight of her words sink in.

"And then there's the Forbidden Technique," she added, her voice dropping to almost a whisper. "It's not ranked. It's feared. Dangerous. Prone to backlash. Sometimes morally irreversible."

Chatty gulped, wide-eyed. "So... we're aiming for Divine, but trying not to die?"

Ling Li remained somber, her expression unyielding. "Exactly."

Ren's fingers tightened around her cup, her heart racing at the implications of those words.

Seated at the end of the table, Four Eyes watched in silence, his expression inscrutable — a mix of wisdom and foreboding.

Ling Li pressed on, her voice steady yet laced with unspoken gravity. "All Martial Artists, Clans, and Sects from across the globe will be participating. Expect fierce competition. Expect sabotage. Expect real battle."

The air thickened, heavy with a newfound seriousness, as the room fell into a more profound silence.

Ling Li's voice turned almost conspiratorial, drawing the audience in closer. "And lastly... while training with the Seven Shah, don't for a second believe that sparring with them — as Otako's men — means you're safe."

She turned her gaze deliberately, locking eyes with the twins, then Ren, and finally, Four Eyes.

"They won't spare you. They won't hold back. If you want to survive, you must give it your all. Every single time."

Her final words struck like a blade, slicing through the remnants of levity that had clung to the room.

No one dared to speak.

Even Kim Kim and Chin Chin looked visibly paler under the weight of this revelation.

Then, breaking the silence, Shun raised his cup high, a determined gleam in his eye. "To survival!"

Ren followed suit, her voice steady. "To mastery!"

Fatty smirked, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "To not die!"

Ling Li nodded solemnly, her expression passing between pride and apprehension. "To earn your place."

As breakfast resumed, the energy had shifted dramatically. Beneath the laughter and the clinking of dishes, a quiet storm brewed in every heart, the anticipation of the 'Eye' looming large.

The 'Eye' was coming.

And no one would leave unchanged.

After the Echo

The morning mist began to dissipate, but the heavy remnants of Master Nerun's test lingered like a bruise beneath the skin, swollen and persistent. The trainees were strewn across the field, some perched cross-legged in contemplative silence, others slumped against weathered rocks or ancient trees, their gaze lost in the distance. The valley, once alive with the rustle of leaves and the chorus of birdsong, felt unnervingly still, as if nature itself held its breath.

Ling Li wove through the somber assembly, her presence both grounding and ethereal. She checked pulses, adjusted the flow of qi with deft gestures, and whispered soothing words that hung in the air like fragile gossamer. Although her aura radiated tranquility, her eyes flickered with a storm of unease. The Echo Test had not merely disoriented its participants; it had laid bare their innermost fears.

Lily huddled, her knees pulled tightly to her chest, her gaze fixed on the earth, where the grass swayed gently in a breeze that seemed to mock her turmoil. The sharp echoes of her father's voice reverberated in her mind, cold and cutting. "I thought I buried that," she murmured, the weight of her memories drawing her deeper into despair.

Nearby, Shun was entranced by the flicker of a small flame dancing in his palm, smoke curling upwards like thoughts left unspoken. "I couldn't control it," he admitted, his voice tinged with frustration. "It felt like the fire was laughing at me."

Four Eyes, sitting with his back nestled against the cool stone of a ridge, had shut out the world, his eyelids heavy as he sought to silence the chaos within. "I heard nothing," he breathed, his voice barely a whisper. "Not even my own thoughts. Just silence. It was... suffocating."

Chatty, a feeble attempt at levity, straining his voice, attempted to crack a joke. But the humor fell flat, his laughter cracking like fragile glass. "Laughter's supposed to be good for you, right? Unless it's your own, thrown back at you like a curse."

Ling Li settled beside him, her hand a comforting weight on his shoulder, radiating warmth. "You all survived. That's the first step," she reassured, her voice a steady beacon amidst the turmoil.

The twins, who had clung to her like shadows amidst the dusk, had finally ceased their trembling. Kim Kim peeked timidly from her sleeve, her wide eyes filled with uncertainty. "Will the Echo come back?" she asked, her voice small in the vast, quiet expanse.

Ling Li offered a gentle smile, her expression tender as a balm. "Only if you let it."

Flashback: The Origin of Echo

Far away, in a chamber hewn from obsidian and silence, Master Nerun sat cloaked in solitude, the dim light casting ghostly shadows across his weathered features. His hood, once shielding, was lowered, revealing a face intricately marked by the passage of time, etched with the resonance of countless words spoken and remembered — the lines on his skin pulsed faintly like echoes of a powerful symphony long forgotten.

He closed his eyes, surrendering to the tide of memory.

Years ago, before the rise of Otako and the forging of the Seven Shah, Nerun wandered as a monk — a keeper of lost frequencies. He journeyed between clans like a whisper on the wind, offering healing through resonance, teaching them that sound held the power to mend what no steel could conquer.

Chapter 383 383: HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S HIDING

But on one fateful day, he arrived at a village where the Clans of the Hollow Voice gathered, their ambitions twisted and reckless. They had begun to experiment with forbidden harmonics — dark techniques capable of shattering minds, erasing memories, and bending wills to their sinister desires. Nerun, sensing the danger, warned them, but they scoffed, amusement dancing in their eyes.

In response, Nerun stood unwavering at the center of their ritual hall and released a single, haunting note.

It wasn't loud; it held no violence. But it was immutably true.

The walls trembled as if the very stones quaked in fear; cracks spiderwebbed outward from his presence. Elders wept, deeply shaken, while younger disciples stood frozen, their identities slipping through their fingers like grains of sand. The proud leader of the Hollow Voice — once defiant and resolute — fell to his knees, pleading for silence.

From that moment onward, Nerun was not merely feared; he became a specter on their horizon.

Not for the power he wielded, but for the clarity he possessed.

He did not destroy with sound. He unveiled truths. And revelation, in a world built upon veils and secrets, was the most dangerous weapon of all.

Years later, Otako discovered him in a cave where no echo dared linger, finding Nerun deep in meditation, lost to the world. Otako offered him a position among the Seven Shah — not as a warrior, but as a harbinger of truth. To rip away illusions, to prepare warriors for the stark reality of existence.

Nerun accepted the call.

But he never smiled again.

Back in the valley, one by one, the trainees began to rise, their bodies aching, their spirits rattled. Yet something profound had shifted within them. They had faced their echoes, those harsh reflections of self, and had heard the truth of their being.

Now, armed with clarity, they stood on the precipice of a new beginning.

After the Echo: Return to the Field

The valley had transformed entirely.

Where there once lingered a heavy cloak of disorientation and oppressive silence, now there was a vibrant pulse — measured, purposeful, and sharply defined. The trainees, still trembling from Master Nerun's formidable test, resumed their drills with renewed fervor. Their movements were slower, each strike and stance deliberate, as if the weight of their fears had cast a long shadow over their actions.

Ling Li stood resolute at the edge of the training field, the twins nestled securely in her arms. Their tiny hands gripped her robes, their once fearful expressions now a tapestry of wonder and curiosity.

Across the expanse of the field, Master Aeris, the Shah of Wind, moved with an ethereal grace.

No — he was not merely moving; he was dancing.

His body blurred into a whirlwind of motion, his flowing robes billowing behind him like the banners of an ancient army caught in a fierce storm. In one heartbeat, he was an ephemeral figure at the far end of the field; in the next, he was a mere whisper behind a trainee, guiding their stance with the gentle breath of the wind. His feet barely kissed the earth, and when he struck, the air crackled with energy, a sharp note of power echoing in his wake.

"Did you see that?" Kim Kim breathed, her voice barely rising above the rustle of grass.

"He disappeared!" Chin Chin squeaked, her eyes wide and sparkling with awe. "No — he turned into wind! I saw it!"

Ling Li offered a soft smile, brushing a stray strand of hair from Chin Chin's face. "He didn't disappear. He simply moved faster than your eyes could follow."

"But he was gone!" Kim Kim insisted, twisting to glimpse the spectacle better. "And then — whoosh! He was there!"

Master Aeris spiraled midair, his body forming an elegant arc, horizontal for a brief moment before landing in a crouch, wind swirling around him like a creature come to life. A collective gasp erupted from the twins, their astonishment palpable.

"He's like a flying leaf!" Chin Chin whispered in awe.

"Or a sword made of air!" Kim Kim exclaimed, her excitement barely contained.

Ling Li chuckled softly, warmth blooming in her heart. "He's the Shah of Wind. He doesn't just traverse the air — he commands it."

#### A Quiet Conversation: Ling Li and Butler Oda

As the trainees immersed themselves once more in their drills, a figure approached from the far path — Butler Oda. His steps were as silent as falling snowflakes despite the tray he balanced gracefully in his hands. Upon the tray, lacquered cups glimmered enticingly, along with a gourd of spiritual nectar that glowed faintly, its surface shimmering like sunlight on water.

"Madam Ling," he intoned with a respectful bow, his demeanor as composed as ever. "A restorative, as you requested."

Ling Li acknowledged him with a nod, the weight of the day evident in her posture as she accepted the tray and set it on a nearby stone. Pouring the warm nectar into two cups, she handed one to Oda and took a sip herself. The liquid caressed her senses, infused with qi-soothing herbs and a hint of phoenix blossom — perfect for stabilizing the jumbled energies within.

Her gaze drifted toward the field, then she lowered her voice, a hint of concern threading her words. "It's Chatty."

Oda's brow creased, concern etched onto his face. "His aura?"

Ling Li nodded, her expression grave. "It's unstable. Beyond just Otako's imprint — though that has left its mark — it comes from something deeper. His qi flows like a wild river — spiking under pressure, then collapsing when he attempts to harness it."

Oda contemplated this, his gaze sharpening. "Residual trauma?"

"Partly," Ling Li replied, her eyes unwavering. "But I fear his core is misaligned. His spiritual lattice compensates for something hidden — perhaps a sealed memory or a suppressed technique."

Oda's expression shifted to intense focus. "You think he's concealing something?"

"I believe he doesn't even realize what he's hiding," she said. "But if we don't stabilize him before the Eye opens, he risks imploding... or worse, attracting something that thrives on fractured resonance."

Oda nodded, determination hardening his features. "I'll adjust his regimen — less external pressure, more internal mapping. I'll procure the Echo Stones."

"Good," Ling Li affirmed, a sense of relief washing over her. "And keep him away from Nerun for now. One more test like that, and he might unravel entirely."

Chapter 384: HE'S A WALKING EXPLOSION

Both turned their attention to Chatty, who was clumsily attempting to mimic Master Aeris's footwork, nearly tripping over in the process.

Butler Oda let out a quiet sigh. "He's spirited."

Ling Li smirked, amusement dancing in her eyes. "He's a walking explosion."

The twins erupted in giggles, their laughter like bells as they watched Chatty flail, then turned their attention back to Master Aeris, who had just launched into a stunning spiraling leap, sending a gust of wind cascading through the field like a musical note.

"Can we train with him?" Kim Kim whispered, eyes alight with dreams of flight.

"When we're big?" Chin Chin chimed in eagerly.

Ling Li pressed soft kisses atop their heads, her heart full. "When you're ready."

"Yey!" Both Twins cheered, their eyes twinkling with anticipation.

Nightfall Reflections: Four Eyes and Shun

The moon hung low over the training field, a luminous orb casting a silvery glow across the dew-laden grass, transforming it into a shimmering sea of diamonds. Most of the trainees had retreated into the

embrace of night, their weary bodies worn out and minds still reeling from the challenging trial set by Master Nerun.

But not Four Eyes and Shun.

They sat on a sturdy flat stone at the valley's edge, shielding themselves from the cool night breeze. An almost palpable silence enveloped them, stretching like a finely drawn bowstring, taut with unsaid words.

Shun shattered the quiet first.

"I thought I'd truly mastered my flame," he mused, his voice barely above a whisper. "But when that sound hit... it turned against me. It felt as if it no longer recognized who I was."

Four Eyes lingered in contemplation, his gaze fixed on the moon, its light reflecting off his lens-covered eyes, rendering them inscrutable.

"I didn't hear anything," he finally replied, his voice deep and resonant. "No voice, no echoes of memory. Just... silence. It felt as if the world had chosen to forget me."

Shun turned to him, eyebrows raised in surprise. "That sounds oddly peaceful."

Four Eyes shook his head slowly, his expression grave. "It wasn't peaceful. It was like being erased, as if I'd never existed in the first place."

A chill wind whispered through the night.

Shun reclined, leaning back on his hands, contemplative. "Do you think the 'Eye' shows us what we fear the most?"

"No," Four Eyes countered firmly. "I believe it reveals what we've buried deep within ourselves."

Once again, silence draped over them, heavy with understanding and unspoken fears.

Then Shun let out a soft laugh. "You know what's striking? I used to think Otako's men were mere monsters. But now, I'm beginning to see them as mirrors."

Four Eyes smirked, a hint of irony in his expression. "Terrifying, soul-crushing mirrors, no less."

Shun nodded in agreement, their shared insight creating a bond of camaraderie.

They clinked their water gourds together as if toasting an unspoken pact.

"To survive the next test," Shun declared.

"To not tatter in front of the twins," Four Eyes added, laughter spilling from them — soft, tired, yet genuine in the serene night.

The Next Day: Chatty and the Echo Stones

Morning light spilled across the training grounds, unveiling a more subdued atmosphere enveloped in the soft hues of dawn.

Most trainees were still lost in meditation or engaged in light drills, trying to ground themselves after the previous day's intensity. Yet in a more minor, circular clearing behind the main ridge stood Chatty, alone but resolute, facing Butler Oda.

Before him lay seven Echo Stones — smooth, obsidian-like orbs etched with intricate rings that pulsed softly like a heartbeat, each radiating a different frequency that vibrated just beyond the threshold of hearing yet resonated deeply within.

Oda, standing tall with arms crossed, exuded a calm authority, his expression a careful blend of firmness and patience.

"These stones will reflect your inner resonance," he proclaimed, his voice steady. "They hold no secrets, offer no leniency, and their indifference will not soften your fears."

Chatty swallowed hard, butterflies churning in his stomach. "So... they're like Master Nerun, but portable?"

Oda's lips remained in a thin line, devoid of any humor. "They're like Nerun if he lacked all patience."

With an authoritative gesture, he directed Chatty's attention to the first stone. "Begin."

Taking a deep breath, Chatty stepped forward and pressed his palm against the orb.

A low hum vibrated through his skin, coursing like electricity from his hand to his chest, thrumming rhythmically in his skull.

Suddenly, he was transported back to the courtyard of his childhood home, surrounded by the taunts and laughter of familiar voices. Panic surged as his aura flared bright, and the stone glowed a fierce red.

"Breathe," Oda instructed, his voice unwavering. "Anchor yourself. Don't react. Witness and observe."

Gritting his teeth, Chatty forced his breath to steady, each inhale a battle against the tide of anxiety.

Gradually, the memory faded, and the stone dimmed.

He moved to the second stone.

This one felt sharper, akin to needles of sound stabbing into his ribs. Vivid images of failure surged back, shadows mocking him with the animated faces of former friends.

With a sudden weakness, his knees buckled, but Oda was there, catching him just before he succumbed to the ground.

"You're not here to win," Oda explained, his voice resolute. "You are here to rediscover who you are when everything else has been stripped away."

Chatty nodded, trembling, determination flickering within him.

Approaching the third stone, he steeled himself.

This time, he didn't resist the pull of the sound.

He let it wash over him, revealing the memories hidden within.

When the sound arrived—his mother's voice, warm and filled with pride — he welcomed it, his heart swelling.

A golden pulse shimmered from the stone.

Oda's gaze sharpened, impressed by the shift.

"Good," he affirmed, his tone acknowledging the progress. "Again!"

Echo Stone Sequence: Chatty's Completion

The fourth stone throbbed gently, emitting a low, mournful hum that seemed to resonate with a distant sorrow. Chatty hesitated, feeling the cool surface beneath his fingertips, his hand trembling — not from fear, but from an unshakeable anticipation of what lay ahead.

As soon as his skin connected with the stone, the sound surged, filling the air not with volume, but with a profound depth — like a heartbeat echoing through the hollow chambers of an abandoned house. In an instant, he was no longer enveloped by the tranquil clearing; he was transported back to the grimy alley behind the old grain market, curled beneath a battered cart, where the relentless rain soaked through the thin fabric of his tunic. The world around him was indifferent — no passersby glanced his way, no voices cried out his name.

Chapter 385: I'M STILL ME

Because no one knew it.

No one knew about him.

He was nameless then.

Without family.

Without a voice.

Just a void of silence echoing within.

Chatty's aura flickered around him, a tempest of conflicting colors — shimmering gold battling against a formless gray. The stone reacted to his turmoil, pulsating in erratic rhythm, mirroring the chaos within his very being.

Yet, Butler Oda remained unmoved.

He observed.

He waited.

He trusted.

Chatty clenched his jaw, forcing each breath to become deliberate, a steady rhythm amidst the storm. He whispered to himself — not in words, but in the pulse of a beat, a cadence to anchor his thoughts.

The memory, once sharp and feral, began to soften.

The stone dimmed, morphing to a silvery glow.

Oda's approval flickered in his eyes. "Good. Again."

The fifth stone erupted with a melody of sharp, slicing tones — a sound reminiscent of glass shattering in reverse. Chatty steeled himself against the incoming wave.

This time, the resonance didn't weave a memory; it conjured a question that sliced through the mist of Chatty's mind.

Who are you when no one is watching?

Chatty found himself viscerally reliving moments of survival — stealing bread from a merchant's stall, fabricating lies about his age to gain entry into employment, laughing too boisterously to mask the inner ache that thrummed beneath the surface.

He stood unwavering, the truth snug against his chest.

"I'm still me," Chatty declared softly.

The stone pulsed a serene blue, a gentle affirmation of his claim.

The sixth stone, however, held an unsettling stillness that draped over him like a shroud.

As Chatty reached out to touch it, an unsettling void remained — no sound, no vision, just an encroaching stillness that brought a frown to his brow. "Is it broken?" he inquired, glancing at Oda.

The butler shook his head firmly. "It's waiting."

Closing his eyes, Chatty surrendered to the silence.

And then he heard it.

A voice.

His own.

Soft, youthful, tinged with desperation.

“Please... someone...”

Chatty didn't flinch or cry. Instead, he opened his eyes, resolute, and spoke, "I'm here now."

The stone ignited with a brilliant white light.

The seventh stone felt entirely different.

It didn't merely pulse; it resonated with an ancient power.

As Chatty placed his hand upon it, the other six stones ignited in a stunning sequence, forming a harmonious ring of sound around him. The frequencies wove together — his memories, fears, and truths — melding into a singular, transcendent wave that vibrated through the very air.

His aura surged, golden and unwavering.

Oda stepped closer, gaze sharp and intense. "Now speak."

Chatty stood tall, his voice rising with clarity and conviction.

"My name is Tong Xue. I have no bloodline. No legacy. No family. Yet, I have survived. I have learned. I have earned my place."

In unison, the stones pulsed once — a final acknowledgment — before fading into stillness.

Oda bowed his head slightly, respect shimmering in his eyes. "Then you are ready."

Chatty let out a shaky exhale, sweat trickling down his brow, but the fire in his eyes burned bright with newfound purpose.

He had faced the Echo.

And this time, it hadn't shattered him.

Ling Li Observes: The Echo of Growth

From her perch atop the sun-drenched ridge, Ling Li found refuge beneath the sprawling branches of an ancient, wind-battered pine. Its gnarled bark and whispering needles formed a protective canopy,

shielding her from the world below. She had chosen not to reveal herself, for her presence was a mere shadow, an unnoticed guardian witnessing the unfolding of fate.

Her keen gaze was locked onto Chatty, who stood isolated in the expansive clearing, encircled by the enigmatic seven Echo Stones that loomed like silent sentinels. Tension radiated from his slender frame, an electric current of uncertainty that flickered in his aura. Yet, in defiance of the fear that had engulfed stronger trainees the day prior, he held his ground — his trembling hands gripping air as if it were a lifeline, his jaw clenched in determination.

Ling Li's heart tightened as she observed him, her memories weaving through the tapestry of time. She recalled Four Eyes told her about Chatty the moment he had first appeared at their gates, a fragile boy with a defiant spark in his eyes — skin too thin, a spirit too fierce. Alone in the world, lacking kinship or a name, he was defined by a singular force: a voice that stubbornly echoed beyond silence.

Four Eyes and Fatty decided to befriend Chatty and give him food, to the point that both their parents made arrangements for Chatty upon learning about him.

Now, that voice was on the verge of transformation.

Ling Li watched as Chatty swayed, teetering on the edge of despair before reclaiming his balance. He winced, a delicate ballet of fear and resolve playing out, and yet, amidst the inner tumult, a smile broke through. He uttered his truth — a melody of authenticity — and the Echo Stones responded, pulsing with a resonance that felt like a whispered acknowledgment.

Nearby, Butler Oda stood watch, arms crossed, his expression a mask of contemplation. Yet, Ling Li was attuned to the subtleties — an imperceptible nod, a shift in his posture that spoke volumes. Approval radiated from him like gentle sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

A sense of pride ignited within Ling Li's chest, blossoming like a delicate flame in the darkness. "He's ready," she breathed softly, feeling warmth suffuse her veins. "Not perfect. Not polished. But ready."

The twins, nestling close like two eager birds, tugged at her robes, eyes wide with curiosity. "Is Uncle Murphy winning?" Kim Kim ventured.

"He's not fighting," Ling Li responded, her voice a blend of understanding and restraint.

Chin Chin cocked his head in confusion. "Then what's he doing?"

A tender smile curled her lips as she replied, "He's remembering."

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Dear amazing readers,

If you've enjoyed the story so far, please remember to vote, leave a review, and share your comments — your feedback truly means everything to me! Every stone, every recommendation, and every kind word helps this story reach more readers and keeps me inspired to write even more exciting Chapters for you.

Your support and gifts are genuinely appreciated — they're not just encouragement, but fuel for my imagination and motivation to keep pushing the story forward.

Let's continue this journey together.

With all my gratitude,

Sirius M

Chapter 386: THE STORM THAT CALLS

Mushu's Lightning Tribulation

The tenth night in Hidden Valley draped itself over the land like a heavy, dark shroud, silence settling deep and profound like the calm before a brewing storm. Within the obsidian-lined sanctum meticulously shaped by Li Tianyuan, Mushu sat in a meditative pose, his breath steady but labored. Filaments of his qi, vibrant and pulsing with chaotic energy, twisted and coiled around his core like restless serpents. The elemental veins, ancient runes etched into the walls, thrummed in a rhythmic symphony with his inner turmoil — the earth beneath quaked ominously, the wind whispered secrets lost to time, and fleeting arcs of lightning crackled in the thickening air, casting flickering shadows on the stone.

Mushu stood at the brink of a critical crossroads.

Once a stronghold of resilient strength, his Golden Core now began to splinter, like fragile glass cracking under the immense weight of expectation.

The moment of transcendence had finally arrived.

For countless cultivators, this juncture was a treacherous dream. Some spent entire lifetimes in pursuit of this elusive power, others met bitter ends in the process, while a few relinquished their hopes, trembling before the wrath of the heavens. But Mushu remained steadfast, undaunted by the dangers ahead.

Mushu called upon the storm.

### The Gathering Storm

Outside Li Tianyuan's sanctuary, the sky above Hidden Valley darkened with a malevolent intensity, swirling clouds twisting and churning like an unleashed tempest thick with raw, primal energy. Thunder rumbled like a colossal beast awakening from slumber, its growl shaking the very ground beneath. The guardian beast, a once-placid sentinel of the valley, bolted into the depths of the forest, instinctively sensing the tempest that brewed beyond the horizon.

Inside the chamber, Mushu's body trembled violently, resonating with the tumultuous power brewing outside.

With an almost soundless shatter, his Golden Core fractured, releasing a flickering essence into the ether — a nascent soul, delicate yet radiant, flickering like a fragile flame battling against encroaching shadows.

Then, the storm unleashed its fury.

A brilliant bolt of lightning tore through the chamber's roof, unleashing a cascading shockwave that reverberated through the valley like a battle cry. An explosion of raw energy engulfed Mushu as he absorbed the electric surge, pain clawing through his meridians in a visceral, piercing agony that stoked the flames of his resolve.

**\*\*SCREAM\*\***

**\*\*SCREAM\*\***

The second bolt followed — a searing projectile imbued with the weight of judgment. It struck his shoulder, purging the lingering specters of past karma and the emotional debris that clung stubbornly to his spirit.

A primal scream burst from his lips, raw and unfiltered, yet he did not yield.

**\*\*SCREAM\*\***

The third bolt descended with an eerie silence.

It bypassed his physical form, thrusting deep into his consciousness.

**\*\*SCREAM\*\***

Memories surged forth in a torrential torrent — fleeting glimpses of lonely childhood afternoons, dark echoes of mocking laughter, the insatiable yearning for acceptance, and the gnawing dread of fading into obscurity.

His nascent soul flickered uncertainly, a candle fighting against a storm.

**\*\*SCREAM\*\***

With fists clenched tight, Mushu summoned the essence of his strength. "I am not weak," he breathed fiercely, drawing power from the depths of his spirit. "I am not forgotten and I cannot be forgotten!"

The fourth bolt struck — a crackling stream of pure, golden lightning.

It collided with Mushu's chest, unleashing the force of a thousand suns, a radiant explosion of ancient energy that illuminated the chamber in a blinding conflagration of light.

**\*\*SCREAM\*\***

**\*\*SCREAM\*\***

Yet, the storm showed no signs of relenting.

Inside the chamber, Mushu collapsed to his knees, his nascent soul stabilizing as its glow transformed into a steady, magnificent hue of violet and gold.

The Lightning That Shook Hidden Valley

The skies above Hidden Valley convulsed with fury.

Clouds continuously churned in ferocious spirals, their weighty presence thick with spiritual pressure. Thunder rolled through the ridges like the wrath of the gods, shaking the very foundations of the valley. Then the lightning came on after the other — fierce, golden-white bolts that split the heavens and struck with surgical precision, illuminating the valley in a celestial glow much like a battlefield drenched in light and chaos.

Cultivators throughout Hidden Valley — hermits, sect envoys, clan heirs, and rogue disciples — froze in their tracks. They understood the magnitude of what was unfolding.

Someone was ascending to Nascent Soul.

And not just any cultivator.

The ferocity of the tribulation — the sheer volume of bolts, the purity of the lightning, the submissive howl of the spiritual wind — indicated that this was no ordinary breakthrough. This was a prodigy destined to carve its path through the cosmos — a formidable threat.

### The Valley Reacts

In the Jade Pavilion, elders of the Crimson Feather Sect sealed their windows and activated protective formations, their expressions grim. One elder muttered in tones laced with dread, "That's not a child's tribulation. That's a monster's."

In the Moonshadow Courtyard, the Hei Clan gathered in urgent silence, their matriarch's eyes narrowing with fierce resolve. "Find out who it is," she commanded, her tone unwavering. "Before the 'Eye' opens. Before the Family Competition begins."

In the Whispering Bamboo Grove, rogue cultivators huddled beneath barrier talismans, their voices a cacophony of whispered theories.

"Is it Otako's heir?"

"No — he wouldn't hide it."

"Then who?"

Even the Beast Tamers of the Southern Ridge retreated into their dens, instinctively shielding their spirit beasts from the storm's relentless wrath.

No one dared approach the source of the monumental energy.

But curiosity, like an insistent tide, surged through Hidden Valley.

Schemes Begin

By morning, the storm had passed, leaving a landscape washed clean, yet teetering on the edge of tension.

The sky above gleamed in pristine clarity.

But the valley itself was far from calm.

Messages flew on the wings of secrecy.

Spies were dispatched like shadows, flitting through the corridors of power.

Old alliances were carefully scrutinized and reevaluated.

Whoever had ascended to Nascent Soul had transformed into an unpredictable variable — one that could tip the delicate balance of power with the opening of the Eye, and as the Family Competition loomed on the horizon.

In Hidden Valley, the presence of variables was seldom tolerated.

Mushu Emerges: The Storm Has Passed

The obsidian chamber doors creaked ominously as they swung open, unleashing a cascade of residual lightning that danced across the stone floor like ephemeral phantoms. The air crackled with lingering energy, heavy with the remnants of the storm that had finally abated.

Chapter 387: PROTECTION IN MOTION

Mushu stepped into the world beyond.

His clothes, singed at the edges and frayed from the tumult of his trials, fluttered gently in the stale air. Drops of sweat clung to the strands of his hair. Yet, his eyes — iridescent silver flecked with violet — radiated a serene, potent strength. No longer a tempest of chaotic energy, his aura now emanated a rhythmic pulse, refined and grounded. The essence of his Nascent Soul had finally found stability.

Beyond the threshold, Li Tianyuan awaited, his hands clasped firmly behind his back, expression inscrutable. Then, as Mushu bowed respectfully, the old master's countenance transformed, breaking into a rare and radiant smile.

It was a smile imbued with warmth and pride, a fleeting treasure conjured from the depths of experience. "You did not merely endure," Li Tianyuan declared with a voice rich in wisdom. "You triumphed."

Mushu inclined his head, his voice gravelly yet resolute. "I'm ready."

A reassuring hand descended upon his shoulder, a gesture of solidarity. "Then rest. Your time will come soon."

### Ling Li Receives the News

Back at Peonies Castle, nestled in a private chamber cloaked by intricate formation arrays, Ling Li sat in profound meditation. A gentle whisper of wind drifted through the air, carrying with it a momentous proclamation — Mushu has ascended. The trials had been surmounted.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and a delicate smile graced her lips, a brief bloom of joy.

Yet, the smile withered almost instantly.

A new message surged forth — a warning: the Hidden Valley was stirring, a slumbering beast awakening. Clans and sects mobilized their forces, their curiosity tinged with a burgeoning dread. They sought to know who had shattered the confines of the mortal realm. They needed to discern if they should be afraid.

Ling Li, also known as Otako to those she navigated within this realm, rose to her feet, tension rippling through her frame. She sensed the approaching storm.

Shi Min's breakthrough was imminent.

And it promised to be far more disruptive.

Orders Sent: Protection in Motion

With urgency, Ling Li summoned a messenger Eagle, its feathers glimmering in the fading light, and inscribed a sealed directive addressed to Li Tianyuan.

"Shi Min's ascension will attract more than mere curiosity; it will incite fear. And fear, My Dear Master, breeds violence. Protect him. Seal the chamber tightly. No one is to enter. No one shall observe."

As the Eagle took flight, she also sent a message to Mushu, who had just rejoined Li Tianyuan's side, strength radiating from his presence.

"You will stay," Ling Li commanded, her tone firm and unyielding. "Shi Min must remain undisturbed. Should anyone approach, you will thwart them."

Mushu received the message, conviction in his voice. "I will guard him with my life."

### Butler Oda Moves in Shadows

In a shadowed corner of the valley, Butler Oda, Otako's direct subordinate, absorbed the same unsettling report, his demeanor unchanged. Silently, he activated a concealed seal beneath his desk, the air shimmering with latent power. From the depths of the shadows, four cloaked figures emerged — his elite Shadow Guards, trained in the deadly arts of silence, assassination, and spiritual disruption.

"Shi Min is to be protected at all costs," he commanded, his voice unwavering. "No one is to touch him. Not even the whisper of the wind."

The guards offered a deep bow before dissolving into the fabric of the valley, their presence a ghostly wisp, detectable only to the most skilled cultivators.

### The Calm Before the Next Storm

Within Shi Min's chamber, an eerie stillness hung in the air, thickening like an impending fog.

But outside, the valley stirred with a cacophony of rumors, like leaves rustling in an unseen gale.

Whispers of speculation ebbed and flowed, each word a leaf tossed upon a turbulent current. Deep beneath the surface, ancient grudges began to stir, restless and yearning for resolution.

The 'Eye' would soon crack open, revealing profound truths and dark intentions.

And the martial arts realm held its breath, suspended on the edge of an unfolding saga.

Chatty's Restless Heart

Twelve days felt like an eternity.

Chatty perched cross-legged on the edge of the training field, his brow knitted tightly, and a storm of impatience brewing in his vivid aura. The Echo Stones had woven a net of stability around him. Still, underneath, something felt amiss — like a vital thread had been plucked from his spirit and left to dance in the wind.

He missed Cannonball.

Ling Li had promised it would only be three days. Just three. A brief moment of reflection, a pause to gain clarity. But that brief pause had morphed into five days, then seven. Now, twelve weary sunrises and sunsets had come and gone.

Chatty struggled to maintain a facade of normalcy — he trained, he sparred, he attempted jokes to lighten the mood — but inevitably, his gaze wandered relentlessly toward the winding forest path Cannonball had vanished down.

"He's probably sulking," Chatty grumbled to himself. "Or chasing butterflies. Or — what if he got lost? What if he's tangled in a tree? What if he's trying to write poetry again?"

Four Eyes ambled by, eyebrow arching in mild amusement. "You're speaking to the wind again."

Chatty groaned in exasperation. "I'm lamenting the absence of loyalty."

Four Eyes chuckled, a knowing smirk flickering on his lips. "You miss your furball."

Chatty didn't shy away from the truth. "I miss my furball."

### Cannonball's Seclusion and Breakthrough

Deep within the serene embrace of Hidden Valley, in a tranquil glade suffused with dappled moonlight, Cannonball — the Enfield spirit beast — lay coiled beneath the ancient tree, his elegant tails wrapping around him like nature's own cocoon. The air thrummed with latent energy, shimmering as if it held its breath. His body pulsed with the rhythm of qi, an electric surge coursing through him.

He was on the threshold.

He hadn't intended to linger this long.

But on day three, a shift had rippled through his core, igniting a powerful surge of energy, expanding his spirit lattice. The breakthrough to Level Four beckoned like a distant star.

Cannonball felt it — so close.

And with it came an enticing choice.

To transcend his furry form, to embrace human shape.

To walk on two legs, articulate speech, and cultivate his spirit independently.

Chapter 388: CANNOBALL'S RETURN

For the next three weeks of the Christmas holiday, I will publish three Chapters daily and wish everyone a Blessed and Joyful Christmas!

But as the energy enveloped him, Cannonball closed his eyes and saw Murphy — Chatty — radiating joy, vulnerability, strength. He vividly recalled the day their bond was forged — a moment when Chatty stood valiantly against a rogue cultivator, the way he shared his meager food even when it was scarce.

Enfields were the essence of loyalty.

Even unto death.

To forsake that for autonomy would be to tarnish the very soul of his kind.

So, Cannonball made his resolute choice.

He broke through.

But he did not change.

He remained the steadfast Enfield.

And today, he emerged from his cocoon.

The Reunion: Fur, Tears, and Chaos

The training field was alive with the bustle of trainees lost in drills when a sudden gust of wind stirred the treetops. Cannonball burst into view, his tail unfurling like a banner behind him, eyes shimmering with newfound brilliance, his aura radiating strength like a sun bursting through dark clouds.

"Murphyyyyyy!" he howled, a joyous echo that reverberated through the air.

Chatty spun around, heart racing. "Cannonball?!"

Before he could even register what was happening, Cannonball launched himself forward with the force and fervor of a cannon, true to his name, and bowled Chatty over in a whirlwind of soft fur, flailing paws, and affectionate growls.

"You're heavier!" Chatty gasped, pinned on the ground. "Did you eat a boulder?!"

"I ascended!" Cannonball barked with pride, licking Chatty's face exuberantly. "I'm stronger now! I can carry you and all your emotional baggage!"

Laughter bubbled up from Chatty, and tears welled in his eyes, blurring his vision. "You idiot. You were supposed to be gone for three days."

"I was busy becoming awesome!" Cannonball declared with the gravity of a hero.

"You were busy making me worry!" Chatty shot back with mock severity, but his smile betrayed him.

Cannonball leaned closer, nuzzling him with warmth and loyalty. "I chose you."

Chatty froze in that moment, the depth of the declaration settling in.

Then he pulled Cannonball close, wrapping his arms around him in a fierce hug. "Then I choose you. Always."

Around them, the bustling trainees paused mid-drill, caught in the electric moment of reunion, their eyes wide with a mix of awe and confusion at the heartfelt display.

Four Eyes muttered, shaking his head with an amused glimmer in his eyes, "That's the most dramatic pet reunion I've ever witnessed."

Ling Li, watching from a distance, couldn't help but smile.

The bond was intact.

And stronger than ever.

Li Tianyuan's Wrath: The Bamboo Forest Sealed

The eagle, a majestic silhouette against the pale dawn, spiraled downwards like a silver arrow slicing through the morning mist. Its mighty wings beatin' a precise rhythm as it gracefully landed on the elegantly curved rooftop of the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, the sharp click of its talons against the jade tiles echoing in the stillness. A scroll, sealed with Otako's sigil, hung delicately from its leg, emanating a faint, ethereal glow as if imbued with ancient protective magic.

Inside the pavilion, Li Tianyuan sat quietly at a low table intricately carved from centuries-old spiritwood, savoring tea brewed from the rarest thousand-year-old lotus leaves, its aroma wafting delicately through the air. As he cradled the scroll delivered into his hand, a tempest of emotions swirled across his face.

He tore through its contents, reading it once, then again, with growing intensity. His eyes narrowed, the lines of his brow deepening like formidable cracks in a rocky mountainside, heralding an imminent avalanche of fury.

"Who dares to make trouble with my family?!" His voice erupted, reverberating through the chamber like the relentless beat of a war drum.

With a resounding crack, his palm slammed down onto the table. The ancient spiritwood groaned under the weight of his wrath, splintering at the edges as if recoiling from his fury. Tea spilled violently from his cup, hissing as it met the heated floor tiles beneath him.

Startled, his young assistant, Xiao Ren, who had been meticulously organizing scrolls nearby, jolted at the sound. He nearly lost an entire stack, his eyes widening in shock, his face a mask of pale disbelief. "M-Master?" he stammered, his voice barely above a whisper.

Li Tianyuan paid him no heed. His gaze burned with an intensity that seemed almost palpable, his qi flaring in golden arcs that shimmered through the air like wild flames licking the sky. Outside, the bamboo forest responded eagerly to his fury — leaves rustled violently, stirred by an unseen force, while the illusory mist thickened, curling around the perimeter like a coiling serpent, ready to defend its lair.

With a decisive flick of his sleeve, Tianyuan reinforced the Illusory Veil Formation, layering it with a secondary seal of Heaven's Eye Concealment. The entire forest shimmered briefly before dissolving from the perception of spiritual senses, cloaking his sanctuary in impenetrable secrecy. Not even the most adept diviners would uncover his location now.

"Xiao Ren," he commanded, his voice low and as sharp as a drawn blade. "Send word to every disciple. The chamber where Shi Min cultivates must be guarded without pause. No one approaches. Not even a shadow."

Xiao Ren bowed deeply, almost tripping over his own feet in his haste to comply. "Y-Yes, Master! Right away!" he stammered, hastening out of the room.

As the boy scrambled away, Li Tianyuan turned back to the scroll, his fingers tightening around it until the parchment crinkled like dried leaves crushed underfoot.

"If these fools are already trembling at the thought of Mushu's ascension," he growled, his voice a low rumble, "what chaos will ensue when Shi Min breaks through?"

He strode to the edge of the pavilion, gazing out at the now-invisible forest, his robes billowing dramatically around him, animated by the sheer force of his qi. His piercing gaze swept over the land.

"They'll scheme. They'll whisper. They'll plot," Li Tianyuan mused, a disdainful snort escaping his lips, echoing like the breath of a dragon preparing to unleash its fiery wrath.

"A pack of jealous dogs, barking at the gates of a house they'll never enter," he sneered, tension coiling within him.

His eyes narrowed further, a fierce glint igniting within their depths.

"Let them come."

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Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for joining me on this journey! If you've enjoyed the story so far, please remember to vote, recommend, and leave your comments — your thoughts mean the world to me and help shape the Chapters ahead.

Your generous gifts and support are an inspiring force, fueling my passion to create even more exciting, heartfelt, and unforgettable scenes for you. Every gesture, big or small, reminds me why I love telling this story.

Let's keep building this world together.

With gratitude,

Sirius M

Chapter 389: THE BAMBOO FOREST SEALED

The Bamboo Forest Sealed: Hidden Valley Reacts

As dawn broke, the ethereal mist that clung to the earth began to lift, revealing the shimmering outline of the Verdant Bamboo Forest. It was at this threshold that the first wave of messengers, disciples, and clan warriors converged, each sent by their sects and families to uncover the enigma surrounding the recent lightning disruption that had rent the skies.

However, what they encountered was not a revelation.

Instead, they were met with an oppressive wall of silence.

The forest pulsed with an array of layered illusions — an intricate tapestry woven from Heaven's Eye Concealment, Mist Veil Formation, and an even older seal that throbbed with ancestral qi, like the heartbeat of the earth itself. Not a whisper penetrated its boundaries; no spiritual sense dared to breach the impenetrable veil. Even the vibrant songs of the birds ceased, as if nature itself held its breath.

Warriors exchanged wary glances, their unease palpable in the still air.

"This barrier wasn't here yesterday," a scout from the Hei Clan muttered, pressing his palm against the invisible wall, only to be repelled by a gentle yet firm hum, echoing like a distant heartbeat beneath solid stone.

A disciple from the Crimson Feather Sect frowned, her brow furrowed as she stared into the thick undergrowth. "This is Old Tianyuan's territory, isn't it?"

"Who else possesses the skill to weave such a dense formation?" another warrior replied grimly. "He must be shielding something of great significance."

"Or someone," murmured a rogue cultivator from the Moonshadow Courtyard, eyes narrowing into slits as he surveyed the landscape.

Speculation Brews

Whispers spread among the gathered onlookers like wildfire, igniting dry grass.

"Could it be the one who's broken through to Nascent Soul?" one voice questioned, laced with a mix of awe and fear.

"Is it one of Tianyuan's own disciples? But I never heard any of his disciples with that high level," another offered tentatively.

"Could it be Shi Min?"

"No, he hasn't made his way into the Hidden Valley recently," a third interjected, shaking their head.

"Then who could it be?"

High above, the Hei Clan matriarch observed from her perch on a spirit hawk, her grip on her fan tightening with anxiety. "If Tianyuan is indeed protecting a Nascent Soul cultivator, it could tip the balance of power. We need to uncover their identity."

In the grandeur of the Crimson Feather Pavilion, an elder slammed his staff against the polished floor, the sound reverberating like a thunderclap. "We dispatched three scouts. None has returned. The forest... it swallowed them whole."

In the Whispering Bamboo Grove, rogue cultivators, emboldened by the nature of their craft, engaged in heated debates.

"If it's Mushu, the right hand of Ling Li, then the Family Competition is already compromised," one argued fervently.

"Forget the competition," another interjected urgently. "If Ling Li possesses a Nascent Soul and Shi Min ascends next, we may be witnessing the birth of a new dynasty right before our eyes."

## Plans Begin to Form

By midday, the various factions had begun to mobilize, each with its own agenda and urgency.

The Hei Clan dispatched a spiritual observer to hover high above the forest, meticulously mapping the intricate fluctuations of qi that danced through the air.

The Crimson Feather Sect sent a diplomatic envoy, fully aware that their request for an audience with Li Tianyuan would likely be refused.

The Moonshadow Courtyard activated their shadow network, seeking whispers from the servants of Tianyuan, hoping for insights lost to the forest's shroud.

Meanwhile, the Beast Tamers unleashed a scent-tracking spirit fox, its nose keen and eager, to scout the perimeter and uncover any trace of the mysterious figure who had emerged.

Yet, their efforts proved fruitless. The forest remained sealed, its secrets tightly locked away.

And in the hushed stillness, the silence deepened, amplifying their mounting dread.

## Ling Li Watches

From a distance, Ling Li — known as Otako — observed the gathering unrest through a glimmering scrying mirror, her expression a canvas of inscrutable thoughts.

"They're restless," she murmured, her voice barely rising above a whisper. "And they're steeped in fear."

But her tone betrayed no hint of panic.

Only cool calculation.

She turned to Butler Oda, who stood like a silent sentinel behind her, unwavering.

"Let them wonder," she said, a glint of cunning in her eyes. "Let shadows consume them. The true storm lies yet unbidden."

## Shi Min's Inner Realm: The Stillness Before Ascension

Deep within the cryptic chamber concealed beneath the towering canopies of the Verdant Bamboo Forest, Shi Min floated suspended in a state of ethereal tranquility. His body was enveloped by a diaphanous cocoon of qi, intricately woven from strands of shimmering moonlight, radiant starlight, and the profound resonance of his ancestors. The air surrounding him lay in an eerie stillness, masking the tumult of energy brewing within.

Inside this cocoon, his inner realm flourished into a boundless, dreamlike expanse. Above him, a sky teemed with ever-shifting constellations that twinkled like scattered jewels, each star throbbing with fragments of his existence — memories intertwining with regrets, victorious moments mingling with stark truths. Beneath his feet sprawled a mirrored lake, its surface an exquisite tapestry reflecting not his physical form, but the very essence of his spirit — a luminous silhouette dancing between the realms of the mortal and the immortal.

Shi Min stood, a solitary figure at the heart of this celestial spectacle. Eyes gently closed, breath steady and rhythmic, yet a maelstrom of forces churned within him.

#### The Forces He Balances

**Time:** His lifespan flickered like a candle's flame, expanding and contracting as he hovered on the precipice of eternity. Shi Min felt the relentless pressure of each moment — every choice shaped by love and loss, every sacrifice etched into the fabric of his soul — a heavy cloak draped over him.

**Karma:** Radiant threads of golden light entwined around his wrists, intertwining with his being and forging an unbreakable bond to the legacies of his ancestry. Some threads radiated warmth, resonating with love and joy, while others were frigid, echoing pain and despair. Yet, Shi Min chose not to sever these connections. Instead, he embraced them, acknowledging the rich tapestry of his lineage.

#### Chapter 390: SEALED WITH ANCESTRAL WRATH

**Elemental Qi:** Powerful currents of wind, crystalline water, and celestial fire surged through his meridians, each one testing the bounds of his control. The elements whispered seductively of their own promises — liberation, annihilation, ascendance — but Shi Min remained steadfast, harmonizing their wild energies in a delicate dance of equilibrium.

Ancestral Echoes: Ethereal voices, woven from the fabric of his bloodline, stirred within the cosmos above him. He could almost hear his great-grandmother's melodic chant cascading like soft rain, his father's heavy silence like a weighty cloud, and his own solemn vow resonating like a thunderous heartbeat. They did not communicate through words but through an intricate rhythm. Shi Min listened intently.

### The Moment Approaches

At the heart of his spiritual lake, a radiant lotus began to unfurl — its delicate petals crafted from the purest essence of his soul. The blossom pulsed in synchrony with his heartbeat, glowing ever brighter with each inhalation, casting a warm, inviting glow around him.

Shi Min took a step forward, drawn irresistibly toward the luminous flower. The cocoon around him tightened momentarily before beginning to dissolve — not in a chaotic collapse, but in a magnificent transformation. The strands of qi merged seamlessly with his being, cascading into his flesh, his bones, his very soul.

No longer was he adrift in the cocoon of energy. He was ascending.

Not through brute force or struggle, but through the exquisite harmony of balance.

### Outside the Chamber

Just beyond the sealed chamber, Li Tianyuan sat in focused meditation, a serene sentinel aware of the shifts in the atmosphere. With a gentle breath, he opened his eyes, a knowing smile gracing his lips.

"He's close," he murmured, as the bamboo forest trembled in response, the leaves whispering secrets to one another.

And far beyond, in her own concealed sanctuary, Ling Li felt the same powerful pulse echoing through her being.

"He's ready," she whispered softly, anticipation threading through her voice.

But the world beyond them remained unaware, teetering on the edge of profound change.

Otako's Next Move: Shadows and Seals

Deep within her private sanctuary, ensconced in the embrace of seven layers of spiritual silence, Ling Li — also known as Otako — stood resolutely before a lacquered desk, its surface intricately carved with mesmerizing phoenix motifs that seemed to dance in the dim light. Her fingers danced across the aged parchment like a maestro conducting an unseen symphony, inscribing coded messages in an intricate cipher that only her select confidants could decode.

Each message bore the weight of urgency, succinct yet multi-faceted, veiling one meaning for her allies and another for the prying eyes of enemies who might intercept them.

"To the Twin Blades Sect: 'The wind shifts. Reinforce the southern ridge. The bamboo sings louder than it should.'"

"To the Iron Bell Monastery: 'The bell must not ring until the lotus blooms. Guard the silence.'"

"To my trusted informants: 'If the fox circles thrice, sever its tail. No one enters the forest. No one watches the cocoon.'"

With a solemn determination, Ling Li sealed each scroll with a drop of her crimson lifeblood, unleashing a tracking glyph that would pulse with warning should any attempt to tamper with her missives occur.

As she labored over her tasks, Butler Oda, his expression inscrutable yet alert, stepped from the shadows behind her.

"They're moving faster than we anticipated," he said, his voice calm yet laced with concern.

"They're afraid," Ling Li replied, a fierce glint igniting in her eyes. "Fear breeds recklessness. We must be precise — like the sting of a serpent."

Ling Li's gaze shifted to the wall across from her, adorned with an array of countermeasure scrolls, each imbued with powerful wards attuned to various threats: soul probes that sought the essence of one's spirit, illusion-breakers that shatter deceptive façades, and qi disruptors that unravel spiritual energies.

"Deploy the third tier," she commanded with unwavering authority. "And send a whisper to the Shadow Guards. If anyone dares breach Tianyuan's forest, I want their name, their sect, and their bloodline."

Oda bowed deeply, the weight of duty evident in his posture. "It will be done."

Ling Li's gaze drifted to the scrying mirror hanging on the wall, where Shi Min's cocoon pulsed faintly like a heartbeat in the dark.

"The storm is gathering," she murmured, a resolute determination settling within her. "And we shall meet it with unwavering strength."

The Breach Attempt: Illusion Unleashed

At the threshold of the Verdant Bamboo Forest, a lone scout from the Hei Clan crouched low, hidden behind a moss-covered boulder that felt alive under his touch. His name was Jin Wu, a mid-tier cultivator revered for his mastery of stealth and spiritual sensitivity.

Tasked with probing the barrier's defenses, he gripped a Qi Needle — a slender, ethereal talisman formulated to slice through illusory realms without triggering alerts. With a gentle mental command, it shimmered to life, hovering delicately in the air before darting into the mist, disappearing into the forest's enigmatic depths.

Jin Wu waited, anticipation coursing through him like wildfire.

Nothing happened.

With a cocky smirk spreading across his face, he murmured, "Too easy."

Jin Wu stepped forward, crossing the threshold with a sense of invincibility.

Instantly, the world around him twisted violently. The forest shimmered and dissolved, transforming into a mirror realm — a sinister caricature of the bamboo grove, where every leaf glinted as shattered glass and ominous shadows conspired in whispered secrets.

Panic surged as Jin Wu spun around in confusion. The familiar path had evaporated, and an oppressive black sky loomed overhead.

Before him, a figure clad in silver mist emerged, its presence both awe-inspiring and terrifying. The shape towered above him, its face obscured by a shimmering veil of light.

"Who seeks what is not theirs?" The figure's voice reverberated like thunder echoing through a cavern, sending shivers racing down Jin Wu's spine.

Summoning his courage, Jin Wu drew his blade. "I mean no harm. I was sent to—"

But the figure raised a hand, and in that instant, Jin Wu's weapon shattered into a cascade of metallic shards, his spiritual energy imploding inward as his knees buckled under the weight of despair.

"You were warned," the figure intoned solemnly. "This forest does not forget."

As swiftly as it had begun, the illusion crumbled around him, leaving him gasping for breath outside the barrier, drenched in sweat, his weapon lost, and his spiritual core trembling in agitation.

Frantically, he scrambled back toward his clan's camp, eyes wide with terror and disbelief.

"They've sealed it with ancestral wrath," he gasped to his comrades. "It's not just a barrier. It's a dire warning."