

## PROTEGE 391

### Chapter 391: FURY BENEATH THE FAN

#### Hei Clan's Reaction

The Hei Clan's encampment loomed atop a commanding ridge, overlooking the sprawling expanse of the Verdant Bamboo Forest, where the dense foliage swayed like a sea of emerald waves. Black banners snapped and fluttered above the tents like sentinels, silent yet ominous, as if warning of the tempest brewing within.

Inside the command tent, the atmosphere was suffocating, thick with fragrant incense that swirled around like a ghostly veil, mingling with the palpable tension that hung in the air. Jin Wu, pale and trembling like a leaf in a storm, knelt on the cold stone floor before the clan's formidable matriarch, Hei Yanshi. His forehead pressed against the unforgiving surface as he fought to steady his racing heart, his mind still reeling from the shock of the illusion he had unwittingly triggered.

"I—I didn't even see the formation activate," Jin Wu stammered, his voice a mere whisper. "It was like stepping into a dream... a nightmare. My blade shattered. My qi just collapsed. I barely escaped."

Hei Yanshi sat regally upon a raised platform, draped in obsidian silk robes that glimmered like the night sky, each fold exuding an air of authority and menace. In her hands, she wielded a fan carved from black jade, its intricate patterns whispering of ancient mysteries. She regarded Jin Wu with an unyielding gaze, her silence wrapping around the room like a shroud.

Then, abruptly, she snapped the fan shut, the sound piercing the tension like a whip crack, reverberating through the tent with a sharp finality.

"You were sent to observe," she pronounced, her voice frosty and contemptuous. "Not to provoke."

Jin Wu flinched under her piercing gaze. "I didn't mean—"

"You didn't mean to fail," she interjected, her tone slicing through his excuses. "But fail you did."

Around the tent, her advisors shifted uneasily, their expressions shadowed with apprehension. An elder leaned forward, concern etched across his features. "Matriarch, the formation he described... It's not merely defensive. It's ancestral — something from the depths of our lineage. Tianyuan either has awakened an ancient power or he has had it all this time but never revealed."

Another advisor nodded gravely. "If he's shielding a Nascent Soul cultivator and it's not Shi Min, then it must be Mushu. Ling Li's right hand. Li Lianyuan himself doesn't have any disciples with this level; it must be from another family branch."

Hei Yanshi's eyes narrowed, intensity flaring within them like ice catching fire.

"Then Ling Li has already made her move," she stated with chilling clarity. "And we are lagging behind."

Rising to her full height, her imposing aura flared, as if summoning the frost of a winter storm.

"Send word to the other clans. I demand vigilance on every disciple who has traversed the valley in the past month. Compile names, bloodlines, and weaknesses."

She turned her icy gaze to Jin Wu, who now quaked with dread.

"You will rest. Then you will return — not to intrude but to listen. The forest has its secrets. You failed to heed them."

Jin Wu bowed deeply, beads of sweat tracing paths down his forehead. "Yes, Matriarch."

As he was ushered away, Hei Yanshi pivoted to her inner circle, determination etched in every line of her face.

"If any from Ling Li's family member ascends next, the martial arts realm will no longer be governed by mere sects or clans. A dynasty will rule it."

Opening her fan with deliberate slowness, the air around her shimmered with potential.

"We must decide now — do we dare to challenge the storm, or do we learn to survive within its fury?"

Hei Yanshi harbors deep resentment towards Ling Li. Since childhood, her parents have frequently compared her to Ling Li. Now, as both are Clan leaders, Ling Li still consistently outperforms her. Hei Yanshi is beyond furious. "I will crush you ultimately!"

## Peonies Castle: The Night of Names and Needles

The moon lounged low in the sky, draping Peonies Castle in a veil of ethereal silver that sparkled against its ornately lacquered eaves and cascaded softly over the manicured gardens below. The cool night air, rich with the intoxicating aroma of jasmine, carried a gentle hum from the protective formations that enveloped the castle. Inside, the halls glimmered with the warm flicker of lantern light, creating a cozy glow that contrasted beautifully with the twilight outside, as the castle succumbed to the soothing rhythm of the evening.

Ling Li stepped through the towering main gate, her clothes still imbued with the musty scent of ancient scrolls and hushed conversations held in shadowed corners. Fresh from a clandestine meeting at Otako's concealed mansion, where she and Butler Oda had navigated the rising tensions broiling in Hidden Valley, her mind felt like a sharpened blade, and her spirit taut like a drawn bowstring. Yet, as she crossed the entryway, two small figures suddenly burst forth from the shadows, launching themselves into her embrace.

"Mom, you left us behind!" cried Kim Kim, her cheeks puffed in indignation, eyes glinting with a fierce mix of disappointment and longing.

"We wanted to watch the training!" Chi Chin chimed in, her arms crossed defiantly, the pout on her lips deepening as if it were a force of nature.

Ling Li blinked in surprise, then exhaled, a helpless smile breaking through her seriousness. "I didn't go to the training field, darlings. I had to handle matters in the office. I promise to take you with me next time, alright?"

Kim Kim tilted her head, considering her mother's words. "Oh..."

Chi Chin narrowed her eyes, her expression serious. "You have to promise, Mom."

Ling Li knelt down, her gentle fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from Chi Chin's forehead. "I promise," she said, her voice warm and reassuring.

In an instant, the twins' frowns melted away, replaced by radiant smiles as they each seized one of her hands, their small fingers wrapping around hers with triumphant glee.

"Mom," Kim Kim asked, tugging gently at her hand, "when will we continue our lesson with the needle technique?"

Ling Li opened her mouth to respond, but before she could speak, a deep voice echoed from the corridor, reverberating through the air like distant thunder.

"What needle technique?"

Chapter 392: EW, SWEATY KISS

Ling Li turned to see El Padre striding into the castle, his long coat trailing behind him like a dark cloud, casting a shadow over the sunny laughter in the room. Trailing closely behind was El Capitan, whose gait was both relaxed and alert, his keen eyes sweeping over the space with the instinct of a man who had weathered a thousand storms.

"You're back?" Ling Li queried, rising gracefully to her feet.

El Padre nodded, a flicker of weariness in his gaze. "We left after Lily's competition to monitor our territories in Shanghai. There were delays — trivial matters, all now settled."

His eyes drifted to the twins, curiosity evident. "So, what needle technique were you discussing?"

Ling Li crossed her arms, an amused smile playing on her lips. "I started teaching them acupuncture. But I need to forge needles that are small enough for their hands."

"Leave that to me!" El Capitan declared, stepping forward with a flourish.

"Thank you, Grandpa Captain!" the twins squealed in unison, their voices harmonizing like a joyous melody as they raced toward him.

"..."

"Ha ha ha ha!"

El Capitan's hearty laughter filled the room as he scooped them up, one in each arm, spinning them around with delight. "Since when did I become Grandpa Captain?"

Ling Li chuckled, shaking her head. "You walked right into that one."

Chin Chin, ever the mischief-maker, grinned mischievously. "You're called El Capitan! It means Captain, right? So we can call you Grandpa Captain!"

"..."

El Capitan raised an eyebrow, laughter rumbling in his chest. "Ha ha ha, okay, I get it. So what do you call El Padre?"

"He's Grandpa Father!" Chin Chin proclaimed proudly, her tone filled with the kind of earnestness that only a child could muster.

"Ha ha ha ha!"

El Padre "..."

The room erupted in laughter, the sound vibrant and warm, even Butler James — usually the epitome of composure — stood by the doorway, his shoulders shaking with mirth.

"You can call me Grandpa Du, and El Padre can be Grandpa Liu," El Capitan suggested, setting the twins down gently.

Kim Kim's eyes sparkled with curiosity as if she had stumbled upon a great secret. "Oh! Are those your real names?"

Together, they ambled through the castle's inner hall, the soft glow of lanterns enveloping them in a golden embrace.

"Yes," El Capitan replied, leaning down conspiratorially, his smile infectious. "My name is Du Guotai, and El Padre is Liu Takming."

He leaned closer, eyes twinkling with mischief. "But this is our secret, so you can't tell anyone."

Chi Chin's brows knitted together in concentration. "Ah? Your names are a secret to keep?"

El Capitan glanced at Ling Li, his eyes pleading for assistance in handling this delicate matter.

Ling Li snorted lightly. "You asked for it."

Turning to the twins, she explained earnestly, "Because your grandpas are involved in very serious work. Underground work. Mafia work. It's best not to reveal their names to anyone."

Kim Kim's eyes widened in astonishment, her voice a hushed whisper. "Like spies?"

"Like shadows," El Padre replied, his tone low yet playful, a smile dancing in his eyes. "But never mind that. What are you worried about?"

Chin Chin nodded solemnly, her small face serious. "We promise to keep the secret. But only if you help us with the needle lesson!"

El Capitan's laughter rang out again, rich and full. "Deal!"

As the family ventured deeper into the heart of Peonies Castle, the weight of the outside world receded into the night. Laughter echoed through the halls, weaving a tapestry of warmth and love, while secrets remained safe in the hands of those who knew how to guard them fiercely.

Dinner at Peonies Castle: Joy, Bonds, and the Storm Ahead

As dusk enveloped Peonies Castle, its golden light poured through the arched windows, bathing the grand hall in a warm, amber glow. Shadows danced gracefully across the polished wooden floors and luxurious silk-draped walls, conjuring an atmosphere of serene elegance. The air was fragrant with the enticing aroma of jasmine tea and roasted lotus root, mingling seamlessly with the gentle hum of footsteps echoing through the stone corridors.

One by one, the trainees emerged from the day's rigorous drills — dusty, flushed, and still bubbling with laughter. Their voices created a vibrant tapestry of youth and camaraderie, filling every corner of the castle with their energy.

Ling Li stood at the threshold of the dining hall, her arms folded against her chest, a soft smile playing at the corners of her lips. She radiated a motherly warmth that contrasted delightfully with her commanding presence.

"Go wash up so we can have dinner," she instructed, her voice firm yet tinged with affection.

Four Eyes, the eager soul he was, was the first to respond. He leaned in, planting a quick kiss on her cheek before bending down to offer each twin an affectionate kiss on the forehead, eliciting giggles from Kim Kim and a mock grimace from Chin Chin.

"Eww, sweaty kiss!" Chin Chin wrinkled her nose in playful distaste, prompting a chuckle from Ling Li as she watched the two dart away, infectiously spirited.

Moments later, Ren burst into the room, her clothes slightly disheveled, her eyes sparkling with exhilaration. Trailing behind him was Reginal, quiet and watchful, a contrast to Ren's buoyant energy.

"Mom!" Ren exclaimed, nearly bouncing off the walls. "Shinsei wants to take me as his grand-disciple! What do you think?"

Ling Li's eyes widened, a smile blooming across her face, suffused with pride. "That's wonderful news! We should start planning the ceremony right away."

Ren nodded enthusiastically, her excitement palpable. "Yes! Shinsei said you could handle all the arrangements — keep it small and simple, though."

With a knowing smile, Ling Li replied, "I'm familiar with his style. Let's arrange it for when your brother returns. Is that alright with you?"

Ren froze for a moment, then laughed with delight. "That would be perfect! Having Shi Min there will make it special. He'll be my senior brother now! How complicated but amazing!"

Her laughter echoed joyfully through the hall, lightening the mood, even as Reginal cracked a small smile.

Chapter 393: HE MUST. AND HE SHALL.

The Table Gathering

Soon, everyone was gathered around the grand dining table, steam rising from an array of delicious dishes. The cozy atmosphere hummed with warmth and vibrant conversation as the twins chattered animatedly between mouthfuls, Four Eyes poured fragrant tea, and Butler James stood discreetly nearby, observant and dignified, ensuring the meal flowed seamlessly.

Ling Li tapped her spoon gently against her bowl to draw attention.

"I have news," she announced, her voice slicing through the clamor like a blade.

Silence fell over the room like a heavy drape, everyone instinctively sensing the weight of her words.

"Mushu has broken through," she continued, her tone imbued with both excitement and gravity. "He's ascended to Nascent Soul."

Gasps rippled across the table, the murmurs swirling like startled leaves caught in a gust of wind.

"But his breakthrough has stirred unrest in Hidden Valley," she warned, her gaze darkening with concern. "Clans and sects are already mobilizing. And when Shi Min ascends..."

She hesitated, the tension coiling in the air.

"...the chaos will deepen."

Ren's chopsticks halted, suspended mid-air, his expression shifting from excitement to dread. "Mom... will Shi Min be in danger?"

In a gentle, reassuring motion, Four Eyes reached across the table and took Ling Li's hand in his own, his voice barely above a whisper. "Will he be alright?" he asked, the gravity of their situation etched into his expression.

Ling Li's gaze drifted towards the flickering lanterns above, her voice softening as if lost in memories. "Truthfully... I'm not overly concerned about the political turmoil. The chaos, the factions — they behave with predictable patterns."

She swallowed hard, her eyes glistening, not with tears, but with a deep-seated fear. "What haunts me is the heavenly tribulation."

Her words hung in the air like an ominous cloud, casting a chill that settled over the room.

A shiver coursed through the guests, and even the twins halted their playful banter, sensing the shift in atmosphere.

Ling Li's gaze grew distant, her thoughts drifting back to tumultuous past experiences — she had witnessed tribulations before, had felt the very fabric of reality wrench apart, the judgment looming like a dark storm, testing the very essence of souls.

Four Eyes tightened his grip around her hand. "Shi Min has always been strong. With the Nirvana Elixir you gave him, he'll succeed. He must. And he shall."

Ling Li nodded solemnly, her fingers intertwining with his, grounding her in the moment.

"I know," she whispered, the weight of her concerns pressing heavily upon her. "But even the strongest souls can be pushed beyond their limits."

Silence enveloped the table, heavy and contemplative.

Outside, a low rumble of thunder echoed in the distance, the first murmurs of an approaching storm.

The trainees bled, screamed, laughed, and rose again.

Days melted away like shadows at dusk, yet the air was thick with the tang of sweat, the dull ache of bruises, and the resonant echoes of war cries that pierced the heavy atmosphere. The three-week training had reached a crescendo, transforming the field into a relentless crucible of grit and resilience. Dust swirled through the air, a haze that clung to the skin like a second layer. Qi erupted in vibrant flares — brilliant blues, fiery golds, and deep crimsons — each ferocious clash a testament to the trainees' metamorphosis amid exhaustion.

At the heart of this chaotic symphony loomed the Seven Shah — masters of unyielding discipline and representations of the brutal beauty of refinement. They did not raise their voices. They did not offer commendations. Instead, they moved with quiet intensity, and the trainees followed their lead — or succumbed to their limitations.

Veyron, the enigmatic Shah of Dusk, wielded silence as his weapon, guiding warriors like Four Eyes through the intricate dance of shadow arts and aura manipulation. His training was a labyrinth of psychological challenges, where clarity and chaos intertwined. Trainees fought in total darkness, blindfolded, relying solely on the subtle whispers of their own qi and the instincts honed by desperation and fear.

Kael, the towering Shah of Steel, embodied relentless power as he drilled his disciples in the intricate mastery of swords and the art of battlefield awareness. His training was an unyielding tide, with every swing of the blade and every precision movement forged in the fires of repetition until they became

instinct, where sparring matches concluded only when the sound of the blade cutting through air resonated like a warrior's victory song.

Aeris, the swift Shah of Wind, embodied unpredictability with an agility that left the air crackling in his wake. He led his group through leaps that defied gravity and unrivaled movements across suspended platforms. Trainees soared through wind tunnels and engaged in frantic battles mid-air, their footwork a dazzling display of grace and control as they danced with the very essence of the skies.

Pyrrha, the fierce Shah of Flame, embodied passion and unyielding spirit, sculpting warriors from the heart of fire itself. His training grounds were volcanic landscapes, where the air shimmered with heat and trials tested pain thresholds and flame control in volatile bursts. His students emerged from the flames scarred yet reborn, each burn etching a story of resilience on their skin.

Thalos, the steadfast Shah of Earth, stood immovable as mountains, imparting lessons in endurance and terrain mastery. His disciples endured crushing meditations beneath massive stones, balanced precariously upon shifting stone pillars, and learned to resonate with the pulse of the land coursing through their veins, grounded and ancient.

Liora, the serene Shah of Light, personified clarity and precision, guiding her trainees through the labyrinth of illusion and mental fortitude. His sessions were cerebral landscapes dominated by spiritual puzzles and mirrored traps, pushing them to confront their own fears and the shadows of deception lurking within.

Nerun, the fluid Shah of Echo, wove rhythm into combat, training his disciples in the art of sound qi and resonant fighting. His practice sessions thrummed with vibrations, sonic meditations, and disorienting echo fields that demanded internal harmony while exposing the fragility of external awareness.

The training field pulsed with the clash of weapons, the crackling weave of qi, and the ragged breaths of those who refused to yield. The air vibrated with life; the trainees bled, screamed, laughed, and, with determination etched on their faces, rose time and again.

Some bore broken bones, remnants of their struggle. Yet within them, the spirit remained unbroken.

## Chapter 394: SHI MIN'S TRIBULATION STARTS

### Ling Li Watches: A Mother's Storm

From the silverleaf tree's gentle shade, Ling Li stood with her arms tightly folded, a fortress against the world. Her gaze, sharp and unyielding, followed the chaotic whirl of movements on the training field, tracking every stumble and surge of glowing qi. But her mind drifted like a leaf carried by the wind — far from the present.

In two days, this rigorous training would culminate, leading them onward to Hidden Valley, where the 'Eye' would open. Yet, Shi Min remained ensconced in his mysterious seclusion, absent from the tumult of it all.

Her eyes wandered skyward, where the blue stretched infinitely, deceptively serene. A chilling recollection swept through her — a tempest glorifying Mushu's ascension, a bluster of twenty-five bolts of blinding lightning, and the wrath of heaven that had roared in fury.

A tightening gripped her heart. "How many lightnings will Shi Min have?" she whispered, her voice barely a breath against the heavy silence.

She wrapped her arms around herself, the chill she felt nothing to do with the wind that rustled the leaves but with haunting memories of anguish long past. Her fingers clawed into her sleeves, knuckles pale against the soft fabric, as visions of fallen cultivators and unraveling souls flickered through her mind. She had witnessed mothers burying their sons, the grief palpable in the air.

And now, her only son stood alone in the chamber ahead — confronting the tumultuous will of the heavens.

### A Moment of Stillness

From behind her, Four Eyes approached, his presence a quiet understanding amid her turmoil. He said nothing, merely standing beside her, providing an anchor of silent solidarity.

Ling Li did not steal a glance in his direction. The weight of her gaze remained fixed on the sky above, where anticipation shimmered like electric tension. Somewhere among the clouds, a storm began to stir, ominous and electric, heralding a reckoning she could not yet fathom.

### The Sky Trembles: Shi Min's Tribulation Begins

It commenced with a faint whisper.

A delicate shift in the air, barely perceptible to the untrained eye — yet to those finely attuned to the intricate dance of qi, it was as clear as a bell tolling in the silence. The atmosphere thickened, laden with an electric tension, as if the heavens themselves were poised in breathless anticipation.

Above Hidden Valley, the sky darkened — not with the brooding menace of storm clouds, but draped in an ethereal, silvery shroud, as if the sun had retreated behind a gossamer veil of spirit mist. Flocks of birds erupted from the treetops, their cries frenzied and disoriented, echoing across the valley like shards of glass. The bamboo leaves stood frozen for a heartbeat, then rustled in a syncopated rhythm that warred with the gentle breeze.

In the heart of the Verdant Bamboo Forest, the protective formations surrounding Shi Min's chamber pulsed ominously — once, then again — like the steady thrum of a heartbeat entwining with something far grander.

Inside the sealed sanctuary, the air shimmered with an otherworldly glow.

The temperature plummeted, leaving an icy breath on the skin, only to surge upward, igniting a fierce warmth within — the spiritual pressure crescendoed, thickening like the prelude to a storm.

Those Who Felt It First

Li Tianyuan, seated in deep meditation at the chamber's threshold, opened his eyes, his breath catching in his throat like a startled bird.

"It's beginning," he whispered, urgency lacing his tone.

Slowly, he rose, his robes swirling around him like ripples in a pond, as the rising qi enveloped him. Beneath his feet, the earth hummed softly — not from physical tremors but from a profound resonance. This kind heralds impending judgment from the cosmos.

Far across the valley, Ling Li halted mid-step, suspended in a moment of anticipation.

She raised her gaze to the heavens, where the clouds above Peonies Castle remained deceptively straightforward, but her heart thundered with foreboding.

She felt it ripple through her bones.

It coursed through her veins like wildfire.

In the charged stillness between heartbeats, she breathed the name of fate. "Shi Min..."

The Valley's Uproar

In the Hei Clan's encampment, a spiritual observer shot upright, sending scrolls fluttering to the ground like fallen leaves.

"Another tribulation?" he gasped, disbelief etched across his features. "Already?"

In the Crimson Feather Pavilion, the bells chimed with an uncanny resonance, ringing without the presence of wind. Elders exchanged wary glances, their faces pale with foreboding.

"It's not over," one elder intoned gravely. "There's more on the horizon."

In the Moonshadow Courtyard, a rogue cultivator watched, wide-eyed, as his cup slipped from his grasp and shattered. "That energy isn't remnants from the previous storm. It's fresh — ascending, alive."

The valley stirred, a living entity awakening from slumber.

Factions braced themselves, tension crackling in the air like an unspent bolt of lightning.

And the sky, once still, began to roil and churn ominously.

The First Crack

A singular rumble reverberated across the valley — deep, resonant, and distant, yet unmistakably clear.

It was not the growl of thunder.

It was the harbinger of judgment — a sound born from the very fabric of the heavens, preparing to unleash their decree.

And deep within the sealed chamber, Shi Min opened his eyes, radiant luminescence shining forth.

He exhaled, a single breath that flowed like a tidal wave.

And the storm answered.

Preparing for the Worst: Ling Li and Li Tianyuan Await the First Bolt

The sky above Hidden Valley was no longer a serene expanse; it had begun to churn ominously. Not with winds or clouds, but with an oppressive spiritual pressure — thick and electric, an ancient force that stirred a primal fear deep within. Birds scattered from the branches, overcome by instincts honed through eons, and cultivators instinctively held their breath as a heavy silence enveloped the air. It was the unmistakable herald of cosmic scrutiny, a signal that the heavens were preparing to lower their gaze.

Within the confines of the Verdant Bamboo Forest, the protective formations surrounding Shi Min's secluded chamber pulsed as if alive, throbbing with a fervent energy. Ancestral qi shimmered in the air like a mirage; the very trees seemed to groan under the weight of divine judgment, their leaves trembling in anticipation of the impending storm.

Chapter 395: THE FIRST BOLT IS NEAR

Li Tianyuan stood resolutely at the edge of the chamber, his robes flowing like dark waves caught in an unseen tide, billowing around him in a powerful gust of energy. His eyes, sharp and piercing, remained locked on the tumultuous sky. At the same time, his hands were clasped behind his back — except for his fingers, which twitched with barely repressed tension.

He had fortified every seal, crafted layers of illusions, barriers, and ancestral wards, each designed to shield against the onslaught of what was to come. Yet in his heart, he knew that none of it could truly stop the reckoning looming on the horizon.

Just then, Ling Li glided into view, her footsteps swift yet eerily silent, her face drawn and pale beneath the flickering lantern light. The sight of her ignited a flicker of hope amidst his worry.

"He's close," Tianyuan said, urgency threading through his voice.

Ling Li nodded gravely, her gaze fixed on the violent hues of the sky. "I felt it — the pulse, the unforgiving shift."

She stepped closer to him, drawing strength from his presence, her arms wrapped tightly around her body as if to hold herself together. "The first bolt is near."

Tianyuan's jaw tightened, a grim determination set upon his features. "We must be ready."

The Weight of a Mother's Fear

Ling Li's breath hitched in her throat, a fragile gasp that betrayed the tempest of emotions surging within her. Memories flooded back, vivid and haunting— her tribulation, the harrowing display of forty bolts, each one more ferocious than the last. She had emerged victorious, but at a price—barely clinging to her strength. But now, her son, Shi Min... her only son...

"How many bolts will he face?" she whispered, each word a prayer laden with dread.

Li Tianyuan did not respond, his silence echoing with unspoken fear. Instead, he raised his hand, activating the Heaven's Veil Formation, which shimmered into existence — a dome of translucent light that glistened with ethereal brilliance above the chamber. While it wouldn't block the inevitable lightning, it would contain the fallout, a desperate measure in the face of impending chaos.

Ling Li stepped closer to the barrier, her fingers lightly brushing against its cool surface. Inside, she could feel Shi Min's qi surging — a steady, insightful pulse of energy that radiated strength, yet trembled ever so slightly under the weight of the divine providence pressing down. He was preparing himself, aligning with the forces of the cosmos, bracing against the tempest that threatened to engulf him.

But the heavens were merciless.

### The First Crackle

A low rumble resonated across the valley, deep and foreboding, sending ripples of unease through the earth. The sky cracked open, though only slightly, a prelude to chaos. Lightning flickered — a single, sinuous thread arcing through the clouds, not yet striking but eerily marking its target with a deadly intent.

Ling Li's heart seized, the sight sending a shudder of fear racing through her veins.

Tianyuan turned to her, eyes darkening with resolve. "If it becomes worse than Mushu's trial, we must intervene."

Ling Li shook her head, an ember of defiance igniting within her. "Only if he falters. Only if he calls out."

His gaze narrowed, concern etched into every feature. "And if he doesn't?"

Ling Li's voice emerged as a fragile whisper, a fragile thread of belief in an overwhelming storm. "Then we trust him."

There, they stood together — two titans of cultivation and the guardians of legacy — united in purpose, watching as the heavens prepared to cast their judgment upon the soul of a boy who had never once asked to be extraordinary. The tension dripped like rain on parched ground, each moment stretching into eternity as they braced for the trials ahead.

The Lightning That Was Not Ordinary

"Everyone! Seek shelter!" a frantic voice pierced the air, its urgency echoed by others in a crescendo of panic.

Then another.

And Another.

The cry rippled through Hidden Valley like a shockwave.

The alarm spread through Hidden Valley like a wildfire, igniting fear in every heart. Parents seized their children, wrapping them in trembling, protective arms. Vendors abandoned their colorful stalls mid-sale, their goods forgotten in the chaos. Disciples fled from the training fields, their qi flaring with anxiety, illuminating the dusk like scattered stars. Even the birds, finely attuned to the spiritual vibrations of the world, sought refuge under the eaves of temple roofs.

The sky had transformed into a deep violet-black tapestry, threaded with shimmering veins of silver light that pulsed rhythmically, as if the universe itself was breathing. Yet, in this ominous moment, it was not thunder that followed; it was an unsettling stillness.

A silence blanketed the valley, so profound it made the very ground beneath feel as if it were about to swallow all sound.

Then, the first crack resonated through the void.

Not a mere bolt of lightning, but a fracture — an exquisite rift carved through the heavens with a precision that defied chaos, like a celestial blade slicing through the fabric of reality.

From that rift, lightning began to manifest — not as chaotic strikes, but as a deliberate gathering. It twisted and coiled like a mighty serpent, its luminous body glimmering with an aura of power and judgment.

## The Factions React

In the Hei Clan's encampment, the matriarch, Hei Yanshi, stood transfixed, her ornate fan quivering in her grasp.

"That's not an ordinary storm," she murmured, her voice barely rising above the tension. "That's something far older, something lost to time."

Her advisors scrambled, faces pale as they rushed to reinforce their protective barriers, but even their meticulously woven formations flickered dangerously under the phenomenon's growing pressure.

In the Crimson Feather Pavilion, the elders sank to their knees, fervently chanting prayers — not for their own safety, but as solemn witnesses to the unfolding event. One elder wept openly, his tears tracing pathways down his cheeks.

"This is not a mere tribulation," he said, voice shaking with emotion. "This is a reckoning — an unearthing of ancient truths."

Meanwhile, in the Moonshadow Courtyard, rogue cultivators, sensing the rise of raw power, abandoned their posts, retreating into the shadows of the caves. One shouted in terror, "It's not just Nascent Soul — it's an awakening of bloodlines long forgotten!"

## Chapter 396: THE ANNIHILATION

In the Beast Tamers' Grove, spirit beasts shrieked and strained against their bonds, their instincts screaming for freedom. A phoenix, caught in the frenzy, erupted into flames mid-flight, reborn in a chaotic blaze of panic and brilliance.

Even the Seven Shahs, scattered throughout the training field, paused their rigorous training, halted by the unprecedented disturbance.

Veyron squinted at the sky, narrowing his eyes in contemplation. "That aura... It's not solely Shi Min's. It's ancestral, echoing through time."

Pyrrha clenched his fists, a fierce determination flaring within him. "The fire in the sky responds to him — does it acknowledge his power?"

Liora leaned closer, whispering with awe, "He's shattering the illusions even the heavens have cast."

### Ling Li and Tianyuan Brace

Back in the serene embrace of the Verdant Bamboo Forest, Ling Li and Li Tianyuan stood beneath the trembling canopy of leaves, shadows playing tricks as the branches swayed.

The first bolt had yet to fall.

Yet the sky above was no longer a dome of azure; it was a reflective mirror, capturing every sin, every virtue, every pivotal choice Shi Min had ever carved into the tapestry of fate.

Ling Li's breath caught in her throat, her heart racing as reality blurred around her.

"Activate the Heaven's Root Barrier," Tianyuan commanded, layering the protective energy over their chamber, the atmosphere vibrating with his resolve.

"Once the first bolt falls," he continued with intensity, "we'll understand the true extent of what's coming."

Ling Li nodded, her voice barely a whisper amidst the mounting tension.

"Let it come," she declared, summoning her courage as the storm loomed ever closer.

Though both were acutely aware that, as cultivators, each individual must summon the strength within themselves to endure the fierce onslaught of tribulation lightning, there was an unspoken bond that hinted at deeper connections. Some Masters, ever watchful and protective, extend their formidable power to shield their disciples in times of peril. It was this very safeguard that they were meticulously preparing for, a silent agreement forged in the crucible of shared burdens, in case Shi Min stumbled at the precipice of his trials.

The First Bolt Falls

The sky fractured open.

Not with the rumble of thunder.

But with the sharp crack of bone snapping.

A jagged rift of blinding light cleaved the sky, and from this celestial fissure descended the first bolt — an imposing column of divine wrath. It surged through the clouds with a howl that was not merely sound but the very essence of will — the heavens' determination to test, to judge, to incinerate.

The bolt struck the Verdant Bamboo Forest with an earth-shattering roar, shattering the tranquil silence that enveloped the valley. Trees bowed under its might, their trunks splintering, stones cruelly fractured. The very air shimmered and rippled outward in concentric waves, warping light and sound like a disturbed mirror.

Within the sealed chamber, the bolt penetrated the protective formation like a spear piercing silk. In that instant, it found Shi Min.

Shi Min's Spiritual Core: The Moment of Impact

Inside the chamber, Shi Min sat cross-legged, enveloped in a radiant lotus of pure qi. His form pulsed with a soft luminescence, veins glowing with a golden light that breathed life into the stillness. Though his breath remained steady, his heart drummed like a war drum echoing in the silence of his confinement.

For days, he had sensed the watchful sky, a heavy gaze pressing down upon him. Now, it had unveiled its voice.

As the bolt made contact with his spiritual barrier, his entire inner realm erupted like a supernova. His consciousness was hurled into a tempest of light and fragmented memories.

Amidst a void peppered with stars, he stood surrounded by echoes of his past — his first spar with Shah of Flame, the warmth of his mother's touch soothing his fevered brow, the solemn vow he took to uphold the family name. Each memory flickered like a fragile lantern, only to be struck by a relentless lightning and shattered into radiant shards.

The heavens weren't merely testing his strength. They were demanding the essence of his truth.

The Response: Not Resistance, but Resonance

Shi Min chose not to resist.

He opened wide.

He embraced the bolt.

It coursed through his meridians, searing every channel, every node, igniting every fiber of his being. Bone creaked. His soul howled in torment. Yet he stood resolute, refusing to flinch or cry out.

Instead, he channeled.

He guided the furious lightning deep within his core, weaving it intricately into the lattice of his cultivation. The agony was indescribable, yet it was a cleansing fire. It incinerated his fear. It obliterated doubt. It shattered hesitation into nothingness.

His spiritual sea expanded, cracking open like an unyielding shell under pressure.

And from its depths, a second core began to bloom — brighter, richer, and infinitely more complete.

Outside: Witnesses to the Impossible

Ling Li stumbled backward as the bolt struck, her knees buckling beneath her. Four Eyes, who almost wrestled with El Padre to convince him to take him to Hidden Valley, grasped Ling Li's arm, his own face a canvas of disbelief and awe.

"That wasn't just a bolt," he murmured, trembling with reverence.

"That was a divine brand." El Padre, who was standing beside them, said.

Li Tianyuan's expression sharpened, his eyes narrowing with intensity. "No... this was merely the first."

Above them, the sky throbbed ominously once more.

The second bolt was already coalescing.

It was greater.

It was hungrier.

As the air thickened with anticipation, they braced for the unraveling of the heavens, knowing that the trials had only just begun.

The Descent of the Second and Third Bolts: The Annihilation Phase of Shi Min's Tribulation

As the Annihilation layer of Shi Min's tribulation unfurled, the heavens drew back their veils, seething with envy and wrath. It was not merely a tumultuous sky; it was a cacophony of divine fury that shook the very fabric of existence. The stage was set for an explosive purification, a dance between celestial chaos and the indomitable spirit below.

## Chapter 397: THE SKY IS ANGRY AND THIRST FOR BLOOD

### Annihilation: The Second and Third Bolts Fall

The air thickened with tension as the sky erupted — not with a rumble, but with a soul-piercing scream. The second bolt descended like a jagged spear forged in the heart of a star, its ethereal edges seething with an intense celestial fire. It crashed into the chamber with cataclysmic force, shattering the intricate outer formation — not merely the protective seal, but the illusory veil that had cloaked Shi Min's presence from the watchful heavens. They had found him. And their fury was palpable.

Instantly, the third bolt descended, a furious beast of light spiraling through the ether. It intertwined with the second, a luminous dragon coiling in a primal embrace before plunging into the ground with a thunderous roar that reverberated across the valley. The Verdant Bamboo Forest trembled violently, its towering trees bowing down in reverence to the unleashed chaos. Rocks splintered and cracked under the mighty force, and the very air split asunder, a cacophony of destruction echoing throughout the land.

### Inside the Chamber: Shi Min Endures

Within the sanctuary of the chamber, Shi Min's body quaked — not from agony, but under the tremendous weight of Annihilation's embrace. The molten lightning clawed into him, transcending mere flesh to invade his very essence. It tore through his meridians like a raging storm, unraveling every delicate thread of qi he had painstakingly cultivated over countless lifetimes. His spiritual lattice, once a fortress of strength, shattered into numerous fragments. The divine flames seared his soul — not with intent to obliterate, but to purify; to eradicate every vestige of impurity, every trace of weakness.

Breathing heavily, Shi Min felt the fire within him illuminate his skin, a radiant glow amidst the tempest. His bones thrummed with an electric resonance, yet he remained silent, a statue carved from unwavering resolve. He did not scream, did not resist the cataclysm. Instead, he surrendered to the

tempest, guiding the force of destruction deep within, allowing it to raze the old, dilapidated structures of his being. He understood well what lay beyond this tribulation.

### The Heavens' Jealousy

Above, the celestial expanse pulsed with a rich tapestry of emotions — not the tranquil serenity befitting the divine, but a seething, palpable jealousy. The heavens had caught a glimpse of the Nirvana Elixir coursing through Shi Min's veins. They had sensed the ancestral protection that wove itself intricately around the chamber, enveloping him in a potent shield of love and legacy. And with that knowledge came an insatiable ire. The heavens, ancient and proud, could not bear to see a mortal so safeguarded, so prepared, so cherished. Their desire became a singular focus: to shatter his spirit. Not merely to test, but to truly annihilate.

The heavens gathered their fury, summoning more lightning — not in mere sequences, but in layers, thickening the storm overhead, signaling that Annihilation was far from over; it was building to a monstrous crescendo.

### Shi Min's Response: The Stillness Within

In the eye of this storm, Shi Min's spiritual core flickered at the edge of collapse before igniting into a stable blaze. His soul, though scorched and battered, began its shift. The shattered lattice of his spirit was not merely reassembled; it was reforged, firmer and more radiant than before. He sat at the heart of chaos, illuminated by a golden light, his mind a serene oasis amidst the storm. Fear held no dominion over him.

He was ready.

## Outside: The Valley Watches in Dread

Ling Li clutched the edge of the protective barrier, her knuckles paling under the strain. "He's still holding," she murmured, eyes wide with hope and dread intermingled.

Li Tianyuan's gaze sharpened, the weight of apprehension settling in. "The heavens are not finished with him. Their anger simmers."

Four Eyes stepped forward, his resolve palpable in the air. "Let them unleash their fury. Shi Min will stand firm."

Above them, the sky pulsed once more, a foreboding pulse resonating throughout the valley. The Purification layer was imminent, ready to incinerate all that remained.

## The Seven Shah Feel the Storm

Though miles from the concealed serenity of Hidden Valley, the Seven Shah sensed the tremor ripple through the spiritual plane, a profound resonance akin to a gong striking deep within their souls.

Veyron sat in his shadow chamber, a sanctuary of silence and introspection, when the sudden onrush of energy flickered the faint aura surrounding him. He opened his eyes, a grave expression spreading across his face. "The storm has begun," he murmured, his voice low and somber. "And it's not merely lightning. It's pure wrath."

Kael, engaged in a spirited duel with a novice, felt the pulsating vibration travel through his blade like a warning shiver. He halted mid-swing, lowering his weapon with a frown. "That's not a mere breakthrough," he said, eyes narrowing as the air thickened with foreboding. "That's a challenge."

Aeris perched upon a towering pillar of swirling wind, his hair dancing wildly in the tempest of energy. He closed his eyes, attuned to the atmospheric tension, feeling an unsettling pressure all around him. "The sky is angry," he whispered, the winds carrying his voice away. "And it thirsts for blood."

Pyrrha stood, grounding himself, his fists tightening as the surrounding heat flared with unbearable intensity. "That's Annihilation," he gasped, dread threading through his words. "The type that leaves no room for mercy."

Thalos felt the ground beneath him pulse with an ominous energy. As he placed a hand down on the earth, he sensed its turmoil. "The heavens are jealous," he declared, his voice rippling with certainty. "They long to shatter what they cannot bend to their will."

Liora, engrossed in his illusions, dropped his crystal with a shattering clang that echoed like a cracked promise. "Shi Min is being peeled away," he said, disbelief flooding his voice. "Layer by layer."

Nerun, meticulously tuning a resonant bell, heard it fracture under pressure, a poignant sound that pierced the air. He looked up, his eyes wide with alarm. "The rhythm is wrong. The heavens... they're screaming."

Chapter 398: THE PURIFICATION

Chatty and Fatty Worry for Four Eyes

In the dimly lit gazebo at Peonies Castle, Chatty paced with frenetic energy, his fingers twitching anxiously as if they had a mind of their own.

"Where is he?" He muttered under his breath, glancing towards the window where shadows danced ominously. "He promised he'd return before sunset."

Fatty sat nearby, holding Lily's delicate hand within his own, her wide, fearful eyes wary of the darkening sky. "Four Eyes went to find Ling Li," Fatty said, trying to instill a sense of calm that felt just out of reach. "He's probably with her right now. Safe."

"But the sky — look at it!" Chatty pointed out, his voice rising with panic. "That's not normal lightning. That's... divine!"

Fatty pulled Lily closer, shielding her from the growing unease outside. "It's Shi Min," he murmured, a subtle tremor of concern in his voice. "He's ascending."

Lily's bottom lip trembled, a soft whimper escaping her. "Will he die?"

Fatty shook his head, though foreboding gnawed at his heart. "Not Shi Min. He's stronger than anyone I've ever known."

Chatty ceased his restless pacing, a knot of dread tightening in his stomach. "Then why does it feel like the heavens want to kill him?"

Silence enveloped them, thick and suffocating, as their questions hung in the air, unanswered.

Shinsei and Ren: The Hidden Temple Trembles

Within the temple's concealed depths, Shinsei and Ren sat cross-legged, encircled by a fragile glow of flickering lanterns and the scent of old scrolls, reeking with time's passage.

Ren's eyes burst open, wide with alarm. "Master... do you feel that?"

Shinsei remained still, a mountain of serenity amid chaos. Yet the air around him throbbed with restless energy.

"Yes," he acknowledged, the weight of knowing pressing on his shoulders. "The tribulation has commenced."

Ren rose abruptly, fists clenched in determination. "It's Shi Min, isn't it?"

Shinsei nodded solemnly, the corners of his mouth drawn tight. "The heavens are testing him. And their discontent is palpable."

Ren's voice wavered with confusion and hurt. "But... why? He's done nothing wrong."

Finally, Shinsei lifted his gaze, his eyes heavy with the burden of centuries. "Sometimes," he remarked with a tinge of regret, "the heavens don't punish wrongdoing. They punish potential."

Ren's breath caught in her throat, the truth striking like a thunderclap.

Shinsei stood resolutely, the gravity of the moment settling around him. "Come. We must prepare. If Shi Min endures this... the world as we know it shall change."

Purification: The Lightning That Burns Without Mercy

The sky throbbed ominously, a heartbeat echoing across the heavens. This time, the lightning did not roar — no, it hissed, an eerie sound reminiscent of silk being violently torn, or of breath being sucked through a clenched throat.

Then came the tenth bolt, slender yet fierce, a luminous ribbon of white-blue electric energy, its edges woven with strands of fiery gold. It descended, not with the violent crash of a storm, but with a haunting grace.

It seeped.

It flowed through the chamber's defenses like molten gold spilling through cracks in ancient stone, bypassing barriers and formations as if they were mere illusions. This lightning was not a harbinger of destruction; it was a beacon of refinement.

The Purification phase had begun.

Inside the Chamber: Shi Min's Trial of Flame

Shi Min's body arched rigidly as the bolt enveloped him — not with brutality, but with an intimate caress. It wound itself around his bones, coiling through his organs, intertwining with the very threads of his soul, igniting a burning that transcended the physical realm.

Not scorch.

Not sear.

Burn away.

Every impurity coursing through his blood was consumed in a brilliant inferno, ash and smoke spiraling upwards. Every flaw in his spiritual lattice melted away, molded anew in the crucible of his essence. Lingering emotions — fear, doubt, anger — were laid bare, stripped of their facades and tested against the raw, unyielding light of truth.

His skin radiated from within, veins aglow like rivers of molten gold threading through the shadow of his form. Each breath he took was deliberate, a testament to his resilience; he did not scream.

But he shook.

His soul quivered as the lightning peeled back the layers that defined him — stripping him down to the very essence of his being. Visions burst forth in a kaleidoscope of memories.

He saw his mother's tears, glistening like dew drops at dawn. He heard his sister's laughter, ringing like chimes on a summer breeze. He glimpsed his own face, once youthful, frail, riddled with fear.

And then — all faded to nothingness.

Just light.

Just truth.

The Heaven's Fury Deepens

Above, the heavens roared with wrath. They had anticipated defiance. They had prepared for collapse. But Shi Min stood unwavering. He did not resist the powerful purification; he welcomed it, embracing the transformative fire that raged around him.

And that only fueled the rage of the heavens.

They watched as the Nirvana Elixir stabilized his core, ancestral qi encircled his soul like a guardian spirit, and an unyielding love enveloped him, forming a shimmering barrier against the storm. They loathed it.

They loathed Shi Min.

And so, they conjured more lightning — not as mere bolts, but in cascading waves of fury and blinding brilliance. The purification would be relentless, a tempest of immaculate judgment.

Outside: Ling Li Feels the Flame

Ling Li staggered as the fifth bolt struck, her senses overwhelmed. She felt it deeply — not in flesh and bone, but through the unbreakable bond she shared with Shi Min. Her very essence pulsed with heat, with a fusion of pain and clarity.

"He's burning," she breathed, her voice barely a whisper lost in the chaos.

Four Eyes steadied her, his grip firm against the swirling tempest. "He's being refined," he reassured her, though unease flickered in his gaze.

Li Tianyuan, determined and resolute, activated yet another layer of protective barrier, his expression darkening. "The heavens are escalating. They seek to shatter him before the final judgment."

Ling Li's eyes narrowed into slits of resolve. "Then let them try."

The storm loomed, and she was ready to stand by her son, heart and soul intertwined, against the fury that sought to consume them both.

Chapter 399: THE JUDGEMENT

Judgment: The Lightning That Sees the Soul

The fifth bolt cascaded down like an irrevocable verdict from the celestial realms. It did not descend with the raw, unbridled fury of annihilation, nor with the searing embrace of Purification. Instead, it arrived in an eerie silence — cold, calculated, and acutely aware. This was the harbinger of judgment.

The heavens had borne witness to Shi Min's resilience. They had recognized his illustrious lineage, his protective aura, and the Nirvana Elixir coursing through his veins. Yet, their scrutiny transcended the physical realm; they sought to unearth the veracity of his soul.

Inside the Chamber: The Mirror of Karma

As the bolt pierced Shi Min's spiritual core, the very fabric of reality began to dissolve around him. He was no longer confined within the chamber's walls. Instead, he found himself enveloped in an infinite void, illuminated by a pale, ethereal glow that cast long shadows — before him loomed an immense mirror, towering like a mountain, its surface undulating like a tranquil lake disturbed by a sudden gust.

Then came the revelations.

The mirror stirred to life, revealing haunting images from his past — the moment he chose to lie in defense of Ren, safeguarding her truth at the cost of his own. The agonizing hesitation when he failed to save a fellow disciple, the anger he suppressed when his efforts went unnoticed, the green-eyed monster lurking when Mushu ascended before him. And beneath it all, the paralyzing fear he had buried so deep that he didn't dare confront it himself.

Each memory struck him like a cascading bolt of lightning, infused with the bitter sting of guilt and shame. The sixth bolt followed with a crack of thunder. The seventh, each pulsating in rhythm with moments of ethical failure, each strike is more agonizing than the last. Shi Min collapsed to his knees in the void, his spiritual form flickering like a candle in a tempest. His soul quivered with the weight of his truth. Yet, through it all, he refused to avert his gaze.

The Core Hold

Shi Min inhaled deeply.

He acknowledged each flaw.

He began to forgive himself.

"I am not perfect," he whispered into the abyss. "But I am not false."

In response, the mirror splintered. The eighth bolt struck with an electrifying force. This was not a revelation of his past; it unveiled his future — a battlefield drenched in crimson and sorrow.

His mother wept in isolation.

Ren and Lily stood fractured and betrayed, and there he was, adorned with power but shrouded in solitude.

Shi Min's hands trembled, desperate for stability. "Is this the man I am destined to become?" he implored the silence.

But the heavens remained mute.

Then came the ninth bolt, followed by the tenth and the eleventh — each strike more brutal, more perocious, each a visceral examination of his very soul.

Outside: The Sky Weeps Fire

The clouds above Hidden Valley roiled like a living creature, pregnant with emotion. Lightning danced across the expanse of the sky in arcs of violet and gold that crackled with unrestrained energy. The wind howled not as a mere tempest but as a vessel of profound sorrow.

The heavens were not merely judging Shi Min; they were resenting him, aiming with relentless fervor to shatter his heart.

## Ling Li's Resolve

Ling Li stood at the edge of the barrier, hands trembling with a mix of fear and determination.

"He's entered the Judgment phase," she said, her voice laden with dread. "They're revealing everything to him. Every fear, every failure."

Four Eyes moved to her side, concern etching his features. "Can he withstand it?"

Li Tianyuan's voice was grave, laced with an urgency born from hope. "He must."

## Shi Min's Stand

Within the void, Shi Min ascended, his soul fractured yet resolute. His heart throbbed raw against the weight of his revelations, but his eyes shone with clarity.

"I will not be perfect," he proclaimed to the cosmos. "But I will be true."

In an explosion of light, the mirror shattered into countless fragments. The twelfth bolt struck, and with it, the Judgment phase culminated.

Shi Min had endured twelve bolts:

1–4: Annihilation

5–12: Judgment

Now awaited him, the full force of Purification, leading into the final, unforgiving phase: Tampering.

The Reckoning: A Storm of Fate and Fear

The storm overhead in Hidden Valley grew into something far more sinister than a mere cosmic disturbance; it became a turmoil that rattled the very pillars of power, devotion, and dread.

The Storm Grows: Bonds and Bloodlines Quake

The sky above Hidden Valley had twisted into a monstrous spectacle.

Lightning no longer struck from above — it hovered like a serpentine beast, coiling and pulsating with an electric rage. Thick clouds churned in an unnerving ballet, spiraling in shades of deep violet and molten gold, each infused with a fury born of the divine. The wind howled with an unsettling silence, carrying an invisible pressure that constricted the lungs and quickened the heartbeat.

In the dim gazebo back at Peonies Castle, Chatty grasped with such intensity that his knuckles turned ashen.

"Twenty bolts already," he murmured, panic threading through his voice. "It just won't relent."

Fatty was huddled on the floor, cradling Lily against him, her small frame trembling like a leaf in the fury of the storm. Her wide eyes gleamed with fear, her lips drawn pale from dread.

"Is it truly Shi Min?" she whispered, barely breaking the tension in the air.

Fatty nodded solemnly, dread washing over him. "It's him. I can feel it. The qi... It's unmistakable. But it's unraveling."

Chatty's eyes glistened with unshed tears as he turned to his friends. "Where is Four Eyes? He should be with Ling Li. He should be doing something."

Just then, Ren burst into the room, her coat clinging to her, drenched in sweat, her face flushed from exertion.

"I just came from Master Shinsei," she gasped, urgency lacing his words. "He's preparing a spiritual anchor. He believes that if Shi Min survives this trial, his soul will eclipse all of ours."

Fatty's gaze met Ren's, brittle with fear. "And if he doesn't make it?"

Ren fell silent, the weight of her unspoken response hanging heavy in the air.

She moved to the center of the room and knelt with purpose.

THUD

"I will pray," Ren declared, her voice resolute. "Not to the heavens above, but to Shi Min himself. Because he alone holds the fate of this storm in his hands."

Chapter 400: THE TAMPERING

The Clans and Sects: A World on Edge

Throughout Hidden Valley, the great powers were awakening from their complacency, sensing the gathering storm.

In the stronghold of the Hei Clan, Hei Yanshi stood, her gaze fixated on an intricate map of ley lines spread before her, her fan quivering in her grip. "Fifty bolts?" she whispered, dread mingling with exhilaration. "If he survives this, he will be untouchable."

Her advisors exchanged nervous glances. "Should we intervene?" one suggested.

"No," she snapped, her voice as sharp as lightning itself. "We observe. We prepare. And if the person falls... then we strike."

In the Crimson Feather Pavilion, elders convened in a solemn circle, their robes shimmering with protective talismans that flickered like starlight. "This is not merely a tribulation," one elder intoned gravely. "This is a declaration of war."

In the Iron Bell Monastery, monks rang the bell — not to summon the faithful, but as a warning to a world unready for the storm. "The heavens are envious," the abbot declared, his tone heavy with foreboding. "And envy is the most merciless of judges."

In the Moonshadow Courtyard, a gathering of rogue cultivators weighed their options as whispers of panic swirled among them. "If he survives," one warned, his voice low and tense, "he'll come for us. And he will remember those who doubted him."

In the Beast Tamers' Grove, spirit beasts cried out in a haunting chorus of despair, a white tiger howled from within its confines, breaking free to bow to the tumultuous sky. "The bloodline stirs," its handler murmured, eyes wide with awe and fear. "This storm is more than a divine clash; it is ancestral."

The Entire Valley Holds Its Breath

As the lightning count surged to thirty bolts, each flash exploded with an intensity fiercer than the last.

Each bolt became a trial — testing the body, soul, and the very fabric of destiny itself.

Yet, through it all, Shi Min stood resilient.

The valley held its breath,

Suspended in time,

It did not slumber.

It remained silent,

Watching with bated breath,

And waiting for the storm to unfold.

Tampering Phase: Bolts 31–40 — The Soul Begins to Crack

The Tampering phase of Shi Min's tribulation begins. The lightning grows more ferocious, testing the limits of his mortal body.

The thirty-first bolt descended like a harbinger of destiny, a relentless judgment that struck without mercy. It neither ignited nor condemned; instead, it wielded the power to reshape. Thus, the Tampering phase commenced.

Having obliterated, refined, and scrutinized Shi Min, the heavens now sought to reconstruct him, but the process was anything but tender. Each bolt rang out like the hammer of an ancient blacksmith, reverberating through the very core of his being. With every collision, his soul, body, and fate were remolded, reshaped into something new and unrecognizable.

The thirty-second bolt shattered his spiritual lattice, violent cracks echoing through his essence as it imploded under the immense pressure, only to frantically reweave itself anew, striving to hold together amidst the chaos.

The thirty-third bolt drove deep into his dantian, unleashing a torrent of raw celestial qi that surged through his veins like wildfire, igniting every dormant cell in a fervor of primal energy.

The thirty-fourth bolt struck with fierce precision at his spine, sending violent tremors cascading through his nervous system, a symphony of pain and awakening that rattled his very foundation.

Then came the thirty-fifth bolt, a direct assault on his heart — each pulse reverberated like thunder, testing not just the sinew of his flesh, but the very essence of his humanity. It scrutinized his emotional core, probing his capacity to love, to withstand suffering, and to cling to the fragile thread of his mortal identity.

Shi Min clenched his jaw, a fierce determination flaring within him as radiance coursed through his body. His soul stood resolute, his mind a fortress of unyielding will. But in the depths of this celestial

trial, one truth remained: his body was still bound by mortality, a delicate vessel caught in the tempest of divine reformation.

The Fortieth Bolt: Blood and Collapse

When the fortieth bolt descended, it came not as light, but as weight.

It crushed the chamber with a force that bent space.

Shi Min's body convulsed.

His knees buckled.

And then—

He spat blood.

A thick stream of crimson splattered across the chamber floor, sizzling as it touched the qi-infused stone.

His vision blurred.

His breath faltered.

His soul remained intact — but his body was breaking.

Outside, Ling Li gasped, her hand flying to her chest.

"He's faltering," she whispered.

Li Tianyuan's eyes narrowed. "We need to—"

Celestial Cavern: The Ancestor Awakens

Deep within the Celestial Cavern, a realm shrouded in the whispers of ancient secrets and illuminated by the soft glow of mystical runes, an eight-hundred-year-old cultivator stirred from his slumber.

His name was Li Shenwu — the venerable patriarch of the Li Clan, a figure enveloped in legend, seldom glimpsed yet profoundly revered.

As his eyelids lifted, a golden luminescence radiated from his irises, casting a warm glow across the shadows of the cavern.

He sensed it — the impending storm. The powerful stirrings of his bloodline. The distinct, urgent call that rippled through the very fabric of time and fate.

With deliberate grace, he raised one hand, counting off ancient calculations with his fingers — esoteric techniques that intertwined karma, destiny, and the pulses of divine interference.

In an instant, he vanished, leaving behind only a whisper of his presence.

His disciples, who had been deep in meditation nearby, jerked back to awareness, panic lacing their voices.

"Ancestor Shenwu!" they exclaimed in unison, their eyes wide with disbelief.

But he had already become one with the ether.

At the Barrier: A Sudden Arrival

Ling Li and Li Tianyuan stood hovering at the threshold of the barrier, their hearts pounding in sync with the surge of qi that suddenly coursed behind them.

They turned in unison, only to behold Li Shenwu, a majestic figure clad in flowing robes that seemed to dance with the air around him, his expression sharp and penetrating.

"Who is it?" his voice boomed, reverberating through the very stone like thunder wrapped in velvet.

Ling Li dropped to her knees, bowing deeply. "Great-Great Grandpa, it's Shi Min!"