

PROTEGE 401

Chapter 401: SHI MIN COLLAPSED

Li Tianyuan crossed his arms, an exasperated scoff escaping his lips. "About time you decided to show up!"

Li Shenwu's brow furrowed, a disdainful snort escaping him. "Did you even have the decency to inform me? Barat! Hmph!"

He stepped forward, his piercing gaze scanning the ominous storm that loomed ahead.

"You two — if you intervene, you'll only deepen the chaos."

"But you can help him!" Li Tianyuan protested, desperation etched across his face.

The old cultivator snorted once more, dismissing their concerns with a wave before vanishing without another word.

Bolt 42: The Moment of Collapse

Inside the chamber, under the weight of dread, the forty-second bolt of energy descended like an unforgiving celestial hammer.

Shi Min knelt, his frame shaking violently, blood escaping his lips in crimson rivulets, a stark contrast against the stone floor.

His spirit fought valiantly, anchored by will, but his body had reached its breaking point.

And then—

A figure materialized before him, tall and radiant, an embodiment of unyielding power.

"Focus!" Li Shenwu's resonant voice rolled through the chamber like a divine bell tolling, awakening the very air.

Shi Min's eyes fluttered open, a flicker of hope igniting within him.

"Concentrate, Shi Min. You cannot surrender."

A gasp escaped Shi Min as he fought to grasp the reality of his situation.

"Focus. Harness your qi."

With a deliberate inhalation — slow, deep, and steady — Shi Min closed his eyes to the chaos around him.

He reached into the depths of his being, casting aside doubt and fear.

And there, in the crucible of turmoil, he found his center and refocused.

Bolts 43–49: The Final Strikes of Tampering

Under the unwavering guidance of Li Shenwu, Shi Min steadied his trembling form, preparing to confront the tempest within him.

The forty-third bolt crashed down like a celestial blade, cleaving through the last threads of his spiritual frailty. A violent convulsion rippled through Shi Min's body, yet his spirit remained unyielding, a fortress against the chaos.

Then came the forty-fourth and forty-fifth bolts, descending in a fierce tandem — a jolt upon his crown, while the other struck deep at his root. The heavens were orchestrating a symphony of alignment, forging his qi into a seamless stream of energy. As his bones audibly cracked and reformed, his blood surged like molten lava, only to cool and settle in a sublime calm.

Li Shenwu stood resolute amidst the storm, his presence a beacon of stability.

"Good," he murmured softly, like a master sculptor witnessing the clay take shape. "Let it shape you."

Then, with a merciless crack of thunder, the forty-sixth bolt lashed out, targeting the very essence of Shi Min's memories. It clawed at his identity, attempting to erase the tapestry of his being. But Shi Min didn't yield; he roared — a primordial force awakened within him, his determination surging forth like an unstoppable tidal wave.

"I am Shi Min!" he bellowed, defiance ringing in the air. "I will not be remade!"

The Awakening Within: Azure Dragon and Fire Phoenix

As the tempestuous fury of the lightning intensified, something ancient stirred deep within Shi Min's core.

The essence of the Azure Dragon, slumbering within his marrow, met the fiery heart of the Fire Phoenix, nestled within the Nirvana Elixir's life-giving blood. Instead of clashing in conflict, they danced in a breathtaking harmony, weaving an intricate tapestry of power within him.

Qi spiraled in a magnificent whirl, a spectral fusion of azure and crimson — a striking contrast of cold power and searing heat. The dragon's essence coiled protectively around his spine, awakening instincts as old as time itself — wisdom, sovereignty, and the fierce instinct to defend. The flame of the phoenix surged through his heart, igniting rebirth and insatiable passion, transforming despair into transcendence.

Together, the Azure Dragon and the Fire Phoenix entwined, gaining sentience, forming a dual soul — a breathtaking combination of two divine beasts, irrevocably bound by Shi Min's overwhelming will. His form glowed radiantly, shimmering with the energy of their fusion, and his aura expanded, eclipsing the realms of mortal comprehension.

Hidden Valley Reacts: The Ancestor Has Returned

Across the expanse of Hidden Valley, a palpable shift reverberated through its very fabric.

In the Hei Clan, Hei Yanshi, poised with elegance, dropped her intricately patterned fan. "Li Shenwu has returned," she breathed, awe evident in her voice. "And he's chosen a successor."

In the Crimson Feather Pavilion, the elders fell to their knees, humility washing over them. "The bloodline stirs from its slumber," one elder proclaimed, reverence threading through his words. "The dragon breathes once more."

In the Moonshadow Courtyard, a chorus of rogue cultivators scattered like leaves before a storm. "We cannot face him," one wailed, terror palpable. "He is no longer one of us."

In the Iron Bell Monastery, the abbot's tears flowed freely, mingling with joy and sorrow alike. "The heavens have failed to shatter him. Now, they must crown him."

In the Beast Tamers' Grove, spirit beasts bowed in reverence. A phoenix screeched a song of honor, while a serpent coiled in humble submission.

Even the Seven Shah, scattered across the vast expanse of the realm, halted their rigorous training, captivated by the tidal wave of power.

Veyron whispered, "He has become both dusk and dawn," while Pyrrha's smile danced across his features. "The flame did not consume him — it crowned him."

The 50th Bolt: Ascension

Then, the world fell silent, as if the very heavens held their breath.

Amidst this stillness, the fiftieth bolt descended — not a strike of destructive fury, but a beacon of pure light, untainted and radiant.

It surged forth, a brilliant cascade that struck Shi Min's core. Rather than burn, it merged seamlessly, igniting a transformation within. Shi Min roared with a primal intensity, the sound reverberating across the valley, a declaration of rebirth.

His body levitated gracefully from the ground, engulfed in a cocoon of swirling qi, suspended between earth and sky. Then, as if the very fabric of the universe unraveled, the heavens split open.

Chapter 402: INDEED A GOOD MATCH

A Request for Constellation Reading Lesson

Shi Min straightened, the fire of determination igniting his expressive eyes. "Still, my gratitude remains. Most importantly, seven-great-grandpa, I yearn to learn the art of constellation reading from you." An electrifying hush enveloped the room, anticipation weaving itself into the very fabric of the moment.

Li Shenwu's eyes sparkled, flecks of surprise and delight dancing in their depths. He stroked his beard slowly, the gesture a silent deliberation, filled with a wisdom that had withstood the test of centuries. "Very well," he replied, his voice low but resonating like the gentle ringing of a temple bell. "You have earned the stars' secrets. Let me guide you in their reading."

Shi Min bowed again, deeper this time, a heartfelt gratitude emanating from his presence. "Thank you, Seven-great-grandpa."

Ling Li: A Mother's Quiet Storm

At the periphery of the gathering, Ling Li sat with her hands neatly folded, her fingers interlaced tightly as if trying to hold together the storm of emotions swirling within her. Her eyes, swelling with unshed tears, watched her son with a blend of awe and aching maternal pride.

Finally, her voice broke free, soft yet imbued with undeniable strength. "Shi Min, the 'Eye' will open in two days. You must remain here with great-grandpa while I return to bring your sisters and everyone else tomorrow. I left abruptly today without a word." Each syllable trembled with guilt, yet her gaze held steadfast.

El Padre and El Capitan: Guardians of the Moment

El Padre, seated beside her, leaned in closer, concern etched into the lines of his brow. His voice was gentle but carried an unwavering authority. "Leave that to us. You need to be here. Take a breath. Your anxiety has been palpable; it's not good for the little ones."

El Capitan nodded, the usual bravado in his demeanor softened by genuine sincerity. "Exactly! We can take care of everything while you relax here. I'm sure many will be eager to seek you out after Shi Min's ascension," he said with a reassuring grin.

Ling Li hesitated, her fingers tightening around the edge of her sleeve, wrestling with the tumult of her emotions. Finally, she nodded slowly, a flicker of relief in her eyes. "Thank you... and I'm sorry for the trouble."

El Capitan waved her off with an easy smile. "What trouble? We're off then! Where will we head when we arrive? Should we come here or to the Li Clan Mansion?"

Ling Li turned to Li Tianyuan, a solid pillar of calm amidst the swirling dynamics. He spoke without hesitation, his deliberation echoing with the wisdom of a seasoned strategist. "I suggest you come here first. Move to the Li Clan Mansion the day after."

Ling Li nodded, gratitude flooding her heart. "We will follow Grandpa's arrangement."

El Capitan clapped his hands together, laughter bubbling forth. "Alright, then! Off we go!"

The Gathering Disperses

As the group began to rise, the atmosphere shifted, morphing into a dance of motion rather than chaos. Servants quietly moved with practiced efficiency, preparing travel packs as the wind stirred the bamboo leaves, whispering secrets of what fate had in store.

Shi Min remained standing, his gaze fixed upward, drawn towards the starlit canvas above. Beside him, Li Shenwu bore a faint smile, already calculating the constellations that would chart the course of the young boy destined to become a legend.

Li Shenwu's Scrutiny: A Meeting of Bloodlines and Fate

"And who is this young lad?" A hush fell over the crowd as Li Shenwu's deep, resonant voice broke the tension in the air, rich and textured like an ancient tapestry. His silvery-white beard cascaded down his chest, each strand shimmering as he stroked it with deliberate elegance. His piercing gaze, sharp as a dagger, fixed upon the quiet figure standing beside Ling Li with the intensity of a hawk eyeing its prey.

Four Eyes — known in more formal circles as Chu Yan — rose with a poise that defied his youth. He exuded a tranquil dignity, each movement executed with absolute precision. As he bowed deeply, his voice carried a calmness that resonated with certainty. "Family Elder, Great-great-grandfather, I am Chu Yan, Ling Ling's husband."

A ripple of surprise coursed through the gathering. Eyes widened, and whispers threaded through the disciples like wind through the trees. Even the younger members leaned forward, their curiosity piqued by the unfolding drama.

Li Shenwu's gaze sharpened to a razor's edge. "Hmm... Come sit with me."

His tone was deceptively neutral, yet an undeniable weight hung in the air — a command unvoiced but deeply felt.

Without a moment's hesitation, Four Eyes stepped forward, settling next to the ancient patriarch. He seated himself with an upright posture, his hands resting on his knees like a still lake reflecting the moonlight, ready to absorb whatever came next.

Li Shenwu continued his examination, eyes narrowing further, as if he were peeling back layers of time and fate, seeking the hidden truths etched into the very marrow of Chu Yan's being. "Let me see both your palms."

With a quiet resolve, Four Eyes extended his hands, an offering of trust.

The Revelation: A Dangerous Balance

As soon as Li Shenwu's fingers brushed against the palms, a faint shimmer of dark qi pulsed from Four Eyes' meridians — a sensation akin to shadows dancing beneath the surface of water. It was neither aggressive nor violent; instead, it was dense, ancient, and coiled, like a serpent poised to strike at any misstep.

The elder's brows knit together in a frown of contemplation. "Hm... You are indeed a good match for Ling Ling." His voice held a thoughtful, almost reluctant tone. "However, your dark aura is perilously strong. A single slip in handling it could lead to dire consequences."

An uneasy silence settled over the room, tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

Li Tianyuan, seated nearby, leaned forward, his voice a sharp knife against the stillness. "Old man, what do you mean by that?"

Li Shenwu remained unfazed, like an old oak standing firm against a storm. "It simply means if he cannot manage it, he will be consumed by his dark aura. It will control him instead of the other way around."

The air grew heavy with trepidation; even the wind outside seemed to be still in reverence.

Chapter 403: SHI MIN: IMMORTAL OF TWIN SPIRITS

From the celestial expanse emerged two divine silhouettes, majestic and awe-inspiring:

An Azure Dragon, weaving through the clouds, its scales adorned with a shimmering tapestry of starlight, radiant and ethereal.

A Fire Phoenix, wings aflame, trailing a cascade of embers that danced and flickered across the valley, illuminating the world beneath in a warm, golden glow.

They soared above Hidden Valley, their vast forms casting shadows that stretched over mighty mountains, momentarily freezing time itself.

Every cultivator, every elder, every spirit beast bowed in reverence, the air thick with awe. Even the heavens seemed to pause in astonishment.

As Shi Min slowly descended, untouched by the chaotic storm around him, his robes flowed like liquid silk, and his eyes glowed with an otherworldly light.

He had ascended, transcending the confines of mortality. He was no longer just Shi Min — he was now Shi Min, Immortal of Twin Spirits.

The Emergence: Shi Min Returns

The tempest had finally ebbed.

As the sky exhaled the remnants of divine ire, it transformed into a canvas of breathtaking hues, where sunlight danced playfully with the lingering shadows of chaos. The ethereal forms of the Azure Dragon and Fire Phoenix etched themselves onto the clouds, their magnificent outlines slowly dissolving like mist at dawn, leaving a silence so deep it felt almost sacred, as though the very earth was holding its breath.

With a gentle shimmer, the protective barrier encircling the Verdant Bamboo Forest melted away, as if acknowledging the return of a long-lost guardian.

The great chamber doors groaned open, heavy with the weight of centuries, and from within stepped Shi Min.

His robes billowed softly around him, undisturbed by the chaos that had unraveled moments before. An aura of tranquility emanated from him, each flicker of his gaze a testament to the latent power he possessed.

The air thrummed with a mighty resonance; every breath he inhaled reverberated with the pulse of the cosmos, harmonizing with the very essence of life itself.

By his side strode Li Shenwu, his chest puffed with an unmistakable pride, his gaze sharp with satisfaction that spoke volumes. The legendary ancestor remained silent, yet his posture was a proclamation: This is my blood. This is our legacy.

The Reunion: Bonds Rekindled

At the edge of the clearing, Ling Li stood as if rooted to the earth, her heart racing within her chest.

Tears glistened like dew in her eyes, reflecting the bittersweet journey of longing and hope. Her hands trembled, caught between fear and joy.

Four Eyes stepped closer, his presence a steadying anchor as he wrapped his arms around her frail shoulders. "He's here," he whispered, his voice a gentle breeze in the storm of emotions.

With a surge of energy, Ling Li moved forward, then broke into a run, her spirit ignited by a flame of recognition.

"Shi Min!" she cried out, a melody of love and urgency that broke the stillness. "You've suffered!"

Shi Min turned at the sound of her voice, and in that moment, the immortal radiance in his eyes softened, warmth spilling forth.

"Mother," he replied, his voice a blend of steadiness and affection.

They embraced — tight and trembling; a wordless reunion that spoke volumes of their shared bonds, woven through the trials of time.

Behind them, Li Tianyuan exhaled with profound relief, his stern countenance cracking into a rare, heartfelt smile. "About time," he muttered under his breath, a father's longing fulfilled at last.

From the path emerged El Padre and El Capitan, their expressions a chaotic mix of awe and disbelief, like travelers stumbling upon a lost, sacred relic.

"He really did it," El Capitan breathed, wonder crystallizing in his voice.

"Fifty bolts," El Padre murmured, shaking his head in disbelief. "And he's still standing."

Mushu, his eyes like saucers, stepped forward timidly. "Shi Min... you're glowing," he observed, the astonishment evident in the quiver of his words.

Shi Min returned the sentiment with a faint smile, "So are you."

Xiao Ren darted toward him, fists clenched in anxious excitement, eyes shining with unshed tears. "You scared us!" he burst out, a mixture of relief and reprimand coloring his voice.

The Valley Watches a Legend Rise

Across Hidden Valley, cultivators emerged cautiously from their shelters, temples, and caves, like flowers unfurling under the sun after a long storm.

They lifted their gazes skyward, entranced by the dragon and phoenix silhouettes that slowly began to dissipate.

And in that moment, realization dawned upon them like the first light of day.

Shi Min was no longer just a prodigy.

He had transformed into something far greater — a force of nature, a symbol of hope, and a beacon for the future.

The Political Ripple: Hidden Valley Recalculates

The storm clouds had dissipated, granting the valley a deceptive tranquility.

Yet, beneath the serene skyline, an undercurrent of tension thrummed in the air. The haunting silhouettes of the Azure Dragon and Fire Phoenix remained etched in the minds of every cultivator, elder, and patriarch, their majestic forms casting long, lingering shadows over sacred temples, towering spires, and hallowed ancestral halls. With the echoes of their power still resonating, the intricate political landscape that defined the valley began to shift like a restless tide.

Hei Clan: From Watchers to Courtiers

In the dim glow of the Hei Clan's war chamber, Hei Yanshi scrutinized a detailed map adorned with intricate lines of influence, her fan tapping a nervous rhythm against its polished surface.

"Shi Min endured the fury of fifty bolts," she said, her voice steady but laced with urgency. "And he did not merely ascend; he awakened twin spirits of unparalleled might."

A wave of murmurs rippled through her advisors, the weight of her words settling upon them like a heavy fog.

"We must send tribute," one suggested, his brow furrowed, sensing the brewing storm.

"We must offer alliance," another urged, his eyes darting with unease.

Hei Yanshi narrowed her gaze, a fierce resolve igniting within her. "No. We must offer marriage."

"..."

The room fell silent, the air thick with unspoken possibilities.

Chapter 404: SHI MIN: THE CENTER OF THE STORM

Crimson Feather Pavilion: From Rivals to Strategists

The elders of the Crimson Feather Pavilion convened in the Flame Hall, their ornate robes still crackling with residual qi, shimmering in the muted light.

"He is no longer merely a disciple," one elder declared, his voice reverberating against the stone walls.
"He has become a sovereign."

A second elder nodded, concern etching deeper lines on his face. "We must critically reassess our treaties. If the Li Clan aligns with him, our influence will wane."

A third elder stood, his voice resonating with ambition. "Then we must elevate ourselves alongside him."

Beast Tamers' Grove: From Isolation to Submission

The spirit beasts of the Beast Tamers' Grove thrummed with restless energy. A phoenix, brilliant and proud, clung to its perch defiantly, while a serpent coiled in agitation, refusing the call of its master.

The Beastmaster knelt before the altar, his voice a mixture of reverence and resignation. "The bloodline has awakened, and the time has come for us to submit."

His second-in-command frowned, skepticism flickering in his eyes. "Submit? To a boy?"

"To a dragon," the Beastmaster corrected, his tone firm and resolute. "And to the rebirth of fire."

Moonshadow Courtyard: From Defiance to Flight

The rogue cultivators gathered in haste, their scrolls unfurling as they prepared to vanish into the embrace of the mountains.

"He will not forget those who questioned his resolve," one murmured, glancing back one last time.

"And he will not need to," another replied, determination etched on their features. "His aura will seek us out."

Iron Bell Monastery: From Silence to Prophecy

The abbot struck the iron bell once more, its resonant toll echoing through the stillness.

"Shi Min has become the storm," he intoned, his voice steady and unwavering. "And the storm does not seek permission."

The monks bowed, the weight of his words settling heavily upon them.

"We must prepare the valley," one monk asserted, hope flickering like a candle in the dark.

"No," the abbot responded, his gaze piercing and unfaltering. "We must prepare the world."

The Seven Shah: From Mentors to Witnesses

Each Shah felt the tremors of change ripple through the fabric of their existence. Veyron closed his eyes, sensing the delicate balance of shadow and light. "He walks in both realms. He will need both," he whispered solemnly.

Kael, keen and sharp, honed his blade with precision. "He will face formidable challengers. We must arm him for the impending war," he declared, steel glinting in the sunlight.

Pyrrha grinned, a flicker of pride in her eyes. "He has emerged unscathed from the flames. Now, he must wield that fire."

Liora's voice was barely a whisper as he articulated a haunting truth: "His clarity will blind the unworthy."

Thalos rested a hand against the earth, grounding himself. "The land will rally behind him," he asserted, confidence swelling within him.

Aeris blurred into the wind, her essence merging with the atmosphere. "I will watch from above," he vowed, his voice a breath of uncertainty lost in the breeze.

Nerun tuned his bell with a steady hand, the vibration altering the very essence of the valley. "The valley has gained a new rhythm," he declared, resonating with the pulse of destiny.

Shi Min: The Center of the Storm

At the very epicenter of this swirl of chaos and awakening, Shi Min stood resolutely beside Li Shenwu, enveloped by the warmth of family and the camaraderie of friends.

He made no proclamations of power.

He claimed no dominion over the others.

Yet, as the energy of the valley shifted and transformed around him, it was clear that every clan, sect, and sovereign had already begun to recognize the truth: The age of Shi Min had commenced, an era forged in fire and filled with promise.

Verdant Bamboo Pavilion: The Calm After the Storm

The storm had receded, but the air still crackled with the essence of residual qi, vibrating softly like a distant echo. The Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, a jewel cradled beneath the gnarled arms of ancient trees, stood as a revered haven where the gentle murmur of leaves sang a soothing lullaby. The aromatic tendrils of sandalwood smoldered in the air, courtesy of the incense lit earlier. At the same time, the soft rustle of robes settling into place created a melody that intertwined with the surrounding stillness.

Shi Min rose with deliberate grace, each movement imbued with a growing sense of purpose. His posture was a harmonious blend of regal dignity and humble reverence. Even as the ethereal glow that once enveloped him faded to a softer radiance, it pulsed with a quiet strength that captured the attention of all in the room.

He advanced, his gaze steady and fierce, locking onto the elder who presided over the gathering like a wise mountain guarding sacred grounds. "Seven-great-grandfather, I am Shi Min," he declared, his voice rich with emotion, a vibrant testament to his resolve as he bowed deeply, his forehead nearly brushing the polished bamboo floor beneath him. "I wish to express my profound gratitude for your guidance during my darkest hour."

Li Shenwu: Pride Behind the Stoicism

Li Shenwu, an ancient sentinel of wisdom, sat enveloped in stillness, his figure as timeless as the earth. With a casual wave of his hand, he acknowledged the young man before him, his silvery-white beard shimmering like starlight caught in dusk. His ancient eyes, sharp and enigmatic as crystalline waters, softened just enough to reveal the flicker of a hidden pride.

"Since you've esteemed me with the title of seven-great-grandfather, it is only fitting," he replied, his tone nonchalant. However, a subtle upward curve at the corners of his mouth betrayed a rare glimpse of satisfaction. He regarded Shi Min with an intensity that pierced through the facade of youth — so young and yet already an immortal. His heart swelled, not with arrogance, but with the profound weight of legacies fulfilled, as other elders, who had poured lifetimes into their cultivation, lowered their gazes in abiding respect.

Chapter 405: A GIFT AND A WARNING

Concern and Inquiry

"Then what can we do, Seven-Great-grandfather?" Shi Min interjected, his voice taut with worry. His eyes darted between Four Eyes and the elder, his own immortal aura thrumming like a distant storm.

"What a filial step-son you are," Li Shenwu replied with amusement.

Li Shenwu turned his unwavering gaze back to Four Eyes, piercing as a shaft of sunlight breaking through storm clouds. "Who tampered with your body?"

Four Eyes met his gaze, unwavering. "Shinsei and Otako."

His voice was low yet firm — solid like granite beneath the softest veneer.

Li Shenwu nodded slowly, stroking his beard as swirling thoughts danced in his mind. "I see. They are likely aware of it, too."

He paused, measuring something unseen in the air.

"Are you also entering the 'Eye' the day after tomorrow?"

Four Eyes offered a single, resolute nod.

A Protective Son and a Stoic Father

"Seven-Great-Grandfather, please don't take offense at my stepfather; he simply doesn't speak much. It's his nature." Shi Min's voice came out earnest, almost a plea wrapped in reverence.

Li Shenwu snorted, the corners of his eyes twinkling with dry amusement. "What a protective stepson you are! I'm not petty. And don't think for a moment I'm oblivious to his personality!" He rolled his eyes in exaggerated exasperation, bringing a ripple of laughter from Ling Li.

Shi Min blinked, momentarily speechless. "Oh."

Four Eyes, though remaining stoic as a statue, felt the flicker of warmth blooming within him — a gentle sensation like sunlight warming the earth after a long winter.

The Gift of Suppression

Leaning forward, Li Shenwu lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper that thrummed with authority. "Once you enter the 'Eye,' it is vital that you find a suitable cultivation technique, one not entangled with dark aura. Whether you succeed depends on your fate."

He raised a finger to his forehead, pointing with intent. "For now, let me bestow upon you a pure essence that will help suppress your excess dark aura."

From the tip of his finger, a radiant white feather emerged — soft and delicate as the wisps of a dream, glowing with the ethereal light of ancestral qi. It drifted gently toward Four Eyes, shimmering like a gossamer thread woven from starlight.

As the feather touched Four Eyes' forehead, the room collectively held its breath, anticipation hanging thick in the air like the promise of a storm.

The Feather of Suppression: A Gift and a Warning

The moment Li Shenwu lifted his hand, an electric shift coursed through the air of the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion. Silence enveloped the gathering like a heavy fog, thick and palpable, as though the very wind had paused to witness the unfolding drama.

From the tip of the ancient ancestor's index finger, a wisp of luminous white essence began to coalesce — fragile as a feather, yet throbbing with the pulse of ages past. It shimmered like ethereal moonlight ensnared in a veil of mist, its edges curling and unfurling in a hypnotic dance, alive with intention.

Gasps echoed through the room, a collective breath held captive by the spectacle.

"Is that...?" someone whispered, their voice barely a flutter above a breath.

"A soul-forged essence," murmured Li Tianyuan, narrowing his gaze as his scholarly instincts kicked in. "He's about to grant him a fragment of his own cultivation."

The feather floated towards Four Eyes, who remained as immovable as a mountain, his expression unreadable, a mask carved from stone. Yet, the slightest tremor flickered in his fingers—whether from awe or instinctive wariness remained a question that hung in the air.

The feather hovered gracefully before his forehead, a moment suspended in time.

Then, with a sound akin to a bell tolling in a dreamscape, it melded into his skin, disappearing as if it had never been.

The Clash Within: Light Meets Shadow

The instant the essence infiltrated his being, a jolt coursed through Four Eyes' body like an electric surge. A pulse of inky black aura erupted from his core, rising like a tempest, violently rebelling against the purity that dared to tame it. The dark qi slithered and coiled, hissing like a serpent disturbed from its slumber.

His eyes flickered chaotically — one moment obsidian black, the next an unsettling silver. His breath caught, suspended in a moment of turmoil, his veins becoming battlegrounds for light and shadow to wage war.

Yet he remained silent.

Clenching his fists, he anchored himself, his jaw set tight in determination. Across the room, Ling Li surged halfway from her seat, alarm etched on her face. Shi Min, instinctively stepping forward, reached for his sword, tension coiling in the air.

But Li Shenwu raised a hand — calm, unwavering, infusing the room with an aura of authority.

"Let it settle," he intoned, voice steady like the ground beneath their feet. "This is not pain; this is balance."

The Storm Passes

After several heart-stopping moments, the black aura began to ebb, drawn inward like an obedient tide, spiraling tightly within Four Eyes' dantian. The silver light of the essence enveloped it, a shimmering cage of moonlit brilliance.

Four Eyes exhaled slowly, like a storm dissipating over a peaceful sea.

His shoulders unfurled, tension dispersing like mist before the dawn. His gaze cleared, the chaos retreating from his expression. The tempest had passed, leaving a fragile calm in its wake.

Li Shenwu's Final Word

Li Shenwu observed Four Eyes with a penetrating gaze, then offered a single approving nod.

"Good," he said, voice imbued with warmth. "You accepted it. That signifies there is still a path forward."

Leaning back, he folded his hands across his knee, a gesture of both relaxation and gravity. "But remember — this is but a bandage, not a cure. If you fail to carve a cultivation path that harmonizes with your true nature, the darkness within will one day consume you."

Four Eyes bowed deeply, respect etched into his features. "I understand."

"See that you do," Li Shenwu cautioned, though his tone softened slightly. "You are not merely Ling Ling's husband now; you are entwined with the destiny of this family."

Chapter 406: A MOMENT OF PEACE

The Family Reacts

"Old man," Li Tianyuan muttered, stroking his chin with a bemused smirk. "You always were a master of the dramatic."

A snort of laughter escaped Li Shenwu. "And you've always had a knack for stating the obvious."

Ling Li, still chuckling from earlier exchanges, wiped a glistening tear from her eye. "You two have hardly changed at all."

Shi Min, deeply moved, turned to Four Eyes with a mixture of admiration and concern. "Paps... are you alright?"

In that rare moment of softness, Four Eyes managed a faint smile. "I'm fine."

Shi Min's eyes widened in astonishment. "You smiled."

"I did not," Four Eyes replied, his voice as flat as a calm lake.

"You did," Mushu chimed in from the side, nudging Mushu, who nodded vigorously in agreement.

Even Xiao Ren, Li Tianyuan's assistant, let out a giggle. "He did!"

Four Eyes sighed, though the warmth flickering in his eyes betrayed him, revealing the flicker of emotion beneath his stoic façade.

A Moment of Peace

The tension that had once gripped the room dissolved into soft laughter and gentle murmurs. Servants wove through the gathering with trays of tea, the rich aroma of chrysanthemum and ginseng blooming in the air, an inviting embrace of warmth and comfort. The bamboo leaves rustled once more, animated by a gentle breeze that whispered through the pavilion.

Above it all, stars began to pierce the velvet night, bright and sharp, celestial sentinels observing the unfolding lives below. And somewhere in the vast expanse of the heavens, the 'Eye' stirred, an omen of things yet to come.

A Rare Declaration and a Ripple of Surprise

As the moon ascended majestically over the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, its silvery light danced across the lush, green bamboo leaves and gleamed on the polished stone floors. Li Shenwu, an elder whose age hinted at the weight of many lifetimes, leaned back in his elegantly carved chair, a quiet yet momentous announcement escaping his lips.

"I'll stay to witness the opening of the 'Eye.'"

His words fell like a heavy stone into tranquil waters, rippling through the room with an unexpected force. Even Li Tianyuan, a man who had shared countless seasons with the old ancestor, blinked in astonishment, his brows arching in disbelief as he turned to Shenwu.

"As I recall, the last time he witnessed the opening of the 'Eye' was during Ling Ling's time... when she entered. Because Ling Ling had a mishap."

His tone was casual, yet the shadows of memories loomed heavily in the air, weaving an unspoken history into the ambiance.

Ling Li's Embarrassment and the Family's Teasing

"Great-grandpa, can we please not dwell on that anymore?" Ling Li interjected, her cheeks flush with a vibrant hue, betraying her embarrassment. She waved her hand dismissively, an attempt to scatter the lingering memory, though her smile belied her discomfort.

"Ha ha ha ha! We absolutely must tell that story tomorrow when everyone gathers. It will be not only entertaining but enlightening," Li Tianyuan declared, clearly reveling in the moment.

Shi Min chimed in with a playful chuckle, nodding enthusiastically. "Definitely! It's a gem of a story. It might even help the younger ones brace themselves for what's to come."

From across the bustling room, Four Eyes tilted his head slightly, his curious gaze fixating on Ling Li, brows knitted as if grappling with the elusive pieces of a puzzle he'd never known existed.

Catching the look, Shi Min's grin widened.

"Paps, did you know Mom was trapped inside the 'Eye' for two whole years?"

Four Eyes blinked in surprise, processing the revelation.

Ling Li's eyes widened in mock shock as she playfully pinched Shi Min's arm.

"Shi Min!"

He erupted into laughter, nimbly dodging to the side as his immortal aura glinted with youthful mirth. "But it was a mishap in disguise! Mom gained incredible benefits from it. Let's save the full story for tomorrow, shall we?"

With a flourish, he bent his body as if to armor himself from another playful jab, giggling like a mischievous child who had successfully skirted a reprimand.

A Joyful Night, Simple and Sacred

Despite the unpretentious nature of the meal — steamed lotus root, delicately braised tofu, and a fragrant wild herb soup — the atmosphere was rich with warmth and laughter. The vegetarian feast was prepared with deep reverence for the tranquility that followed the storm, transforming the meal into a sacred gathering.

Servants moved gracefully through the space, their presence almost ethereal as they silently refilled cups of steaming tea and deftly cleared away empty dishes. The elders, their voices low and hushed, shared stories that flowed like ancient rivers, their words fueling the flames of nostalgia. Meanwhile, the younger disciples lingered at the periphery, wide-eyed and absorbed, soaking in every crystalline tale.

Outside, the bamboo whispered softly in the gentle night breeze, its leaves rustling like secrets shared between old friends. The stars twinkled above with a brilliance that seemed to repaint the night sky.

And at the heart of the pavilion, embraced by the love of family, legends, and laughter, Shi Min sat — no longer merely a cultivator, but a resplendent symbol of a legacy reborn, glowing with the promise of stories yet to unfold.

Return to Peonies Castle: The Storm Has Passed

The imposing gates of Peonies Castle creaked open slowly, their heavy weight echoing through the stillness, carrying with it a palpable air of expectation. Moonlight poured into the courtyard like liquid silver, casting an ethereal glow upon the anxious faces gathered at the entrance — devoted disciples, watchful attendants, and concerned family members, all of whom had spent the day ensnared in a silence heavy with dread, their eyes glued to the tumultuous sky that roared with the wrath of thunderous storms.

As soon as El Padre and El Capitan emerged from the darkened passageway, the tension shattered, dissipating like the final notes of a plucked string.

"El Padre, is Shi Min alright?" Shun's voice broke the spell, tight and taut with worry, his wide eyes sparkling with fear. Beside him, Ren and Lily stood frozen, fingers intertwined like delicate vines, waiting for an answer that could either fragment their hopes or wrap them in solace.

Chapter 407: MAFIA AND UNDERGROUND BOSS: SPEECHLESS

The News That Changed Everything

El Padre paused, his boots caked with the dust of distant travels, a cloak swirling around him infused with the heady aromas of aged bamboo and the crisp scent of freshly fallen rain. He gazed at them — at their anxious expressions — and then a smile broke through his solemnity. It wasn't merely a casual smile; it was a brilliant burst of warmth, laden with pride, relief, and sheer awe.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice thick with emotion, each word imbued with the weight of his journey. "Shi Min ascended successfully. Despite the fifty bolts of lightning he faced. He is truly one of a kind."

Gasps erupted like fireworks through the crowd.

Lily's hands flew to her mouth in disbelief, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Ren let out a sharp exhale, knees trembling as though the ground itself had given way. Shun blinked, stunned into silence. "Fifty?"

El Capitan stepped forward, his grin illuminating the shadows of apprehension. "And he didn't just survive. He soared. Azure Dragon and Fire Phoenix danced alongside him in the heavens. You should have seen it."

The Journey Ahead

El Padre raised a hand, silencing the murmurs that surged like a tide. "Anyway, rest early. El Capitan and I, alongside the Seven Shah, will take you to Hidden Valley tomorrow. We leave at the crack of dawn."

The announcement hung over the courtyard like a sacred promise, infusing the air with hope. Servants sprang into action, preparing inviting rooms and warm baths, while the disciples buzzed with excitement, some already rifling through scrolls and robes. The weight of dread that had clung to Peonies Castle for days evaporated, replaced with an exhilarating anticipation.

Ren turned to Lily, his eyes sparkling like the stars scattered across a velvet sky. "We'll see him tomorrow."

Lily nodded, tears of joy brimming in her eyes. "I want to hug him."

Shun lifted his gaze to the stars, wonder dancing on his features. "I want to ask him what it felt like — to face the heavens' wrath."

El Capitan clapped his hands, the sound a cheerful echo in the night. "Then sleep fast, little warriors. Tomorrow, we tread the path of legends."

Peonies Castle Courtyard: The Twins Make Their Move

Just as the courtyard began to settle into a hushed sigh of relief, a pair of high-pitched voices sliced through the calm night air like arrows seeking their mark.

"Grandpa Liu, Grandpa Du, what about us? We want to go with you!" declared Kim Kim, her tiny fists clenched in indignation, eyes gleaming with righteous determination.

"You can't leave the two of us alone!" echoed Chin Chin, her lower lip jutting out in a dramatic pout capable of disarming even the most stoic of cultivators.

El Padre — Grandpa Liu — froze mid-step, his eyes darting to the twins as if they had suddenly materialized out of the night. He blinked, bewildered, once... then twice.

"!!!!"

"Ah... I... uh..." El Padre stammered, clearly flustered and caught off guard. "I... forgot to ask your mother if..."

His voice trailed off, and he rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture of visible confusion.

Ren Steps In: The Voice of Reason

Before the silence could twist into awkward tension, Ren stepped forward, her presence calm yet firm, embodying the wisdom of an eldest sibling. "We might need to take them with us," she suggested, casting a knowing glance at the twins, eyebrows arched with meaning. "Aunt Pharsa is stationed in Beijing, and Grandpa and Grandma Xu are still traveling. There's no one to look after them."

She bestowed a subtle wink upon the twins.

"That's right!" Kim Kim and Chin Chin chimed in unison, their faces aglow like lanterns ignited by joy.

El Padre Concedes

El Padre let out a heavy sigh, defeated by the dual power of logic and irresistible charm. "So be it. You're both coming with us."

"Yey!" the twins squealed, their voices ringing through the courtyard like joyous bells, scattering attention and brightening hearts.

They darted forward, skirts swirling like petals caught in a gentle breeze, and latched onto El Padre's legs with the force of tiny hurricanes.

"Grandpa Liu, you're the most handsome and kind Grandpa!" Kim declared, squeezing him with all her might.

"Uncle Liu is the most lovable Grandpa!" Chin Chin added earnestly, her innocent mispronunciation piercing through the night with such sincerity that even the moon seemed to smile.

Speechless Guardians

"...."

El Padre looked down at the two girls clinging to him, his mouth opening and closing like a fish desperately gasping for air.

El Capitan, standing beside him, blinked in slow disbelief and then muttered under his breath, "Lovable?"

"...."

The two men exchanged a glance — an unspoken mix of bewilderment, amusement, and resignation flickering in their eyes.

"We're doomed," El Capitan whispered, a hint of humor lacing his tone.

"We're outnumbered," El Padre murmured in response, a resigned smile forming on his lips.

The twins beamed up at them, utterly triumphant, their spirits radiant as the dawn that awaited them.

Dawn Over Hidden Valley: The Grand Arrival

As the first light of dawn spilled over the horizon, the sky transformed into a breathtaking canvas of lavender and gold. The group set out from Peonies Castle, the crisp morning air filled with the fragrance of dew-kissed petals, and anticipation fluttered like the wings of a thousand butterflies. The tranquil silence of the early hour hung in the air, punctuated only by the gentle rustle of their flowing robes and the melodic chirping of mountain birds serenading the awakening day.

Upon arriving at the entrance of Hidden Valley, a majestic stone archway loomed before them, intricately carved with ancient runes that seemed to whisper secrets of the past. El Padre brought the procession to a halt, his eyes sparkling with a playful mischief that set the tone for the grand event to come.

"We need to make a grand entrance," he proclaimed, his voice resonating with theatrical exuberance that echoed through the valley.

Beside him, El Capitan let out a derisive snort, arms crossed tightly over his chest. "You just want to show off," he quipped, unimpressed.

"El Capitan, that's exactly the point!" El Padre beamed, unbothered by the retort.

Before a retort could escape El Capitan's lips, Butler Oda stepped forward, his expression enigmatic beneath the shadow of his ceremonial hood, exuding an air of quiet authority.

"Agreed. It's time the valley remembers who holds the sky," Butler Oda stated, his tone leaving no room for argument.

To everyone's astonishment, the Seven Shah nodded in solemn accord, their unity palpable.

Chapter 408: OLD HABITS ARE HARD TO SHAKE

"Oda... it truly has been ages." Li Tianyuan's voice grew gentle as he turned, focusing all his attention on the man behind the imposing Seven Shah. Butler Oda, cloaked in midnight robes edged with silver that shimmered like moonbeams, stood perfectly still, radiating quiet dignity. He offered a seldom-seen smile and dipped his head in a gesture of refined grace.

"Yuan. It's a pleasure to see you once more."

Words faded between them. Shared history pressed close: childhood mischief, battle scars, and years unfurled like a scroll between past and present selves.

A Gathering of Generations

"Welcome, everyone, to my humble abode of serenity," Li Tianyuan declared, his voice regaining its usual commanding resonance, echoing against the wooden beams.

"Yes, savor the charm of the Bamboo Pavilion today!" Shi Min exclaimed, his exuberance lighting up the room. "Because tomorrow, we shall retreat to the grandeur of the Li Mansion at the heart of Hidden Valley."

The group entered the pavilion. Floorboards creaked under their steps as they walked in. Sunlight filtered through the latticework, painting patterns on the bamboo mats. Laughter and chatter rose, carried by the fragrant breeze that stirred pale green curtains. The younger members formed clusters — Shi Min and Shun swapped stories while Kim Kim dared Chin Chin into playful mischief.

The elders settled in shaded corners on the second floor overlooking the young generation, cups of tea in hand, their voices low as they chatted and sipped, the aroma of sandalwood incense mingling with the air. El Padre, El Capitán, Butler Oda, and the Seven Shah gathered around a low table, trading old jokes in a mix of languages, occasionally pausing to watch Xiao Ren and Bamboo Pavilion disciples demonstrate with fans and wooden swords, moving swiftly like swallows in flight.

Sibling Shenanigans: The Pond Incident

"Lily, there's a lovely pond just beyond the back — you'll love it!" Shi Min called, his tone teasingly melodic.

Lily turned, her eyes sparkling with youthful mischief like the morning dew glistening on leaves. "Oh? I shall heed the Crown Prince's invitation and explore!"

"You—" Shi Min challenged, his eyes narrowing playfully as he lunged forward, closing the distance with swift strides.

Lily let out a delighted squeal and dashed away, her robes flaring behind her. She dove behind Fatty, using his large frame as a shield to avoid Shi Min, much like a child hiding from a chaser.

Fatty stood still, tensed between Lily and Shi Min, unsure whether to move. His heart pounded so hard it echoed in his ears, and sweat rolled down his face. On one side stood the newly ascended immortal and future patriarch; on the other, the girl he adored, notorious for never forgetting a slight.

"Fatty, shift aside," Shi Min commanded, voice deceptively calm yet crackling with authority.

"Uh... ehh..." Fatty faltered, his words tumbling out as his feet refused to move.

"Big Brother!" Lily protested, peeking from behind Fatty's shoulder, her tone sharp yet playful. "My boyfriend is no longer fat, but you still insist on calling him Fatty!"

Shi Min snorted, crossing his arms with a grin. "Old habits are hard to shake. Besides, he has yet to earn a new title," he retorted.

The Elders Observe

From their platform under the pavilion's central beam, Li Shenwu and Ling Li watched the playful interaction, looking thoughtful. Li Tianyuan and Four Eyes stood beside them.

The old patriarch's gaze sharpened like a blade, fixed on the young man sheltering Lily. "Ling Ling, is that lad your daughter's partner?" he inquired, stroking his beard with slow, deliberate movements.

Ling Li nodded firmly. "Yes, Great-Great-Grandpa. That's Quan Ye. He's also Chu Yan's best friend. The other one beside him is Tong Xue, Pharsa's husband, and the young one is Shun, Ren's fiancée."

Li Shenwu's sharp gaze shifted to the three young men, as if assessing a centuries-long chess game. He stayed silent, then commanded, "Call them over."

Summoned by the Ancestor

"Murphy, Quan Ye, Shun — come over," Four Eyes intoned, his voice steady and commanding, resonating like the toll of a distant bell.

Fatty felt his body stiffen as if encased in ice. His eyes widened, disbelief painted across his features as he turned slowly towards the source of the summons.

"Me?" he mouthed, pointing to his own face as scrutiny settled over him.

Beside him, Chatty's face turned pale with apprehension. Almost reflexively, he edged behind Fatty and clutched his sleeve tightly, seeking cover as if bracing for a coming storm.

"Why are you hiding behind me?" Fatty hissed, his voice cracking like thin ice underfoot.

"Because you're bigger, and I'm not ready to meet my end," Chatty shot back, eyes wide with apprehension.

Fatty swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment, rallying his courage. With a deep breath, he stepped forward, one hand pulling Chatty — who resisted at first — so they approached the elders together, both tense.

Shun, always calm and composed, straightened his back and walked confidently towards the elders without pausing.

All eyes fell upon them — heavy and expectant. The air thickened with each hesitant step, the world holding its breath. Murmurs faded; even the birds went silent, as if ancient boughs listened in. Sunlight paused at the threshold, casting a half-light on the trio. Tension shimmered like a web, vibrating with anticipation, lineage, tradition, and hope.

Li Shenwu's Evaluation: Fatty and Chatty

The pavilion grew quiet. Li Shenwu's gaze fell upon Fatty, sharp as blades honed by centuries. He lingered on the young man with such intensity that Fatty's knees grew weak. The air seemed heavier. The elder's scrutiny carried the weight of mountains, pressing down upon him.

Fatty swallowed hard, his throat dry. His hands twitched at his sides, unsure whether to clasp them or let them hang. He could feel every bead of sweat sliding down his back.

Li Shenwu stroked his beard, his expression unreadable, before declaring in a voice that carried both judgment and possibility.

"Strong physical attributes, without elemental skills. If properly nurtured, he can learn telekinesis."

The words struck Fatty like a thunderclap. His eyes widened, his breath caught. 'Telekinesis? Again?' This was the second time he had heard such a claim — the first from the Azure Dragon in Mystic Mountain. He had dismissed it then as a dream, a fantasy whispered by a beast of legend. But now, hearing it from the Seven-great-grandfather himself, the possibility burned inside him like a hidden flame.

Fatty gasped softly, his chest tightening with both awe and confusion. 'What does it mean? Why me? Can I really...?' His mind spun, but before he could ask, Li Shenwu waved his hand, dismissing him without another word.

Chapter 409: GRAND DECLARATION OF POWER

The Sword Flight: A Display of Legacy

With an air of pride, each Shah summoned their blade — a mesmerizing array of ancient, soul-bound swords that shimmered like stars, pulsating with elemental qi. In unison, they sent the blades soaring into the cerulean sky, each weapon hovering gracefully like celestial platforms, defying gravity's grasp.

One by one, they ascended onto their swords, their presence a blend of elegance and power, each paired with an awestruck trainee whose eyes widened in both wonder and trepidation.

El Padre was the first to rise, his cloak billowing dramatically in the wind, the spirited twins nestled securely in his arms.

"We're flying! Grandpa Liu is the coolest!" Kim Kim exclaimed, laughter spilling from her lips like music.

"We're going to crash into the clouds!" Chin Chin squealed, gripping El Padre's collar with excitement that rivaled his wild imagination.

Even El Capitan, initially reticent, followed suit with a resigned sigh, muttering under his breath, "If we're doing this, we're doing it right."

Behind them, the Seven Shah soared with grace, shrouded in traditional samurai garb — elegant black and crimson robes that flowed like liquid night, and silver masks adorned with clan sigils, their majestic yet fearsome presence commanding the sky. Each Shah was closely flanked by a trainee, who clung tightly to their swords, eyes wide with a combination of awe and dreams yet to be realized.

Hidden Valley Watches

As the daring flight pierced through the tranquil skies above Hidden Valley, cultivators below paused mid-motion, their breath taken away by the spectacle unfolding overhead. Elders interrupted their serene morning meditations, disciples dropped their scrolls in disbelief, and even the spirit beasts turned their curious gazes upwards.

The formation of gleaming flying swords, the regal carriage of the Seven Shah, and the undeniable aura emanating from El Padre sent a thunderous message reverberating throughout the valley:

The Li Clan has arrived. They are a force to be reckoned with.

Whispers spread like wildfire, igniting intrigue and reverence.

"Is that really the Seven Shah?"

"Those behind them... could they possibly be new members of the inner disciples of the Li Clan?"

"Who's that man up front — holding children and radiating such immense qi?"

"That's El Padre. And those twins? They are the embodiment of his legacy."

The Twins "..."

'We are not El Padre's children!'

Arrival at Verdant Bamboo Pavilion

With impeccable precision, the group descended in perfect formation, landing with the grace of descending clouds at the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, where the Elders stood like sentinels, their expressions a blend of solemnity and anticipation.

Ling Li stepped forward, her eyes glistening with moisture as she caught sight of the twins joyfully waving from El Padre's arms.

"You made quite the scene, didn't you?" she remarked, her tone balancing amusement with a hint of exasperation.

El Padre's grin was infectious. "A necessary one. Let the valley understand that we're not merely here to visit; we're here to remind them of who has the power."

Butler Oda, together with the Seven Shah, bowed in unison, a striking display of respect and tradition.

The trainees dismounted, still buzzing with the thrill of the flight, their hearts racing with exhilaration.

And the valley, once draped in tranquility, now thrummed with the awareness that the indomitable power of the Li Clan had returned, their presence felt like a tempest breaking the dawn.

A Reunion of Blood and Spirit

As the group arrived at the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, the air shimmered with anticipation. Ren and Lily, their hearts racing, broke into a joyous sprint, their footfalls reverberating against the smooth, polished stone like a heartbeat of hope.

"Shi Min!" Ren called out, her voice trembling with an overwhelming rush of emotions, echoing through the tranquil surroundings.

Without hesitation, they launched themselves into his arms, enveloping him in a fierce embrace, tears cascading down their cheeks like liquid silver under the gentle sunlight.

"We were so worried about you!" Ren managed to say, her voice muffled against his shoulder, where she sought solace.

"Big Brother, your successful breakthrough is thrilling... but part of me was terrified," Lily sobbed, her delicate hands clenching his robe as though holding on for dear life.

Shi Min wrapped his arms around them, his immortal aura enveloping them in a comforting warmth that chased away the shadows of their fears.

"I'm sorry for all the worry I caused," he said softly, his words like a balm. "But I had to do it. For all of us."

The Elders Take Notice

Watching from the periphery, Li Shenwu and Li Tianyuan bore witness to this poignant moment, their expressions a mask of inscrutable wisdom.

Li Shenwu's voice, ethereal and commanding like the whisper of the wind through ancient trees, broke the charged silence. "Ling Ling... are these your children?"

Ling Li stepped forward, her posture exuding a blend of pride and grace, as if she were unveiling a hidden treasure. "Yes. Children, come forth and introduce yourselves to your Great-grandpa and Seven-great-grandpa."

The Line of Legacy

With backs straight and eyes glowing with awe, the children lined up like young saplings eager for the sun's embrace.

Ren, the eldest, stepped forward with serene confidence first. With her hands pressed together in a sincere gesture, she bowed deeply, her voice clear and respectful as a clarion call. "Seven-Great-Grandfather, Great-grandfather, I'm Ren, the eldest."

Next was Lily, who mirrored her sister's bow with an air of unyielding reverence. "I'm Lily, the third child and second daughter."

Then came the lively twins, bursting with excitement.

"We're Kim Kim and Chin Chin!" they chimed, both bowing energetically with small hands pressed together, their eagerness palpable in the air. "I'm Kim Kim, the fourth child and third daughter!"

"I'm Chin Chin, the fifth child and fourth daughter. We're twins!" she added, her little brow scrunching in earnest concentration.

Li Shenwu's lips curled into an amused smile, the corners of his mouth lifting like the dawn breaking over a horizon. "If you have something on your mind, little one, don't hesitate to share it."

Chin Chin blinked at him with innocent curiosity. "Why do we call you Seven-great-grandpa?"

A chorus of laughter erupted, filling the pavilion with warmth.

Li Shenwu chuckled, his voice reminiscent of leaves rustling in a gentle breeze. "Ah, that's because I'm seven generations older than your parents."

Chin Chin tilted her head, as if processing this revelation.

Ren leaned down and shared a conspiratorial whisper: "If we don't call him Seven-great-grandpa, we'd have to say Great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather."

Chin Chin's eyes widened, the realization washing over her like sunlight through the trees. "Ah! Better to call him Seven-great-grandpa!"

Chapter 410: YOU ARE THE CROWN PRINCE OF LI CLAN

Laughter rang out yet again, even tickling the spirit of the venerable Li Shenwu, who let loose a hearty, genuine laugh that resonated through the bamboo grove.

Kim Kim, pondering deeply, rubbed her chin like a pint-sized sage. "That means... Seven-great-grandfather must be very old."

Li Shenwu raised an eyebrow, a playful challenge glimmering in his gaze. "That's correct. Why don't you take a wild guess at my age?"

Kim Kim furrowed her brow in concentration. "You must be at least... five hundred years old!"

Li Shenwu erupted into delighted laughter, a sound like joyous bells ringing in the distance. "Come here, dear one, and Seven-great-grandpa will bestow upon you a worthy first meeting gift!"

The Gifts of Legacy

With obedient eagerness, Kim Kim stepped forward. Li Shenwu gently took her hand, slipping a jade bracelet inlaid with a radiant golden dragon onto her wrist, its qi pulsing with life and energy.

"Thank you, Seven-great-grandpa," she said earnestly, bowing with both hands, her face glowing with gratitude.

"Now, come here, little one," he called to Chin Chin, bestowing upon her a matching bracelet that glimmered with promise.

Next, he summoned Ren and Lily, gifting each of them a white jade bracelet — simple yet elegant, imbued with protective qi and offering love and care woven through time.

His gaze turned solemn as it fell on Shi Min.

"This is for you." With a reverent touch, he slipped a jade thumb ring onto Shi Min's hand — its surface intricately etched with the ancestral sigil of the Li Clan, a symbol of strength that has echoed through generations. "It signifies your power within our family. You are the Crown Prince of the Li Clan and its future."

Shi Min blinked, awash in a whirlwind of emotions as the delicate thumb ring slipped snugly onto his finger. Its cool, polished surface shimmered in the light, radiating an aura of extraordinary value. The words of significance behind the ring echoed in his mind, causing a wave of humility to wash over him. "Seven-great-grandfather, this ring is far too precious for someone like me. I fear I may not be worthy of such an honor," he said, his brow furrowing with a mixture of gratitude and trepidation.

Li Shenwu's laughter flowed like warm sunlight, filling a winter room and dispelling the chill of Shi Min's insecurities. "If you are not worthy of this ring, then I dare say everyone else is merely trash," he proclaimed, his voice rich and commanding, infusing the air with a sense of finality.

With a heart full of reverence, Shi Min bowed deeply, the weight of his ancestor's words settling upon him like a mantle of responsibility. "Thank you, Seven-great-grandfather," he murmured, the solemnity of the moment crystal clear in his mind.

Lastly, he turned to Four Eyes, an air of authority surrounding him. "As Ling Ling's husband, you embody the patriarch of the Li Clan." He slid a matching thumb ring onto Four Eyes' hand, the weight of tradition resting heavily yet confidently upon him.

Four Eyes bowed deeply, his expression a canvas of gratitude and respect, his pride unmistakable.

The Rings of Unity: A Moment of Power

Li Shenwu's gaze shifted to Ling Li, his eyes piercing yet gentle. "Ling Li, where's your ring?"

With a graceful movement, Ling Li reached into her spatial pouch, retrieving a jade ring that sparkled with a sumptuous radiance, ornate and rarely worn. "It's too ostentatious; I usually keep it hidden."

"Come," Li Shenwu commanded with a touch of warmth.

Gently, he took her hand, coaxing her thumb forward. In a gesture both ceremonial and intimate, he pressed Four Eyes' ring against hers.

At that moment, a soft glow emerged from the two rings, illuminating the space around them. A surge of ancestral qi rippled outward, crashing through the pavilion like a wave of warm thunder. The air shimmered like heat waves rising on a summer day. The bamboo leaves rustled in harmony, and even the ground beneath their feet pulsed with energy.

The two rings merged — not physically, but in spirit, their auras entwining to form a single, resplendent seal that hovered for a fleeting moment above their hands before settling into their respective rings.

In that radiant moment, a golden sigil — the ancient crest of the Li Clan — flared brilliantly in the air, then vanished, sealed within their very skin.

The Meaning of the Rings

A hush fell over the assembly, enveloping them in an almost sacred silence.

Even the youngest children stood still, awestruck by the spectacle.

"What... was that?" Ren whispered, her voice trembling with a mix of wonder and bewilderment.

Li Shenwu's voice was low and reverent, imbued with the weight of generations. "The rings have recognized their bond. When the patriarch's and matriarch's rings resonate, it signifies that the clan's core has stabilized. The ancestral qi acknowledges them as the heart of the Li bloodline."

"It hasn't happened in over five generations," Li Tianyuan added, a hint of awe coloring his tone.

Shi Min looked at his parents, his heart swelling with something more profound than pride — belonging.

The twins clapped.

"So cool!" Kim Kim squealed.

"Does that mean Mommy and Pap are king and queen now?" Chin Chin asked.

Li Shenwu chuckled. "Not quite. But close enough."

Inside the Bamboo Pavilion: Bonds Rekindled, Tensions Stirred

"Come, everyone," Li Tianyuan finally proclaimed, his voice a warm embrace that belied the hint of unease as he observed the group standing at the threshold of the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, like anxious guests waiting for the go-ahead to exhale.

He stepped aside, his hand sweeping in a grand gesture toward the hall bathed in dappled morning light. The polished wooden floors sparkled like a tranquil lake under sunlit ripples, while the mingling aromas of fresh bamboo and earthy sandalwood wafted through the air, wrapping around them like a gentle caress.