

PROTEGE 411

Chapter 411: SPIRIT CARP AND THE HIDDEN PORTAL

Chatty's Trial

Li Shenwu's finger shifted, signaling for Chatty to step forward. Chatty froze. It was as if invisible roots twined around his ankles, fixing him to the floor while his heart pounded like a festival drum against his ribs and a cold sweat slicked his palms. He longed to vanish, to dissolve into the shadows and escape the searing eyes around him. Only when Shun nudged him firmly in the back did he lurch forward, his steps clumsy and uncertain, his head bowed low as though the very air was too heavy to lift his gaze.

Li Shenwu's forehead creased; his aura weighed down like thunder. "So, you're Pharsa's husband?" Authority crackled in every word.

Chatty nodded quickly, his chin nearly touching his chest.

"You're so weak! Aren't you ashamed? You can't even raise your head! Look at you! The two-year-old twins are even stronger and more confident than you!" Li Shenwu scolded, his voice slicing through the air.

He snorted, the sound sharp and dismissive.

Chatty's Inner Thoughts

Chatty's mind reeled, his cheeks burning with humiliation that felt like a thousand tiny needles. 'Ashamed? Of course, I'm ashamed. I've always been the coward, the one hiding behind Fatty, behind jokes and false laughter. I know I'm weak. I know I'm not like Shi Min or Shun, or even the twins whose confidence shines brighter than lanterns in the night. But... I'm still here. I still try, even with knees knocking and fear gnawing at my insides. Doesn't that count for something?'

His fingers clenched at his sides, trembling so hard it seemed the room might hear. 'I love Pharsa. I want to be worthy of her. I want to be more than the clan's joke. But every time I stand before someone like him... my knees turn to water, my voice shrivels, and my courage scatters like startled sparrows. Am I doomed always to be the weakest link?'

Chatty dared not raise his head, but inside, a small ember flickered — a stubborn, fragile spark refusing to be snuffed out by shame. Beneath all the fear, defiance simmered — a silent promise that this moment would not define him forever.

The Enfield Revelation

Li Shenwu turned his gaze to Ling Li, his tone sharp but curious. "Ling Ling, did you provide him with this Enfield?"

Ling Li straightened, her voice calm but firm. "Great-grandpa, indeed it was I who gifted Murphy with the Enfield. Murphy can speak with the animals."

Li Shenwu's eyes softened slightly, his beard brushing against his chest as he nodded in understanding. "If not for this Enfield, his body might have already broken. And I'm sure you are aware of that."

Ling Li bowed her head respectfully. "Yes, Great-grandpa, I'm aware of Murphy's situation."

"He will be a beast tamer in the future. But before that happens, make sure to correct and enhance his cultivation — or he might explode without even knowing why," Li Shenwu warned, his eyes narrowing with stern emphasis.

Chatty flinched at the word explode, his stomach twisting. The ember inside him burned hotter, mingling fear with determination. 'I don't want to die like that. I don't want to be remembered as the weak one. I'll prove myself... somehow.'

Shun's Evaluation

Li Shenwu moved on, his steps deliberate, his aura shifting as he approached Shun. The young man, knowing his place as Ren's elder, bowed deeply, his posture respectful and unwavering.

Li Shenwu's eyes gleamed, his voice resonant. "Good, good."

He circled Shun slowly, observing him from every angle, his beard brushing against his robes as he stroked it in thought. "Strong fire attribute and a very bright future, with all the golden aura surrounding you. Good."

Shun's chest swelled with pride, though he kept his expression humble. The golden aura shimmered faintly around him, like sunlight breaking through clouds.

Calling Ren

Li Shenwu turned back to Ling Li, his voice commanding yet calm. "Ling Li, call your eldest daughter over."

Before Ling Li could respond, Shun stepped forward, his tone respectful. "Auntie, I'll call Ren. She is playing with Lily at the pond."

The pavilion stirred with anticipation. The elders leaned forward, curious to see the eldest daughter. The younger disciples whispered among themselves, eager to witness another evaluation. Even the twins perked up, their eyes wide with excitement.

The air thickened once more, the weight of legacy pressing down on everyone present.

Bamboo Garden: The Pond's Secrets

The Bamboo Garden shimmered under the late morning sun, its pond reflecting the swaying stalks like a living mirror of jade. Ren and Lily knelt at the water's edge, laughter bubbling between them as they flicked droplets back and forth. The air was thick with the scent of wet bamboo and distant steamed buns. But then, the water's surface trembled—not from their hands, but from something deeper, as if the pond itself held its breath.

A flash of gold broke through the water.

"Ren... look!" Lily gasped, clutching her sister's sleeve.

From the depths rose a Spirit Carp with Golden Scales, its luminous body casting gold patterns on the girls' faces, each scale flashing with the brilliance of molten sunlight. The carp's eyes glowed with ancient intelligence, and as it surfaced, the pond seemed to hum with quiet power—a music just beyond hearing. It circled gracefully, trailing ripples that shimmered and pulsed, lingering as though the water itself was reluctant to let go of the magic.

Ren's breath caught. "A Spirit Carp... here? In the Bamboo Garden?"

The carp leapt once, golden scales scattering droplets that burst into tiny stars on the surface. For a heartbeat, the sisters felt the carp's gaze—a challenge and an invitation, as if it weighed their very souls. Lily reached out, her fingers trembling as they skimmed the water. The carp darted closer, then vanished in a swirl of light, leaving a faint, pulsing glow at the pond's heart.

The Hidden Portal

Ren leaned forward, her sharp eyes narrowing. "Wait... do you see that?"

At the pond's center, the glow blossomed, unfurling in a widening ripple that clung stubbornly to the surface. It deepened, shapes shifting until the outline of a doorway appeared beneath the water, beckoning and mysterious. The sisters exchanged a glance, curiosity sparking between them like static before a storm.

"It's... a portal, isn't it?" Lily whispered, her voice trembling with awe.

Ren nodded, determination flashing in her eyes. "Let's pry it open. Just a little."

Chapter 412: BIG BROTHER IS BRAVE

Ren and Lily pressed their hands against the water's surface, only to feel it resist — solid and cold as glass. The ripple shimmered, vibrating beneath their fingertips, a thrumming energy rising from the depths. A faint, electric hum filled the air, as if the pond itself drew breath. The Spirit Carp surfaced again, circling them with slow purpose, its movements a silent warning not to trespass too far.

Just as the portal began to pulse brighter, footsteps approached.

"Ren! Auntie asked for you. Come quickly!" Shun's voice rang out from the bamboo path.

Ren froze, caught in the tug-of-war between duty and the thrill of discovery. Wonder pulled her forward, responsibility held her back. Lily clutched her hand, eyes wide with excitement and fear, and whispered, "We'll come back. Tonight."

The portal dimmed, retreating into stillness as Shun's shadow fell across the pond.

The Twins and the Mischievous Spirit Duck

Meanwhile, chaos erupted deeper in the Bamboo Forest.

"Quack-quack! Fifty bolts of lightning, and you still screamed like a baby! Quack!" The Mischievous Spirit Duck strutted into the sun-dappled clearing, feathers agleam with threads of pale, flickering qi. Its voice rang out, echoing off bamboo and mossy stone, each squawk a masterwork of mockery. Shi Min's ordeal became a legend retold in the duck's theatrical, taunting performance, its beak nearly curling into a mischievous grin.

"How dare you!" shouted Kim Kim, her tiny fists clenched. "Big Brother is brave!"

"Yeah! You're just a noisy duck!" Chin Chin added, her brows knitted in fierce determination.

With a sudden whirl of silvery wings, the duck darted away, quick as a falling star. The twins erupted in a chorus of laughter and outraged cries, giving chase through the whispering bamboo. Bare feet thudded against the loamy earth, their voices ringing out, bright and wild, weaving through the forest like birdsong on the breeze.

The duck zigzagged, quacking insults. "Lightning! Boom! Crackle! And he cried! Quack-quack!"

"Catch it! Catch it!" Kim Kim yelled, leaping over a fallen branch.

Chin Chin dove after the duck, nearly tumbling into a patch of moss. "Stop mocking my brother, you feathered demon!"

The bamboo forest exploded into uproar— birds burst skyward in a flurry of wings, leaves shivered in cascading waves, and a startled hare zigzagged through the underbrush. Disciples poked their heads

from behind mossy trunks, blinking in confusion at the uproar. The twins' laughter tangled with shrill battle cries, echoing as they spun circles around the clearing, their resolve as fierce as any general's.

Finally, the duck darted straight into the pond, clearing, splashing water everywhere. Ren and Lily turned just in time to see their twin sisters crash through the bamboo, hair wild, faces flushed, still shouting at the duck.

The Spirit Carp arched from the water again, golden scales scattering prisms of light, as if it, too, delighted in the wild spectacle unfolding on the shore.

Ren hurried into the pavilion, her steps light but brimming with energy. Her cheeks were flushed from running, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Ren's Evaluation and the Carp's Intervention

Ren bowed respectfully before Li Shenwu, her purple aura shimmering faintly around her like mist. The elder's eyes gleamed as he stroked his beard, his thoughts heavy with recognition. 'Indeed... Ling Ling's daughter. Just like Shi Min and their mother, she is surrounded by a purple aura - a rare sign of destiny.' Li Shenwu silently thought, beaming with admiration.

"Seven-Great Grandpa, you called for me? Sorry — Lily and I were so engrossed with the Carp with Golden Scales!" Ren blurted, her voice bubbling with youthful energy.

The pavilion stirred at her words.

"They showed up??? They finally showed up!!!" Li Tianyuan's voice rang out, sharp with disbelief. His eyes widened, and without waiting for explanation, he rushed out of the pavilion, his robes trailing like a storm.

Ren blinked, confused. "Aren't they always there?" she asked innocently.

Chaos in the Bamboo Forest

But before the solemnity could deepen, a shrill chorus of quacks shattered the silence.

"Quack... quack...! Lightning boy cried! Quack!"

Heads turned. The sound grew louder, accompanied by shrieks of laughter and furious little voices.

Bursting through the bamboo came Kim Kim and Chin Chin, their hair wild, their cheeks flushed, chasing the Mischievous Spirit Duck with all the ferocity of generals leading a charge.

"Stop mocking Big Brother! He's brave!" Kim Kim shouted, leaping over a rock.

"Yeah! You're just a noisy duck!" Chin Chin added, her brows knitted in fierce determination.

The duck flapped its shimmering wings, darting between bamboo stalks, quacking insults with every turn. "Boom! Crackle! Lightning! And he screamed! Quack... quack...!"

The twins shrieked, half furious, half ecstatic, as they chased the Mischievous Spirit Ducks through the clearing. Their little feet pounded the earth, scattering leaves and startling birds into flight. Disciples nearby ducked out of the way, bewildered by the racket.

Ren covered her face with her hands, torn between laughter and embarrassment. Lily giggled uncontrollably, clutching her stomach. Even Shi Min and Four Eyes, despite their stoic demeanor, couldn't help the twitch of a smile.

The Carp Intervenes

Just as the duck splashed into the pond, mocking louder than ever, the Spirit Carp with Golden Scales leapt high from the water. Its body shimmered like a living sun, droplets scattering in radiant arcs.

The duck squawked in shock, flapping wildly as the Carp's golden aura rippled across the pond. The mocking quacks turned into panicked honks as the duck scrambled away, chased now by shimmering waves of qi.

"Quaaaack... Quack.. Quack.. Quaaaack!!!"

The twins froze, their mouths wide open in awe.

"Did you see that?! The Carp chased the duck!" Kim Kim squealed, clapping her hands.

Chin Chin puffed her chest proudly. "That's because we said Big Brother is brave! Even the Carp agrees!"

The pavilion erupted in laughter, the solemnity broken by the chaos of childhood innocence and mystical wonder. Even Li Shenwu's stern face softened, his beard twitching as he muttered, "Even the carp knows when to silence foolishness."

Chapter 413: COMPLIMENTARY DESTINIES

Ling Li and the Twins

The Bamboo Pavilion rang with the wild symphony of quacks and shrieks, as if the forest itself had burst into laughter.

"Quack... quack!"

"Stop running, you Mischievous Ducks!" Kim Kim shouted.

"Coward ducks only know how to run!" Chin Chin yelled as she ran, almost stumbling.

Then, with a snap sharper than thunder, Ling Li's voice sliced through the clamor.

"Kim Kim, Chin Chin! Why are you running after ducks through the forest like little storms?"

The twins skidded to a breathless halt, cheeks glowing and hair crowned with leaf confetti. Kim Kim jabbed a finger at the duck, which shimmered like a coin in sunlight and waddled with smug defiance.

"It mocked Big Brother! Said he cried when lightning erupted!" Kim Kim declared, fists balled, lip trembling with injustice.

Chin Chin stomped so hard the boards rattled, her small face scrunched in outrage. "No Mischievous Duck can insult my Big Brother! Not on our watch!"

The Mischievous Spirit Duck let out a triumphant quack, wings flapping as if applauding its own mischief. Laughter rippled through the pavilion, even as Ling Li bit back a smile, her eyes dancing with equal parts fondness and exasperation.

"Quack... quack... quack...!!!"

"Enough. Ducks are not our enemies. But loyalty like yours — how could both of you ever scold it?" Ling Li's sigh was half laughter, half exasperation, as the twins swelled with pride, heroes in their own eyes.

Ren's Evaluation

As the laughter ebbed, Ren moved forward — her purple aura unfurling in the air, soft and mysterious as dawn mist creeping over sacred waters.

Ren bowed deeply, her voice bright with youthful energy. "Seven-Great Grandpa, you called for me? "

Li Shenwu's gaze sharpened. "The Carp showed themselves to you?"

Ren nodded eagerly. "Yes, they were beautiful! "

Destiny Revealed

"The Spirit Carp with Golden Scales — rare as a shooting star. They surface, shining with golden light, only when our bloodlines run strong. They are not just fish, but guides — living promises of fortune and the unbroken chain of the Li Clan." Li Shenwu's voice was as old as mountain stone, heavy with memory.

Li Shenwu stepped closer, his gaze piercing through Ren's aura. "But you, child... your aura is not only purple. It resonates with the carp's glow. And more — there is a ripple in your fate."

Ren's breath caught, her heart pounding. She thought of the pond, the strange ripple she and Lily had touched, the hidden portal that pulsed beneath the water.

Li Shenwu's eyes gleamed. "You touched it, didn't you? The hidden gate beneath the pond."

Ren's lips parted in shock. "How... how did you know?"

"Because your aura carries its mark. The carp revealed themselves not only for the clan's prosperity, but for you. You are tied to that portal, Ren. It is a path few can see, fewer still can open."

Silence fell like a velvet curtain. Every gaze locked on Ren, the eldest. Even the twins froze, mouths agape, as if the world itself was holding its breath.

Li Shenwu's voice dropped lower, reverent. "Your destiny is not only to lead as the eldest, but to bridge what lies hidden. The carp are your guides. The portal is your trial. And through it, the Li Clan's future may be secured — or destroyed."

Ren's knees wobbled like saplings in the wind, but she bent low, voice clear and bright despite the storm thundering in her chest. "I won't fail you, Seven-Great Grandpa."

Lily's Evaluation

When Ren bowed and retreated, the air in the pavilion seemed to shift — lighter, expectant, threaded with the gold shimmer of the waiting pond. Lily, cheeks still warm from laughter and the duck chase with the twins, hovered at the edge before stepping forward, her heart fluttering with a cocktail of curiosity and nervous pride.

Li Shenwu's gaze sharpened, his beard trailing over his robe as he studied Lily's aura. Unlike Ren's calm, steady purple, Lily's glow trembled — soft, fluid, like sunlight skipping across the surface of water.

He stroked his beard, deep in thought. 'This one... she is different. Not bound to the portal, but attuned to the carp themselves. She hears what others cannot.'

"Child, step closer." Li Shenwu's voice was firm, but not unkind.

Lily obeyed, her eyes wide. "Seven-Great Grandpa... I didn't mean to disturb the carp. They just... came to Big sister and me."

Li Shenwu's sternness melted a little. "They didn't come by accident. The Spirit Carp with Golden Scales is a guide, and you — child—can hear what others miss. Their splashes, their secrets, even their laughter in the ripples. Where Ren is bound to the hidden gate, you are tuned to the carp's voice."

The pavilion stirred with murmurs. Elders leaned forward, intrigued. Even Ling Li's eyes widened, her hand tightening on her robe.

Complementary Destinies

Li Shenwu raised his hand, his voice resonant. "Ren and Lily — two sisters, two paths. One bound to the portal, the other to the carp. Together, you form balance. The gate cannot be opened without guidance, and guidance is meaningless without the courage to walk through."

Ren's heart thudded, her eyes shining as she turned to Lily. Lily blinked back at her, half in awe, half in disbelief.

"So... I'm supposed to talk to fish?" Lily whispered, her lips twitching.

Ling Li "..."

She pinched the bridge of her nose and groaned softly, but a smile tugged at her lips. 'Is she truly my daughter? Well, it's not surprising, only in this family could prophecy be interrupted by duck talk,' she thought while shaking her head.

The pavilion erupted in laughter, breaking the tension. Even Li Shenwu chuckled, though his tone remained solemn.

"Not fish, child. Guides. They will speak when others are deaf. They will warn when danger approaches. And you must listen." Li Shenwu patiently explained.

The Twins Interrupt Again

Before the weight of prophecy could settle, the twins burst back into the clearing, still chasing the Mischievous Spirit Duck.

"Quack... quack! Carp are shiny! Carp are silly! Quack!" the duck mocked, splashing into the pond.

Kim Kim, and Chin Chin shrieked, diving after it, their tiny hands splashing water everywhere. The carp leapt once more, scattering golden droplets that shimmered like stars. The duck squawked in panic, fleeing into the bamboo, leaving the twins triumphant and soaked.

"Quack! Quaaaack!"

"Ha ha ha ha! See! Even the carp helped us!" Chin Chin declared proudly.

Li Shenwu shook his head, a weary twinkle in his eye. "Even ducks and carp conspire to teach us lessons," he muttered, as if nature itself enjoyed playing tricks on them all.

Chapter 414: LEGEND AND GIRL: WEAPON AND DAUGHTER

"From this moment forth, Ren is my disciple, my torchbearer." Shinsei's voice rolled through the pavilion like distant thunder, each word settling into bone and memory. "Her journey is no longer woven solely with the threads of the Li Clan, but entwined with my teachings, forged in the crucible of ancient wisdom. She shall walk the razor's edge between flame and shadow, with the spirit carp as her compass and the portal as her crucible — a trial that will either temper her into legend or consume her utterly."

Ren descended into another bow, deeper this time, her spine curved like a willow bending before the wind. Her voice emerged as a calm river flowing over jagged stones, masking the tempest churning beneath. "I will honor this bond with every breath I draw, Master. My life is yours to shape."

Shinsei's eyes glimmered with something ancient and knowing, sharp as lantern light cutting through fog. A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Then rise, Apprentice. Let the world tremble at the sound of your name, for it will echo across mountains and through the corridors of time itself."

Clan Reactions

The sacred hush shattered like porcelain striking stone. Whispers erupted, darting between the elders like fireflies awakening at dusk — frantic, luminous, impossible to contain. The air itself seemed to buzz with unspoken questions and barely restrained wonder.

Elders leaned toward one another like conspirators in a forbidden ritual, their silk robes rustling, their weathered faces creased with concern. "A prophecy binding carp to portal, blood to destiny — has such a convergence ever graced our histories? Or cursed them?"

"With Shinsei claiming her, does this shift authority away from the clan?"

"No, it strengthens us. Or... perhaps it divides us."

The younger disciples buzzed like a hive disturbed, their excitement crackling through the air like static before lightning. "Ren carries two mantles now — granddaughter of Li Shenwu, Apprentice of the legendary Shinsei. Will she eclipse even Shi Min's glory?"

"And Lily — she hears what the carp whisper in the deep. Together, the sisters are like thunder and rain, storm and sky, each incomplete without the other."

"Or doomed to shatter beneath the weight of destiny. Balance is as fragile as a clay pot perched on a precipice — one tremor, and all falls to ruin."

Suddenly, the Twins — mischievous sprites with eyes bright as polished jade — shattered the tension like a stone through a paper screen. "We'll help too!" Kim Kim proclaimed, puffing out her chest like a bantam rooster challenging the dawn.

"Yeah! We'll chase ducks and carp and even portals if they dare appear!" Chin Chin added, her twin braids bouncing like eager puppies, her grin wide enough to swallow the moon.

The Mischievous Spirit Duck, never one to be outdone by mere mortals, ruffled its iridescent feathers and unleashed a mighty quack—a sound somewhere between a war cry and a cackle.

"Quaaack! Quack! Quack! Quack! Quack!"

The entire pavilion erupted in laughter, the tension dissolving like morning mist under sunlight.

Even the stone-faced Li Shenwu, whose expressions were rarer than phoenix sightings, let slip a reluctant smile that softened his granite features. "Hmph. Courage wears many feathers — even if it quacks rather than roars. Perhaps especially then."

The Ripple Effect

The news leapt from the pavilion like a frog startled by thunder, bounding across the Hidden Valley with unstoppable momentum. Messengers dashed through crowded markets and over mist-shrouded hills, their feet barely touching earth. Gossip poured from lips faster than wine at a wedding feast, each retelling more embellished than the last.

Across distant Li Clan halls scattered throughout the valley, some cheered with wild abandon, banging ceremonial drums until their hands ached and lighting red lanterns that blazed like captured stars, convinced Ren's apprenticeship would usher in an age of unprecedented honor. Others grumbled in shadowy corners thick with incense smoke, fretting that Shinsei's towering reputation would eclipse their own elders, reducing generations of wisdom to forgotten footnotes.

Beyond the clan's borders, in the secret folds and hidden enclaves of the Hidden Valley where rival sects nursed old grudges, the news landed like a poisoned dart. Some licked their lips with predatory hunger: "If this girl opens the portal, perhaps we can snatch its secrets from her inexperienced hands before the Li Clan claims them all."

Others saw only an existential threat looming on the horizon: "The Li Clan swells with power like a river before flood season — spirit carp, ancient portal, prophecy incarnate, and now Shinsei's legendary hand guiding them? We must tread carefully, or be swept away entirely."

A few scoffed, their cynicism hardened by years of watching prodigies rise and fall. "Apprentice of Shinsei or not, she's still green as spring bamboo shoots, untested by winter's bite. Let's see if she survives the first storm — or if the wind breaks her before she ever takes root."

The valley buzzed with feverish speculation, alliances whispered in torch-lit shadows, and old rivalries sharpened like blades on whetstones. The spirit carp's golden leap had rippled far beyond the tranquil

pond — it had shaken the foundations of the entire Hidden Valley, and nothing would ever be quite the same.

Ren's Inner World After the Ritual

The laughter and whispers swirling through the pavilion clung to Ren's ears like silk threads she couldn't quite brush away, even as she stepped from Shinsei's towering shadow. She tucked her trembling hands deep into her sleeves, hiding the storm raging beneath her carefully constructed calm. The delicate flavor of ceremonial tea still lingered on her lips, but what she honestly tasted was something far heavier — the metallic weight of destiny settling upon her tongue like an iron coin, a bittersweet reminder that the girl she'd been at dawn had died, and someone new, someone terrifying, had been born in her place.

She had bowed to Shinsei as her Master, and the clan had bowed to her destiny.

Chapter 415: THE ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Gathering at Verdant Bamboo Pavilion

As the sun dipped low, casting long shadows over the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, Li Shenwu's voice rang out—a summons impossible to ignore. Li Tianyuan raced through winding corridors and sunlit courtyards, calling forth every elder, every disciple, and every curious child. Within moments, the grand hall swelled with people. Robes shimmered like rippling water, whispers fluttered from corner to corner, and a hush of expectation wrapped around them all, thick as morning mist. The Spirit Carp's fabled leap had already sent a shiver of awe through the clan; now, hearts pounded as they awaited the elder's declaration.

Li Shenwu stood at the dais, a living monument of authority—his presence as weighty as a boulder atop a mountain peak. Fingers stroking his snowy beard, he drew a breath, ready to speak. But before a single word could take flight, the great wooden doors groaned open, stealing every gaze.

Shinsei's Arrival

"Old Man, you're not disregarding me before announcing anything that has to do with my apprentice, are you?"

The interruption sliced through the tension. The voice was sharp, playful, and ancient as the hills. Shinsei strode in, his robes glimmering with hints of immortal qi, his eyes bright with secret laughter.

Li Shenwu's beard bristled like the tail of an angry cat. "Who are you calling Old Man?! You're older than the mountains! And who cares about your so-called apprenticeship? These two are my great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaughters!"

Shinsei scoffed, folding his arms with practiced drama. "Older? Hah! Since Ren is my apprentice, you— how many greats did you count? Seven? Then how are you supposed to address me now? Shouldn't you call me Grandmaster Shinsei?"

Everyone "!!!!"

The crowd buzzed, heads tilting to catch every barb. Even Ling Li pressed her lips into a thin line, wrestling with the absurdity of their squabble.

The two immortals — Li Shenwu and Shinsei — fell into their familiar dance of pride and rivalry, their words sparking like flint against stone.

Bickering Two Immortals: Pride and Age-old Rivalry

Li Shenwu jabbed a finger at Shinsei. "Seven greats or seventy makes no difference! I am the patriarch here! Don't swagger in claiming you outrank me."

Shinsei's lips curled in a sly grin. "Patriarch, sure. But when it comes to Ren, she bows to me first. Apprentice before granddaughter. That means I'm her master — and you, by logic, her junior."

Li Shenwu's beard quivered with indignation. "Junior?! You insolent relic! If I am junior, then you must be dust!"

Shinsei laughed, his tone dry as autumn leaves. "Dust, maybe. But it was this dust that taught your granddaughter to command fire and wisdom. Without me, she'd still be chasing ducks with those twins of yours."

The twins, catching the slight, piped up, "Hey! We're brave!" The Spirit Duck added its two cents with a cheeky quack, drawing snickers from the crowd.

Ling Li Intervenes

Ling Li finally stepped forward, her voice calm but firm. "Enough. If you two argue about seniority, we'll be here until the carp grow old. Ren is both granddaughter and apprentice. That makes her bound to both of you. So perhaps... You should address each other as equals."

The pavilion fell silent.

Li Shenwu huffed, his beard twitching. "Equals? Hmph. Fine. Then I'll call him... Brother Shinsei."

Shinsei's lips curled into a grin. "Brother Shenwu, then. Though I prefer 'Younger Brother.'"

Li Shenwu's eyes flashed. "Don't push it."

Everyone "...."

Chastened by Ling Li's wisdom, the elders let their bickering subside, eager to preserve their dignity before the younger generation.

The Announcement

Finally, Li Shenwu lifted his hand, commanding silence with a gesture. His voice rolled out like thunder across the hall.

"Hear me, Li Clan! Today, the Spirit Carp with Golden Scales has revealed itself. This is no ordinary omen. It is a sign of prosperity, continuity, and destiny."

He gestured to Ren and Lily, who stood shoulder to shoulder, their spirits gleaming like dawn on still water.

"Ren, eldest daughter of Matriarch Ling Li, is bound to the hidden portal beneath the pond. She will be the bridge between what is concealed and what must be revealed. Her courage will open the way."

His gaze shifted to Lily, softer now.

"Lily, second daughter, is attuned to the carp hearts. She hears their guidance, their warnings, their laughter. She will be the voice of wisdom, ensuring the clan does not stray, keeping us true."

He lowered his hand, his tone reverent. "Together, they are balanced. One forges the path, the other guides the steps. This is the destiny of the sisters — and through them, the future of the Li Clan."

The pavilion erupted in awe. Elders bowed with respect, disciples whispered reverently, and even the mischievous twins stood wide-eyed, their duck chase forgotten.

Shinsei smirked, leaning toward Li Shenwu. "Not bad, Old Man. For once, you got it right."

Li Shenwu snorted. "Brother Shenwu, if you please."

Laughter bubbled through the clan, the air lighter for a moment, but the weight of prophecy lingered — etched into every heart present.

The Apprenticeship Ritual

Shinsei cleared his throat, his voice slicing through the pavilion's murmurs the way dawn scatters the night. Every head turned, the tension thick as steam from a kettle.

"Since all the Li are here, let it be known — Ren is now my apprentice." His words fell like pebbles in a pond, sending ripples through the gathered clan. "Ren, come and serve your Master tea."

A hush swept the crowd. Ren's heart thundered in her chest, louder than the rain drums during the festival. She'd always felt Shinsei's quiet guidance, but to be named his apprentice before everyone. Ling Li, eyes full of pride, gave her a slight nod.

Ren slid forward on her knees, the hem of her robe whispering across the polished wood. Around her, a faint shimmer of purple light danced — her aura, gentle but proud. A disciple rushed over, hands trembling, to offer a tray of porcelain cups. The scent of tea, earthy and warm, wrapped around Ren like a mother's embrace. She lifted a cup in both hands, arms steady despite her racing pulse.

Bowing deeply, she held the cup up to Shinsei. "Master, please accept this tea."

Shinsei took it with a gravitas that felt centuries old, though a sly smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. He drank, slow and deliberate, then set the cup down with a flourish. Suddenly, his aura flared, filling the pavilion with a pressure that made even seasoned elders straighten.

Chapter 416: WHAT IF I FAIL?

Ren's heart galloped wildly, like a panicked horse with no reins. 'Apprentice. Granddaughter. Portal-bearer. Guide of the carp.' The titles piled upon her shoulders like stones, each one heavier than the last. 'Could one mortal soul carry so many names, shoulder so many destinies without buckling?' Ren silently thought. 'How could I be all these things at once — legend and girl, weapon and daughter — without shattering into a thousand irretrievable pieces?'

Excitement surged through her veins like liquid lightning, bright and dizzying and almost painful in its intensity. For years, she had dreamed of proving herself, of finally slipping free from the long, suffocating shadows cast by her legendary elders. Now, impossibly, the world itself unfurled before her like an illuminated scroll painted in gold and crimson — vast, beautiful, terrifying. Shinsei's words — "The world will know your name" — burned in her chest like a wildfire hungry for air, for fuel, for everything she had to give.

But beneath that blazing hope, a cold river of doubt ran deep, dark, and treacherous. 'What if I fail? What if the portal doesn't open but devours me whole, leaving nothing but echoes? What if the carp, once faithful, senses my weakness and turns away?'

Her mind drifted unbidden to Lily — her sister's crystalline laughter echoing across the pond at twilight, her gentle touch stirring ancient secrets in the carp's golden ripples. 'Lily hears what I cannot — the whispers beneath the water, the songs in the silence. Without her, I am blind, stumbling through an endless dark. Without me, she cannot open the way. We are two halves of the same impossible path, cut from the same mysterious stone by hands we'll never see.'

Ren's gaze wandered across the pavilion to the twins, who stood nearby, oblivious to the weight of the moment, their embroidered robes soggy and mud-splattered from chasing ducks, round cheeks flushed with uncomplicated joy and fierce pride. Their innocence sparkled like dew on morning grass — a living, breathing reminder of what she was truly meant to guard. Not ancient portals or mystical carp, but this: their laughter, the delicate threads of kinship, the fragile hope of the clan's tomorrow embodied in two small girls who still believed the world was good.

She balled her fists until her nails bit crescents into her palms, using the sharp pain to ground herself in the present, in the real. 'I must not falter — not for myself, not for Lily, not for Shun, not for Shi Min, not for the clan counting on me.' Their dreams and fears wove through her own like golden threads through silk, binding them together like reeds in a river current — separate stalks made unbreakable by their connection.

The Weight of Dual Bonds

Ren slipped away to the edge of the Bamboo Garden, where moonlight spilled like a silver thread upon the pond. The golden scales of the carp glimmered beneath the surface, flickering like tiny lanterns in the dark. She knelt, peering into the water, her own reflection split and scattered by the restless ripples.

"Granddaughter of Li Shenwu. Apprentice of Shinsei. Daughter of Ling Li, Sister to Lily and the immortal Shi Min. Partner to Shun, the future President of the Country." She spoke each title like a prayer, or perhaps an accusation. "Who am I, truly, beneath all these borrowed names? When they strip away, what remains?"

A single carp broke the surface, its scales aglow with a quiet light, as if offering an answer to the ache in her heart. Its presence was steady, a silent promise that steadied her doubts — if only for a fleeting breath. She rose and wandered among the bamboo, letting the whisper of leaves soothe the chaos in her mind.

Lily's Reflections After the Ritual

When the pavilion finally quieted, and the last lanterns dimmed to embers, Lily slipped away from the crowd like a shadow, her small feet carrying her instinctively back toward the pond — her refuge, her sanctuary. The golden ripples still shimmered faintly in the darkness, as if the water itself had been

waiting patiently for her return. She crouched at the edge, hugging her knees to her chest, her thoughts uncharacteristically heavy despite her usual effervescent lightheartedness.

'Ren, my big sister, is Master Shinsei's apprentice now... everyone saw it. Everyone bowed. She's the eldest, the leader, the one tied to the portal. And me? I'm just the one who hears fish.'

Her lips trembled into a pout she was too old for but couldn't suppress, but the pond answered as it always did. The Spirit Carp with Golden Scales surfaced like a small sun rising from the deep, its ancient eyes glowing softly with understanding. It circled once, deliberately, sending ripples that brushed against her aura like gentle fingers. Lily felt the familiar hum in her chest — a resonance, a recognition, a secret language no one else in the entire clan seemed capable of hearing.

Lily whispered to the glowing creature, her voice small but fierce, "You're listening to me, aren't you? You see me. Even if no one else does — even if I'm invisible in Big sister's shadow — you see me."

The carp leapt lightly, scattering droplets that sparkled like stars. Lily giggled despite herself, her heart easing. "Big sister may open the way, but I'll make sure she doesn't walk alone. I'll be her ears, her guide, her balance."

The Sisters' Complementary Paths

Later, as Ren returned from her walk, she found Lily sitting cross-legged at the pond's edge, her posture patient but expectant. Their eyes met: Ren's dark and intense, with determination; Lily's softer, reflecting the water's shimmer and a quiet resolve that needed no words.

As the breeze rippled the pond's surface, the glistening water seemed to mirror Ren's turbulent heart. Each ripple carried a fleeting thought, a whisper of doubt that echoed within her. Ren's mind was a tangled web of emotions, a blend of courage and fear. 'How would my path impact my bond with Lily? Was I ready to face what awaited in the portal?'

The expectation to excel, the fear of letting down not just herself but her sister, too, weighed heavily on her shoulders. The path she was about to tread seemed to take on a sharper, more daunting edge, whispering the question she dared not voice:

'What if I fail?'

Chapter 417: SHE HEARS THE FISH?

Ren knelt beside her sister, her voice barely above a whisper. "I have to open the portal. It's my trial." Her words felt heavier spoken aloud, like stones she'd been carrying inside her chest. For a moment, she hesitated, the fear of failure hovering at the edges of her thoughts — a fear she would never dare to voice, even to Lily. Yet, as she glanced at her sister, determination flickered back into place, pushing the unbidden worry aside.

Lily smiled faintly, trailing her fingers across the cool water, watching the ripples spread outward. A shadow of doubt flickered briefly in her eyes, like a cloud momentarily veiling the sun. "And I'll listen to the carp. They'll tell me when danger comes." She looked up at her big sister, her gaze steady once more. "You'll walk forward, and I'll make sure you don't fall."

Ren's chest tightened — not with anxiety this time, but with something warmer. Her doubts didn't vanish, but they grew quieter. She reached out, and Lily met her halfway. Together, they clasped hands, the pond reflecting the moonlight behind them in a soft, steady glow.

The Clan Reacts to Lily's Role

The pavilion was still buzzing with conversations about Ren's apprenticeship. The air was thick with the mingled scents of sandalwood and incense, a heady aroma that seemed to cling to the back of the throat. As the fragrance shifted to an acrid edge, Li Shenwu's words about Lily finally registered, casting an invisible shadow over the assembly. The elders leaned forward in their seats, their weathered faces displaying both wonder and unease, eyebrows raised, lips pressed thin, and fingers drumming on the armrests.

Elder Wu cleared his throat, his voice trembling slightly. "To hear the carp... this is no ordinary gift. It is guidance from the unseen." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Rare, perhaps once in a generation."

Elder Mei frowned deeply, her fingers tapping the table. "But guidance can be dangerous. What if the carp misled her? What if she hears too much?" She glanced around. "There are things better left unknown." Her words carried the weight of personal experience, reminiscent of a time in her youth when she had heeded a whisper from the unseen and faced unforeseen consequences. The memory of those days lingered in her mind, a cautionary tale urging her to voice her doubts.

"Once," Elder Mei continued, her voice quieter, "I too, trusted an unseen guide and nearly lost everything." She paused, choosing her following words with care. "The messages from the carp can be cryptic, easily misinterpreted, or even manipulated by those with ill intent. It's a power that demands caution, for the line between insight and deception is perilously thin."

Elder Han stroked his long beard thoughtfully, his eyes distant. "No, this is balance." He nodded slowly, as if convincing himself. "Ren opens the way, Lily ensures we do not stumble. Without her, the portal is merely a trap waiting for spring."

The disciples whispered among themselves, their excitement barely contained.

One disciple muttered, "She hears fish? That's... strange." He caught himself, lowering his voice when an elder glanced his way.

Another disciple corrected him, leaning closer. "Not fish — Spirit Carp. Guides." His eyes widened as the implications sank in. "If she can hear them, she might know the dangers before they strike."

A third disciple shivered visibly. "That's even scarier than Ren's portal. A voice that warns of death before it comes..." He trailed off, unsettled by his own words.

Lily's cheeks flushed pink under the weight of so many stares. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, then clutched Ren's hand. "They're making me sound like some oracle," she whispered, her voice tight. "I just... listened." Ren squeezed her hand firmly, the pressure steady and grounding.

The Ripple Effect Across the Li Clan

The announcement spread swiftly beyond the pavilion. Messengers departed before dawn, carrying sealed letters to Li Clan branches across the region — some a day's journey, others a week's ride away.

In the northern branch, elders gathered in their hall and raised cups of wine. "Two daughters, two destinies," they toasted. "The clan is blessed with such fortune."

In the southern branch, elders spoke in hushed tones behind closed doors. "A portal and a voice? Too much power concentrated in one generation." One elder shook his head. "Power like this draws attention — not everyone would welcome this."

In distant branches, disciples debated over meals and training sessions. "Will Ren and Lily unite us—or divide us?" The question hung in the air, unanswered. Some saw hope; others saw competition brewing.

The Iron Fang Sect's leaders scoffed when they heard the news. "A girl who hears carp? Ridiculous." But the sect master paused, his expression darkening. "Yet... if true, she could sense our movements before battle. That changes things."

While others only scoffed: "A girl who hears carp? Ridiculous. Yet... if true, she could sense our movements before battle."

The Moonshade Clan's strategists whispered among themselves in their war room. "Ren's portal is dangerous, but Lily's sensitivity may be worse." One traced a map with her finger. "A guide who hears omens can unravel strategies before they even begin."

The Crimson Lotus Sect's inner circle plotted in their shadowed chamber. "If the carp truly guide her, then she must be silenced." The sect leader's voice was cold and decisive. "The Li Clan cannot be allowed such foresight. It tips the balance too far."

The valley buzzed with speculation over the following days. Alliances were whispered about in shadows, old rivalries sharpened like blades on whetstones. Some feared Ren's portal, but more feared Lily's gift — an unseen danger, harder to counter than any physical threat.

The Banquet and the Announcement

Lanterns cast golden pools of light across the pavilion, their glow making the bamboo walls flicker with playful shadows. Disciples and helpers hurried to and fro, balancing trays piled high with steaming delicacies and filling the air with the rich scent of fragrant wine. Li Tianyuan's voice, as inviting as a hearth and as firm as an oak, rang out: "After tonight's great news, we feast together!"

As the night deepened, tables gleamed with food, and laughter waited at the threshold. Elders, disciples, and visitors glided in, their silken robes whispering secrets over the polished floors, excitement fluttering in their voices. At the head of the hall sat Li Shenwu, his presence unmoving and unyielding as a mountain, while beside him, Shinsei, the honored guest, radiated a quiet power that seemed to make the very air shiver.

Chapter 418: HEAVEN-PIERCING NEEDLE ARTS

The clatter of chopsticks against porcelain and the murmur of conversation filled the room until Li Shenwu raised one hand. Silence fell within seconds, spreading from the head table outward like ripples on water.

"Tomorrow, we will all proceed to the main mansion of the Li Clan in the Hidden Valley. The 'Eye' will open the day after tomorrow. The 'Eye' is a mysterious convergence of energies that tests one's resolve and spirit, offering both peril and profound insight to those who venture within. It unveils truths and grants strength to the worthy. We must discuss what you need to prepare once you enter the 'Eye.'" His voice carried clearly to every corner of the hall, brooking no argument.

He turned his gaze directly toward Ren and Lily, his eyes settling on each in turn. "You two may return here for the portal after you come out of the 'Eye.'" The implication was clear: if you come out.

A hush swept through the hall. Chopsticks paused mid-air, cups stopped halfway to lips. For several seconds, silence held, each person absorbing the weight of Li Shenwu's decree and what it meant for the sisters.

Shinsei's Gift

Breaking the silence, Shinsei spoke, his voice calm but carrying an unmistakable weight.

"Ren," he said, his tone gentle but firm, "as my disciple, the path through the 'Eye' is yours to choose. Whether you enter or remain, I bestow upon you a gift — one worthy of a master's promise to his student."

Ren's hand hovered, chopsticks quivering like the antennae of a startled insect. Her heart beat a wild tattoo — choice pressed on her from all sides:

Enter the Eye? Refuse?

Accept the gift?

Before her, the future sprawled in a thousand tangled threads, impossible to unravel.

Shinsei's eyes grew gentle, his words a blend of command and kindness. "You have mastered the needle's dance. Now, I grant you the secret art itself — the 'Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts.' With this, your hands will know a sharpness keener than any sword, a swiftness to shame the wind, and a control that dares to touch the heavens themselves."

It is said that this technique was born from the ancient sages who watched the stars and aspired to reach them, shaping a method that could pierce the very fabric of the heavens. However, this power comes with its own trials. The technique demands intense focus and drains one's stamina with each use, rooted in the belief that such heavenly prowess must be balanced by sacrifice. The more it's wielded, the greater the physical toll, asking the practitioner to balance power and endurance carefully. These constraints ensure that every victory earned with the Heaven-Piercing Needle is hard-won and precious.

A ripple ran through the hall. Elders traded glances brimming with respect and envy, disciples leaned close, their whispers buzzing like bees. Even the name — 'Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts' — hung in the air, promising a deadly beauty.

Ren's Dilemma

Ren blinked, her breath catching in her chest. Instinctively, her eyes sought her mother, Ling Li, who sat three tables away — the one steady point in a suddenly spinning room.

Ling Li's eyes softened, and she gave a slight nod. Her voice carried clearly but gently. "Always follow your Master's lead, but do not be afraid to voice your own thoughts."

Ren's lips parted, her voice barely steady. "Mother... I want to honor My Master, but..." She glanced at Shinsei, then back. "The Eye... the portal... I don't know if I can do both."

Her thoughts spun in dizzying circles. 'If I step into the 'Eye,' I gamble with everything: my life, my honor, and the expectations resting on my shoulders. I could achieve a greater understanding of myself and my place within the clan, maybe uncover a strength I never knew I possessed. But what if I falter? Will they call me a coward if I turn away? The disapproval of my peers and the disappointment of my family weigh heavily on me. Yet, this technique glimmers before me as a key that might unlock a future I never dared

imagine. It promises excellence, a chance to stand among the legends of our time. It could mean vindicating my past sacrifices or risking it all for uncertain glory.'

The Clan's Reaction

The banquet hall buzzed with barely suppressed tension. Conversations resumed, but every eye kept drifting back to Ren.

Elder Wu leaned toward his neighbor, keeping his voice low. "Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts... such precision could rival sword masters. I've only heard of three people who mastered it."

Elder Mei frowned, shaking her head slightly. "But needles are fragile."

Elder Han stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Fragile? No. Subtle." He paused, considering. "A weapon unseen until it strikes. In the right hands, more dangerous than any blade. Perhaps that is precisely her path."

Disciples leaned close, whispering excitedly.

"Ren will surpass even Shi Min with this technique," one disciple whispered, awe in his voice.

"Nonsense! Shi Min is immortal and has a mystic power!"

"But if she enters the Eye, she may never return," another countered, the sobering thought dampening the excitement.

"Her sister hears carp, she pierces the heavens..." A third disciple shook her head in wonder. "Together, they might actually be unstoppable."

Hidden Valley – Iron Fang Sect Council Hall

The moon hung low over the Hidden Valley like a watchful eye, its pale light spilling across jagged cliffs and shadowed forests that seemed to breathe with nocturnal life. The cry of a solitary owl echoed off the stone, piercing the still night with its haunting call. The crisp bite of mountain air carried with it the scent of pine, mingling with the sweet floral notes of wildflowers nestled between the rocks.

Deep within the valley's most treacherous fold, the council hall of the Iron Fang Sect glowed with amber lanterns, their flames casting restless shadows that danced across stone walls carved with scenes of ancient conquests. The air hung thick with sandalwood incense and something darker, the metallic tang of ambition, the suffocating weight of whispered schemes that could topple dynasties.

At the head of the hall sat Elder Zhan, a man whose reputation preceded him like a shadow before dawn. His eyes were sharp as a hunting hawk's, missing nothing, forgetting less. His fingers drummed a deliberate rhythm against the iron armrest of his throne-like chair — tap, tap, tap — a sound that made lesser men's hearts stutter. Around him, the sect's elders and disciples leaned forward like wolves scenting blood, their weathered faces etched with disdain and a barely concealed unease that sharpened the air.

Chapter 419: LEGENDARY DAUGHTERS OF PROPHECY

"So, the Li Clan dares to announce their daughters as heirs of destiny, tied to carp and portals." Elder Zhan's voice was low, barely above a whisper, yet it carried through the hall like a blade drawn across steel — cold, precise, unmistakable. As his words spread through the room, an immediate chill slithered across the assembled elders and disciples, an involuntary inhale shifting the air as if the hall itself were drawing breath.

Faces visibly tightened, eyes darting to one another, a ripple of something akin to fear creeping into their bones as they absorbed the lethality of his decree. He let the words settle, watching faces shift in the lantern light.

"If the sisters enter the 'Eye', we must ensure they do not return! Their bodies will feed the darkness, and their names will become cautionary tales!"

Scoffing and Plotting

A ripple of scoffs followed his words.

Elder Fang, a scarred veteran whose lips seemed permanently curled in contempt, spat the words like venom. "Carp? Portals? Superstitions dressed in prophecy's silk robes. The Li Clan grows fat with arrogance, flaunting omens as if they were weapons, parading children as if they were legends." He slammed his palm on the table, making cups rattle. "It's an insult to every true warrior in this valley."

Elder Yun, her eyes narrowed to calculating slits, raised one elegant hand. "Do not underestimate omens, Fang. Your scars have made you blind to subtlety." Her voice was silk wrapped around a dagger. "The Spirit Carp with Golden Scales appears only when bloodlines run true and strong, when destiny's threads weave tight. It is said that during the reign of the old Tiger King, such omens foretold his rise, marking a time of unity and strength across the valley. If the carp guide them now, then the 'Eye' itself may favor them — and all our plotting will mean nothing but ash and regret."

Disciple Wei, young and brash and hungry to prove himself, slammed his fist against the table with enough force to make the wood groan. A flicker of doubt crossed his eyes, a memory of his sister warning him about the cost of ambition. For a moment, her voice echoed in his mind, questioning if the path of blood was worth the glory he sought. But the fleeting hesitation vanished as quickly as it came, consumed by the fire of his determination.

"Then we strike inside the 'Eye'!" His eyes blazed with the reckless courage of youth. "If they enter, they will not leave alive! We'll paint the walls with their blood and claim their destiny as our own!"

The hall erupted in a cacophony of voices, tension crackling through the air like lightning before a storm. Shouts rose and fell like clashing blades, each elder and disciple adding their voice to the chorus of ambition and bloodlust. The very walls seemed to absorb the violence of their intent, holding it, amplifying it, until the room itself felt like a weapon being forged.

The Shadow of the Eye

Elder Zhan raised his hand, and a profound silence swept over the room as if the very air had been locked in place. The flicker of lantern flames held their breath, casting flickering shadows that seemed to pause in their dance. Even the stone walls seemed to listen, echoing the stillness. His gaze was cold and commanding, his tone deliberate.

"The 'Eye' is no ordinary trial. It reveals truths, grants strength, but it also devours the unworthy with no mercy. Many years ago, it revealed the Phoenix Clan Chief's deepest fears, leaving him a shattered man who abandoned his throne. There was also the tale of a legendary warrior whose soul it consumed entirely, leaving behind only an empty shell. However, if they survive — and we would be fools to assume they won't — they will emerge stronger than any of our disciples, tempered by the 'Eye's' fire, forged in its darkness." He let that sink in.

"Ren with her portal, Lily with her carp, both carrying Shinsei's teachings and Li Shenwu's blood. Together, they could unite every clan in this valley under the Li banner, and we would all become footnotes in their legend."

Seeds of Intrigue

Elder Yun leaned forward, her voice sharp. "But if they survive, they will emerge stronger than any of us. Ren with her portal, Lily with her carp. Together, they could unite the clans under Li Shenwu's banner."

Elder Fang sneered, his scarred face twisting into something ugly and determined. "Then we cannot allow survival. Simple as that." He looked around the table, meeting each pair of eyes.

"Spread word to the Crimson Lotus Sect — they already thirst for Li's blood. Let the Moonshade Clan know — they fear the Li Clan's rising power. If the Li sisters enter the 'Eye,' every rival, every enemy, every jealous sect must be ready to strike. We'll turn that trial into a slaughterhouse."

Yet, in the shadows of this plotting, none noticed the brief, calculating glance exchanged between Yun and another elder. Perhaps not everyone in the room was as eager for bloodshed as Fang believed. A faction within the Misty River Sect had long admired the Li sisters' courage and skill, seeing them as potential allies rather than threats. This dormant admiration threatened to unravel Fang's brutal design, sowing seeds of conflict that might not grow as expected.

The disciples exchanged glances, their eyes gleaming with a volatile mixture of anticipation and fear. The thought of facing the Li sisters inside the 'Eye' — those legendary daughters of prophecy — sent shivers racing down their spines like ice water. But the promise of glory, the intoxicating vision of returning as

the ones who'd slain destiny itself, silenced their doubts and drowned their hesitation in ambition's seductive whisper.

Atmosphere of Threat

The council hall seemed to grow darker as the lanterns flickered and guttered, their flames struggling against some unseen wind. One of the lanterns sputtered and went out completely, plunging a corner of the hall into deep shadow, a mirror to the council's sinking ethics. Shadows stretched across the carved walls like grasping claws, like hungry spirits drawn to the malice brewing within. Elder Zhan's voice cut through the gloom one final time, sharp and absolute as an executioner's blade.

Chapter 420: DIE SCREAMING IN DARKNESS

"Mark my words, and carve them into your hearts." Elder Zhan stood, his silhouette towering against the dying light. "The Li Clan believes destiny favors them, that prophecy shields them, that their daughters are untouchable. We will show them that destiny can be broken, that prophecy bleeds like any living thing." His eyes glinted like obsidian in firelight. "If the sisters enter the 'Eye...' they will not return. And the Li Clan's hope will die screaming in the darkness."

The elders bowed their heads in grim agreement, a silent covenant sealed in shadow and ambition. The meeting dissolved into whispered conspiracies and dark promises. Outside, the wind howled through the valley like a wounded beast, carrying with it the scent of pine, stone, and something else — the copper tang of blood yet to be spilled, of violence waiting to be born, of two young women who had no idea how many knives were already pointed at their backs.

Hidden Valley – Crimson Lotus Sect Hall

The Crimson Lotus Sect hall was a living entity of shadows and flickering flame, a sanctuary hewn from the mountain's forbidding core. Lanterns, red as freshly drawn blood, hung on iron chains, and their light spawned writhing shadows over the etched lotus blooms on the walls. Every petal seemed poised to cut

deeper than any blade. The oppressive air clung heavily, dense with the scent of sandalwood, but it couldn't mask the metallic tang of blood that lingered deep within the stones.

At the chamber's heart, enthroned upon a dais of obsidian veined with crimson, sat Matriarch Xue Lian. Her robes cascaded like molten rubies, each fold shimmering with embroidered lotus flames that seemed to pulse with her breath. Her eyes — black as midnight water, sharp as executioner's steel — swept across the assembly with predatory patience. Around her, the sect's inner circle formed concentric rings of devotion: elders draped in blood-silk, their faces half-hidden beneath vermilion hoods; disciples pressed to the cold floor, spines rigid, breath held, each one a weapon awaiting her command.

A messenger — still trembling from his sprint through the mountain passes — had just delivered the intelligence that set the chamber ablaze with whispers: Ren, the elder sister, chosen apprentice of the legendary Shinsei, now wielded the Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts, a technique that demanded blood for power. Lily, the younger, had awakened the ancient bond with the Spirit Carp, creatures who read the currents of fate itself. Together, the Li sisters stood as heirs of prophecy, twin flames threatening to illuminate the valley's carefully cultivated darkness.

The Matriarch Speaks

Xue Lian's lips curved into a smile that held no warmth, only the cruel satisfaction of a spider sensing vibrations on her web. "So... the Li Clan parades their daughters as chosen by heaven itself." Her voice was silk over razors, but a shadow of something unspoken flickered in her eyes. "Carp that whisper secrets. Needles that pierce the veil of fate. Portals and omens, prophecies and bloodlines. How... quaint." As she spoke, a fleeting hesitation twisted her smile, as though beneath the layers of scorn lay a sliver of envy at what might have been had fate chosen her own lineage differently.

Though disdain dripped from every syllable, her eyes betrayed a different truth — they gleamed with the cold fire of calculation, measuring angles of attack, weighing probabilities of ruin. She tapped one lacquered nail against the obsidian armrest, each click reverberating through the silent chamber like a war drum counting down to slaughter.

"Do not be deceived by provincial celebrations and naive proclamations." Her voice sharpened to a blade's edge. "The Spirit Carp are not mere ornamental fish — they are ancient sentinels who swim through time's currents. If Lily truly communes with them, she may perceive our approach before we even decide to strike, sense the ripples of intention itself. And Ren—" She paused, letting the name hang like a noose. "Her needles may pierce more than flesh and bone. The Heaven-Piercing Arts were forged to puncture the fabric of destiny, to rewrite what heaven has written. That makes her either our greatest threat... or our most valuable corpse."

Elders Debate

Elder Hua — his face a topography of violence, each scar a testament to battles survived — barked a harsh laugh. "Needles? Fragile toys for embroiderers and healers. Give me a blade three feet of honest steel, and I'll cut through both sisters before their precious needles even leave their sheaths."

Elder Ming, her soft voice having orchestrated more deaths than Hua's sword could, countered with a tone that was sweet yet deadly. "Fragile? No, brother. Subtle. Precise. Invisible until the moment they pierce your meridians and collapse your cultivation from within." She leaned forward, her eyes glittering like chips of amber.

"The Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts demand blood sacrifice — the practitioner's own life force traded for impossible power. Each needle requires a drop of essence, a moment closer to the eternal rest, an unsettling tango with mortality itself. If Ren masters this exchange, if she learns to bleed herself at the threshold of death, even to the point of reducing her lifespan by years with each powerful strike... she becomes a weapon that grows sharper with every wound. That, Elder Hua, makes her infinitely more dangerous than your honest steel."

Disciple Lan, barely twenty winters old but already drunk on ambition, his hunger visible in the way he pressed closer to the inner circle, leaned forward with the eagerness of a hunting hound scenting blood.

His dreams, as vivid as the lotus blossoms etched in the hall, centered on the 'Eye,' where triumph could shift him from shadow to leader, from disciple to herald of destiny.

"Then we must ensure she bleeds out before she learns control, before she understands the true depth of her power. The 'Eye' will open soon. We can infiltrate its trials, poison its visions, tilt the very architecture of destiny against her." Failing meant more than just losing face; it meant fading back into the obscurity he loathed, his ambitions crushed underfoot.

The hall erupted in a cacophony of strategic whispers and heated debate, voices rising and overlapping like flames feeding on dry kindling, each elder and disciple eager to prove their worth, to offer the killing stroke that would secure favor in the Matriarch's eyes.