

PROTEGE 421

Chapter 421 421: THE RUIN WE SEEK TO AVOID

The Matriarch's Command

Xue Lian raised her hand, silencing the chamber. Her smile widened, cruel and deliberate.

"The Iron Fang Sect will strike with their characteristic brutality — all muscle and roaring chi, as subtle as an avalanche." Her smile widened, showing teeth. "Let them. Let them draw the Li Clan's attention, exhaust their defenses, make them bleed. We, the Crimson Lotus, will strike where they cannot defend — with poison that mimics medicine, with shadows that wear friendly faces. If the sisters dare enter the 'Eye,' we will already be there, woven into the fabric of its trials. We will craft illusions from their deepest fears, corrupt their omens into prophecies of doom, and turn their heaven-blessed gifts into instruments of their own destruction."

Her eyes gleamed with malice so pure it seemed to darken the already dim chamber. "The carp's gentle whispers will become maddening screams that shred sanity. The portal Ren opens will not lead to enlightenment but to abyssal despair, to visions of everyone she loves dying by her own needles. And when they emerge — if they emerge — they will be broken beyond repair. Shattered vessels we can either discard... or reshape into weapons that serve us instead." As she spoke, a fleeting shadow of something lost and deeply personal crossed Xue Lian's features, a reminder of her own sacrifices — dreams of a forgotten past, locked away to embrace the relentless path she walked. Yet, these memories, sharper than any blade, threatened her composure even now, the faintest crack in her otherwise impenetrable armor.

The elders bowed their heads in synchronized reverence, a gesture that was both submission and conspiracy. The disciples pressed their foreheads to the cold stone until skin met rock, some hard enough to draw blood — an offering, a promise. The hall itself seemed to pulse with accumulated malice, the lotus flames flickering and swelling as if the very air fed on their murderous resolve, as if darkness itself approved of their covenant.

Atmosphere of Threat

Outside the mountain sanctum, the Hidden Valley winds howled through narrow gorges and across knife-edge cliffs, carrying whispers of schemes and counter-schemes across miles of treacherous terrain. The Li Clan's bold announcement had rippled through the cultivation world like blood in water — it had not only stirred awe among allies and admirers. Still, it had awakened every predator in the valley, every sect that had waited decades for an opportunity to tear down the mighty and feast on their power.

The Iron Fang Sect, in their fortress of black iron and rage, plotted brute destruction — overwhelming force, direct annihilation.

The Crimson Lotus Sect, in its halls of shadow and flame, prepared subtle ruin — psychological warfare and spiritual corruption.

And together, like wolves circling wounded prey, the entire Hidden Valley sharpened its knives, honed its techniques, and set its traps for the two sisters who dared to walk the path of heaven, who dared to enter the 'Eye' believing themselves chosen, unaware that destiny itself had been bought, poisoned, and turned against them.

Hidden Valley – Moonshade Clan Assembly

The Moonshade Clan's council chamber was unlike any mortal construction, an ethereal space where the lines of reality blurred. A singular striking detail dominated the scene — a massive silver mirror, polished to supernatural clarity, reflected not only images but endless possibilities, tantalizing glimpses of futures that vanished like wisps of smoke. The floor was a living sea of mist, coiling around ankles with an icy touch like curious serpents. Candles hung suspended in the air, their pale blue flames flickering eerily, casting ghostly reflections that seemed to mouth silent prophecies.

At the chamber's heart, seated upon a throne carved from a single piece of moonstone that seemed to glow from within, sat High Seer Yao. His eyes remained hidden beneath silk the color of starless midnight, yet those who met his gaze — veiled though it was — felt he perceived far more than sight alone could reveal. His right hand, almost unconsciously, traced delicate runes upon the throne's arm, a habit borne of reflection and foresight. When he spoke, his voice emerged soft as falling snow yet resonant as temple bells, carrying through the mist-laden air with unnatural clarity.

Around him, elders, draped in silver-threaded grey robes, formed a circle of debate, their voices hushed to preserve secrecy yet urgent with the weight of decisions that would reshape the valley's future. Mystics stood at the periphery, their eyes glazed with vision-trance, witnessing timelines branch and collapse with each proposed strategy.

"The Li sisters..." Yao began, his veiled head tilting as if listening to voices only he could hear. "One bound to the portal between worlds, her needles keys to doors that should remain locked. The other bound to the Spirit Carp, ancient witnesses who remember the valley before humans walked its paths." Though his voice remained calm as still water, each word landed with the weight of carved stone.

"This is not a mere omen, not simple providence. This is convergence — the moment when multiple threads of destiny twist together into a single cord. The 'Eye' will test them beyond mortal endurance, yes, but it may also crown them as the valley's rightful rulers, chosen not by bloodline alone but by heaven's mandate."

Elder Shen — whose face bore the stern, weathered lines of one who had witnessed three generations rise and fall — scoffed with the bitter pragmatism of a survivor. "Crown them? Or crown us, if we prove clever enough to guide their inexperienced hands. The carp's whispers are interpretations, not absolutes. With the right pressure, the right suggestions planted in fertile young minds, those whispers could be bent to serve our interests rather than theirs."

Mystic Lan, whose eyes gleamed with the peculiar luminescence of one who had gazed too long into the spaces between moments, countered with the conviction of witnessed catastrophe. His voice shook with barely contained urgency as he spoke.

"To bend omens is to invite the very ruin we seek to avoid. The Spirit Carp does not speak in riddles or metaphors — it speaks in fundamental truths, the bones of reality itself. If Lily truly hears their voice unfiltered, if she has become a conduit for that ancient clarity, then truth will turn on us like a blade if we attempt to twist it. The consequences of such hubris loom beyond our sight, a shadow we dare not face." His words left a silence heavy with unspoken dread, the full scope of what could be never fully uttered.

Chapter 422 422: LET THEM FEAR

Disciple Rui, barely past his twentieth year yet already calculating power dynamics with the acuity of a seasoned strategist, leaned forward through the swirling mist. His eyes, bright with ambition barely tempered by wisdom, flicked to a nearby game board of xiangqi. With a deft, almost subconscious movement, he repositioned a lone cannon piece, implying a subtle yet decisive breakthrough in the defensive setup — a microcosm of his greater ambitions.

"Then the path is clear: we ally with them completely, without reservation or hidden agenda. If Ren opens the hidden portal and Lily guides its revelations, we position ourselves as their most loyal supporters, their trusted advisors. When the valley inevitably bows before their power, we ensure we are standing at their right hand — we bow last, and we bow least, elevated by proximity to their throne."

The chamber erupted in a susurrus of divided counsel, voices overlapping and contradicting in the mist-thick air. Some urged complete alliance, arguing passionately for transparency and genuine support. Others whispered of conditional loyalty, of backing the sisters only until a better opportunity emerged. Still others spoke in coded phrases of outright betrayal — of appearing to support while secretly undermining, of waiting for the perfect moment to strike. The mirrors reflected it all, multiplying the conspiracy into infinite variations.

High Seer Yao raised one pale hand, the gesture small yet absolute. Instantly, the mist-filled hall fell silent, with even the whispers of the mirror-reflections ceasing as if reality itself obeyed her command. Silence stretched through the room, a heavy, tangible presence that seemed to draw the very breath from the chamber.

"The 'Eye' reveals truth in its purest, most unforgiving form — it strips away pretense, burns through deception, exposes the core of what a soul truly is." His veiled face turned slowly, as if regarding each person present despite her blindness. "If the sisters enter its depths, we will see whether they are light that illuminates the valley's path forward... or shadow that will consume us all." Another pause lingered, a moment where destiny itself seemed to hang in the balance, felt in the shared, unquenchable silence.

"Until that revelation, we do not commit. We watch with all our hearts. And we wait with infinite patience."

His words hung suspended in the air like the floating candles, neither promise nor threat, neither alliance nor enmity — a declaration of calculated neutrality that was somehow more unsettling than open hostility.

The chamber understood: the Moonshade Clan's path remained unchosen, their loyalty unbound, their considerable power available to the highest bidder or the most convincing vision. They would be the valley's wildcard, the unpredictable element that could tip the scales toward salvation or annihilation.

Verdant Bamboo Pavilion: Ling Li's Hidden Guard

Far from the Hidden Valley's treacherous politics, in the deceptive tranquility of the Bamboo Garden pavilion where night-blooming jasmine scented the air with false peace, Ling Li sat in solitary vigil. Her robe flowed around her like liquid midnight, black silk embroidered with silver phoenixes that seemed to

shift when viewed from the periphery. The grand banquet celebrating her daughters' gifts had ended hours ago, guests departed, servants dismissed, yet her mind remained restless as a caged predator.

She lit a single lantern with deliberate precision, its flame burning steady and unwavering — a beacon in the darkness, a signal. She waited with the patience of one who knew her summons would be answered.

From the shadows between bamboo stalks, where darkness pooled thick as ink, a figure materialized with the silence of falling snow — one of her hidden guard, the elite operatives whose existence the Li Clan publicly denied. He wore black cloth that seemed to absorb light rather than merely reflect it, his face obscured behind a featureless mask of dark lacquer. He crossed the pavilion in three soundless steps and knelt so low his forehead nearly touched the polished wood, a posture of absolute submission. When he spoke, his voice emerged hushed yet urgent, trained to carry only to the intended ears.

"Mistress, I bring word from the Hidden Valley."

Ling Li's eyes narrowed, her hand tightening on the jade cup before her. "Speak."

The guard's voice carried the weight of secrets purchased with blood and silver, intelligence gathered at significant risk from the valley's most dangerous corners.

The Iron Fang Sect publicly scoffs at omens and prophecy, dismissing such things as superstitious nonsense for the weak-minded. Yet in their private war councils, they plot direct action, planning an ambush within the 'Eye' itself, where normal laws and alliances hold no weight. The war leader has made his intentions chillingly clear with a blood oath sworn before their ancestors: 'The Li sisters will enter the Eye, but they will not return alive.'

"The Crimson Lotus Sect prepares their signature arsenal — poisons that corrupt spiritual energy from within, illusions that cannot be distinguished from reality until it's too late. Their Matriarch has already begun crafting the trap: they will infiltrate the Eye's trials, weave themselves into its visions, and systematically twist every omen the sisters receive. The carp's guidance will become maddening screams. The portals Ren opens will lead not to enlightenment but to psychological abysses designed to shatter her sanity.

The Moonshade Clan remains divided, their council chamber a battlefield of competing philosophies. Some urge genuine alliance, seeing the sisters as the valley's best hope for a prosperous future. Others advocate for opportunistic betrayal, waiting to see which side gains advantage before committing. Their High Seer Yao has declared neutrality — they will watch with their considerable divinatory powers, gathering intelligence on all sides, waiting to see whether the sisters prove to be light or shadow before the Moonshade Clan reveals its hand."

Yet, in the quiet moments, Ling Li couldn't help but wonder: 'What if the clans were right?' This fleeting doubt, quickly dismissed as weakness, only served to sharpen her resolve against their indecision.

Ling Li's breath slowed, each inhalation deliberate and controlled, the only outward sign of the fury building beneath her composed exterior. Her gaze sharpened to steel, cold and cutting. "So the valley sharpens its knives in the darkness, gathering like wolves around prey they perceive as vulnerable." A dangerous smile curved her lips.

"They fear my daughters — fear their potential, their gifts, their destiny. Good. Excellent. Let them fear. Let that fear drive them to reveal themselves, to commit their forces, to show me exactly who must be destroyed when this is finished."

Chapter 423: WHICH ONE IS TRULY ME?

The guard pressed his forehead harder against the floor, as if the weight of his following words demanded deeper obeisance.

"Mistress, the entire valley speaks of nothing but destiny and prophecy. Some call your daughters unstoppable — chosen by heaven itself, destined to unite the cultivation world under a new era of prosperity. Others call them dangerous anomalies — too powerful, too young, too unpredictable, threats that must be eliminated before they upset the careful balance of power. But on one point, all factions agree regardless of their stance: the sisters must be tested in the 'Eye.' Their true nature must be revealed. The valley will accept nothing less."

Ling Li rose in a single fluid motion, her spiritual aura flaring outward like invisible wings, a pressure that made the lantern flame gutter and bend. The temperature in the pavilion dropped perceptibly, and long shadows stretched across the bamboo floor, darkening the corners as if night itself responded to her will.

When she spoke, her voice remained calm as a mountain lake's surface, but beneath that tranquility lay depths that could drown armies. Each word carried the absolute weight of command, the authority of one who had ruled for decades through cunning, strength, and ruthless efficiency.

"Carry my words to Great-grandpa Shenwu immediately — he must know every sect that moves against us. Find Shinsei in whatever mountain hermitage he's chosen tonight and inform him that his apprentice faces coordinated assassination attempts." Ling Li's eyes blazed with cold fire.

"The valley plots in shadows, sharpening knives and brewing poisons, believing my daughters are naive children to be tested and discarded. But the Li Clan does not bow. We have never bowed. My daughters will enter the 'Eye' as planned, and they will face whatever trials and treachery await them within. And when they emerge — not if, but when — the valley will learn the true cost of awakening destiny, of threatening those chosen by heaven itself. Let the sects remember why the Li Clan has endured for ten generations while others have crumbled to dust."

The guard bowed so deeply his body folded nearly in half, then rose and retreated backward, never turning his back on his mistress, before dissolving into the shadows between bamboo stalks as if he had never existed at all.

Ling Li stood alone in the pavilion's circle of lantern light, an island of illumination surrounded by darkness pressing in from all sides. The flame burned steady and unwavering despite the night breeze, its light reflecting in her eyes, eyes that burned with resolve harder than diamond, sharper than any blade the valley could forge.

She was not merely a mother protecting her children. She was a matriarch defending her clan's destiny, and she would burn the entire valley to ash before allowing anyone to harm what was under her protection. As the lantern's flame flickered, its glow was mirrored not only in her unyielding eyes but also in the depths of the unseen 'Eye,' a potent symbol of the power and peril that awaited. This dual reflection embodied the convergence of destiny and determination, leaving a lingering echo that resonated long after the scene faded.

Moonlit Pond – Sisters' Reflections

The banquet's laughter and clatter had faded into the night like echoes swallowed by distance, leaving the Bamboo Pavilion hushed and heavy under the weight of destiny spoken aloud. Ren felt the quiet as a paused breath, a moment caught on the cusp of change, knowing that everything she did next would either solidify her place as the chosen portal-bearer or unravel the legacy her family had crafted through generations. Lanterns flickered low along the pavilion's edges, their amber glow barely reaching the pond beyond, where darkness pooled thick, and the water's surface reflected stars like scattered diamonds on black silk.

Ren slipped quietly into the garden like a ghost seeking solitude, her indigo robe whispering against dew-damp grass that soaked the hem with cold moisture. The chill of the moss pierced her skin like the cold fingers of doubt, echoing her heart's relentless race from Shinsei's words and the weight of expectation in every eye that had turned toward her during the banquet. The name of the 'Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts' echoed in her mind like a war drum counting down to battle, demanding and

inescapable. She knelt at the pond's edge, knees pressing into the soft moss, and stared at her reflection fractured by ripples into a dozen incomplete versions of herself, none of them whole.

'Apprentice to a legend. Daughter of a Matriarch. Portal-bearer chosen by blood. Needle wielder who must bleed for power. Wife of the President. In a world that demands I wear so many masks, who am I beneath them all? How can one person carry so many identities without fracturing under the weight? Which one is truly me, and which are masks I'm expected to wear?'

Her breath trembled, visible in the cool night air as wisps of mist. The silence pressed in from all sides, heavy as waterlogged cloth, suffocating in its completeness. Even the usual night sounds — crickets, wind through bamboo, distant owl calls — seemed to have withdrawn.

For a moment, there was nothing. A crushing stillness.

It was as if the world held its breath with her, leaving her alone with thoughts that spiraled darker with each passing moment.

Lily Joins Ren

Soft footsteps approached through the grass, deliberate enough to announce presence without startling. Lily appeared from the pavilion's shadow, her hair loose and flowing past her shoulders like a dark waterfall, still damp from the ritual washing after the banquet. Her eyes — so often bright with mischief — were wide with concern, reading her big sister's posture with the intuition born from seventeen years of shared existence. She crouched beside Ren with fluid grace, hugging her own knees, mirroring her sister's position in silent solidarity.

"You slipped away the moment Mother's attention shifted to the elders' toasts. I knew you'd come here when the world becomes too loud, when expectations press too close." Lily's words were soft, almost teasing, aimed at easing the moment, but her gaze remained serious, analyzing Ren's face for signs of distress.

Ren's lips curved into a semblance of a smile, a flicker of insincerity catching at the corner of her mouth, as if testing its strength against the weight of unspoken truths. "I needed air. Needed... quiet. Needed to remember what my own thoughts sound like without everyone else's expectations drowning them out."

The pond shimmered faintly, its surface tension breaking in concentric circles that expanded outward. As if in response to the weight of emotion hanging in the air, the Spirit Carp with Golden Scales surfaced in perfect synchronization. Their bodies glowed with inner luminescence, ancient and otherworldly, scattering droplets that caught the lantern light and sparkled as liquid stars suspended in darkness before falling back to disturb the water's mirror. This timely appearance felt like a celestial sign, an omen that the sisters' path, though fraught with mystery and peril, was also watched over and guided by forces beyond their understanding.

Chapter 424: THE DRAGON'S EYE

The Carp's Whisper

Lily's breath caught audibly, her entire body going still with the sudden intensity of connection. She leaned closer to the water's edge, drawn by invisible threads, her spiritual aura trembling and flaring with colors visible only to those with cultivated sight.

The Carp circled in an intricate pattern — not random, but deliberate, forming shapes that held meaning in their geometry. This pattern awakened in Lily a sense of awe, a rush of exhilaration mixed with a deep-seated fear. Her heart echoed the Carp's deliberate design, resonating with an ancient power that was both thrilling and unsettling. The golden scales of the Spirit Carp glowed as they whispered warnings of an assassin lurking in the shadows, a betrayal poised to cast a chilling pall over the sisters' fate.

Lily whispered, her voice barely audible, touched with awe and something like fear. "They're speaking... I can hear them. Not words exactly, but meanings that form in my mind fully shaped, like memories that aren't mine."

Ren turned sharply, her own fears momentarily forgotten in concern for her sister and curiosity about this gift that was revealing itself. "What do they say? What are they showing you?"

Lily's eyes widened until the whites showed all around, her pupils dilating as if staring into depths invisible to others. Her voice emerged hushed and distant, as if repeating words not her own, channeling something ancient and knowing. Yet, in the midst of visions, Lily took a deliberate breath, owning her words as she spoke them. She hesitated for a heartbeat, choosing how to interpret what she saw — a reminder that fate was not set in stone.

"Shadows... waiting in the 'Dragon's Eye.' Not natural shadows, but deliberate ones, woven by hands that wish us harm. They whisper of danger that wears familiar faces. Of trials that will twist truth into fear, hope into despair, love into weapons used against us." Lily finished, her voice carrying both the weight of prophecy and the strength of her own will.

"What is the 'Dragon's Eye'?" Ren asked with a furrowed brow.

"It's the 'Eye'. It seems it's actually a 'Dragon's Eye'." Lily replied with a crunched nose.

The pond rippled violently, waves surging outward as though the Carp's warning carried physical weight beyond mere words, as though reality itself recoiled from the dark futures they had glimpsed. The water churned with agitation, and the carp dove deep, their golden glow fading into the black depths like stars swallowed by storm clouds.

Ren's Fear

Ren's hands clenched into fists, her nails biting into her palms hard enough to leave crescents in the flesh. The sharp sting seemed to tether her thoughts, her mind racing faster than her heart could bear. Her voice broke on the words she'd been holding back all evening, vulnerable truths spilling out in the darkness where only her sister could witness them.

"I'm afraid, Lily. Terrified, actually. What if I fail? What if I can't open the portal when it matters, when lives depend on it? What if Shinsei's gift — this Heaven-Piercing technique — consumes me before I master it, demands more blood than I have to give?" Her breath hitched.

"Everyone looks at me like I'm already chosen, already triumphant, as if the outcome is certain. But I don't feel chosen. I feel... trapped. Like I'm being pushed toward a cliff edge, and everyone expects me to fly, but no one has asked if I have wings."

Her reflection wavered in the water, distorted not just by the Carp's disturbance but by her own trembling, fracturing into pieces that refused to cohere into a single, confident image. She looked broken even to herself.

Lily's Reassurance

Lily reached out, her fingers brushing Ren's clenched fist with the gentleness of someone handling something precious and fragile. Slowly, she coaxed the tension from her sister's hand until their fingers could intertwine. Ren exhaled, releasing some of the weight she had been holding onto. Lily's smile was

small but steady, the steadiness that comes not from ignorance of danger but from choosing courage despite understanding the cost.

"You're not trapped, big sister. You're anchored, like the roots of the ancient Silver Sycamore that withstands every storm beside the 'Dragon's Eye,'" Lily said with quiet conviction, her words weaving an image unique to their world.

"You open the way with your needles and your portals, I guide it with the Carp's wisdom and foresight. You are the river's spiraling current, shaping the mightiest rocks, and I am the calm depths that feed its course, unseen but enduring. My gift isn't weakness just because it seems gentler than yours; it's balance, the complement to your power." She squeezed Ren's hand.

Lily continued, "Without me, you'd walk blind into every trap they're setting. Without you, I'd have no path to follow, no strength to protect what the Carp show me. Together, we're not just two sisters, we're whole, complete, stronger than either of us could ever be alone."

Ren's chest tightened, but this time with emotion rather than fear. Gratitude, love, and renewed determination flooded through her. Her doubts didn't vanish entirely, but they eased, pushed back by the certainty of not facing them alone.

She squeezed Lily's hand with strength that spoke of commitment, her voice steadier than it had been all evening. "Then we'll face the Dragon's Eye together. Shadows or not. Trials or traps. Whatever the valley throws at us, they'll have to go through both of us." As they held each other's gaze, a fleeting shadow danced beneath the surface of the pond, barely visible in the starlit waters — a reminder that not all was yet revealed, and that some secrets still lurked, waiting to change everything.

As if in response to their renewed resolve, the Carp leapt once more from the depths in a synchronized arc of liquid gold, their bodies tracing perfect curves through the night air before splashing back down.

They scattered droplets that caught the lantern light and shimmered like omens written in water and starlight — promises of trials ahead, but also of survival, of sisterhood that would endure.

The sisters sat side by side at the pond's edge, shoulders touching, hands still clasped, their bond glowing as brightly as the pond itself — a light that no shadow could fully extinguish, no matter how dark the 'Dragon's Eye' might prove to be.

Chapter 425: A SEIGE IN DISGUISE

Night at the Pond – Sisters Seek Guidance

After hearing the Carp's ominous whispers — warnings of shadows and twisted trials that echoed in their minds like funeral bells — Ren and Lily exchanged a glance, their eyes wide with worry. Ren's hands tightened instinctively on Lily's sleeve as she felt the weight of her responsibility pressing down on her shoulders.

Fear nipped at her resolve, the idea of their family falling into danger sending a chill through her spine. To shield her loved ones, to avert disaster, that was the frantic flicker of hope she clung to. The peaceful garden now felt hostile. Ren steadied herself and spoke, her voice trembling despite her efforts. "We can't keep this to ourselves. This isn't just our burden to carry. Mother and Shi Min must know immediately — they need to understand what we're walking into."

Together, they dashed through the Bamboo Pavilion, the lanterns flickering rapidly past as their feet barely touched the polished wood floors. Ren's mind raced, her breath quick and shallow, as she abandoned formalities, barely noticing the surroundings. Her words tumbled out urgently when they found Ling Li and Shi Min in the strategy chamber, their heads bent over maps of the Hidden Valley.

"Mother, Brother — Lily heard the Spirit Carp speak clearly for the first time. They warned of shadows waiting in the 'Dragon's Eye'. Not natural shadows, but deliberate ones. Enemies. Traps designed specifically for us."

Ren bowed quickly, her words spilling out. "Mother, Brother — Lily heard the Spirit Carp. They warned of shadows waiting in the 'Eye.'"

Shi Min's brow furrowed, his hand tightening on his hilt. "Shadows? Inside the Eye?" His voice dropped to a cold, calculated tone. "Hmmm... It seems enemies aren't just plotting — they've infiltrated, turning our trials into a battlefield. This is no mere test; it's a siege in disguise."

Ling Li's expression hardened, but her voice stayed calm, fury carefully restrained. "The Spirit Carp do not speak lightly — if they warn of shadows, danger awaits. You did well to come. We'll use every advantage." She cupped Lily's face. "We'll be ready." Her gaze softened as she looked at her daughters, seeing both their strength and their vulnerability.

"Omens are warnings, not chains. Prepare for danger, but have courage. The Spirit Carp showed you the shadows because you can overcome them. Prophecy is not surrender — it's preparation." Ling Li's eyes lingered on Ren and Lily, contemplating the difficult choices that lay ahead.

"The shadows might demand a sacrifice, a crossroads you must face together. Remember that true strength comes not merely from prevailing against adversity, but understanding when to act in unity, even if the path seems wrought with personal loss. Know that facing such trials means you have the power to change the outcome." Ling Li added.

Ren and Lily bowed deeper, steadied by their Mother's words yet still wary. Their fear became determination, shadowed by an awareness of looming danger.

Shi Min leaned forward, his expression grave, his warrior's intuition compelling him to ensure his sisters understood the 'Dragon Eye's true nature. "There's something crucial you must understand about the 'Eye' itself — it's not merely a trial ground, but a sentient force with its own ancient intelligence." His voice dropped to the tone he used when imparting life-or-death wisdom.

"The Eye doesn't tolerate deceitful hearts. It reads intentions like we read scrolls, piercing through every pretense, every hidden motive. When you step inside, your hearts must remain absolutely pure — crystalline in their clarity. Your sole intention must be what it should be: to be granted a cultivation technique, to grow stronger for righteous purposes." He paused, letting the weight settle.

Shi Min continued, "If anyone tries to harm you within those sacred walls, defend yourselves without hesitation. Do whatever you must to survive. But here's the critical distinction — as long as we are not the ones to provoke, as long as you enter with pure intent and only respond to aggression rather than initiate it, you will be guarded by the 'Eye' itself. It will recognize the difference between defender and aggressor, and its protection will shield the righteous."

"That is correct," Ling Li affirmed, her voice carrying the certainty of one who had studied the Eye's ancient records for decades. She stepped closer to her daughters, her gaze intense. "'The Dragon's Eye' has stood for millennia as an impartial arbiter. It has witnessed countless cultivators enter its depths — some with noble hearts, others with corruption festering in their souls. Without exception, it has rewarded the pure and punished the deceitful. Trust in this truth as you trust in your own bond. Enter with a clear conscience, and the 'Eye' will become your ally rather than your judge."

"We understand," Ren and Lily replied in unison, their voices overlapping in the way they did only when they were completely aligned in thought and purpose. Ren's hand found Lily's, their fingers intertwining as they had since childhood when facing uncertain futures. The gesture was unconscious but telling — a physical manifestation of the bond their Mother and brother had just urged them to trust. In their eyes burned not just understanding but determination: they would enter the 'Dragon's Eye' with pure hearts, defend themselves if necessary, and emerge together or not at all.

Seeing her two daughters united, Ling Li felt a warm assurance in her heart that they both understood their purpose.

"Both of you should return to your chambers and rest. Cultivate as much as you can." Shi Min advised.

"Yes, Crown Prince, we'll listen to you," Lily teasingly said, dragging Ren with her as she ran away.

Shi Min snorted loudly, but his heart was happy for his sisters.

Ling Li and Shi Min continued discussing their rival sects' plots against them.

"I have a full grasp of their plan. I will discuss this further with Butler Oda and the Seven Shah. Mom, you should sleep now. You're about to enter your trimester and need more time to rest. With triplets, you might give birth earlier than normal," Shi Min said.

"I know, son, thank you. Then I shall leave these matters to you."

"Got it," Shi Min replied with a comic salute.

Chapter 426: DEAR, I LEARNED IT FROM YOU

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

A Passionate Night Before Turmoil

When Ling Li returned to their chamber, Four Eyes was waiting for her. He was only in his pajamas, shirtless. He stood up and held her in his arms. "You've been exhausted. It's been hard on you," Four Eyes whispered.

Four Eyes embraced Ling Li from behind. Kissing her neck. He missed her throughout the day. The scent of her calmed his weary heart.

"Honey, can we?" He asks, whispering in her ears.

"As long as you help me wash..." Ling Li replied with a chuckle.

Four Eyes slowly helps Ling Li take off her clothes, as he showers her body with kisses mixed with murmurs of delight. "I love the scent of your body... I want you right now..."

Ling Li, now fully naked, felt hot. Four Eyes always has a way of making her forget the day's stresses and relax in his touch. He makes sure they have enough foreplay, and she is ready.

Four Eyes scooped Ling Li and brought her to their bed, and continued to kiss her. From her ears to her neck, to her sensitive nipples.

"Hhhmmmmmm..." Ling Li moaned as her toes curled.

Four Eyes was sucking both her breasts alternately until her nipples were up saluting him.

His kisses slid down to her round belly, as if to let his three babies know how much he loves their mother.

Four Eyes wasn't done kissing; his kisses slid way down, finding Ling Li's wet entrance. "Dear, you're so wet for me..." Four Eyes lick it, little at a time, teasing Ling Li.

"Aaahhhhhhh..." Ling Li is gripping the sheets.

It was the sound Four Eyes had been waiting for, as if on cue... he started to lick... hard... sucking every drop. His tongue explores each fold... hungrily eating her. His thumb was rubbing her clit.

"Aaahhhhhhh..."

Aaahhhhhhh...

Hhhmmmmmm...

Chu Yan..." Ling Li moaned.

"Cum for me, Dear... I want to drink it..."

Ling Li lost in ecstasy... "I'm cumming..."

Aaahhhhhh...

Hhhmmmmmm..."

Four Eyes didn't stop sucking and licking her cum clean.

He took off his pajamas, wiped his mouth, and lay beside Ling Li. His hard cock proudly standing, pre cum shining on its tip.

"Dear... ride me..." He said as he pulled Ling Li up and let her kneel on top of him.

"Ride me, Baby... as wild as you can..."

Ling Li chuckled.

She slowly guided his hard cock inside her. The sensation made her tilt her head back.

"Dear... I love the way your tight pussy squeezes my cock... Moan for me..." Four Eyes said, with his watery eyes locked on Ling Li.

Ling Li chuckled. "Honey, I didn't realize you like to talk dirty during sex..."

Four Eyes chuckled back... "Dear, I learned it from you... and I love it..."

Ling Li's face turned crimson as she remembered the last time she had been very wild and had talked dirty.

"Dear..."

Ugghhhhhh...

Yes... deeper... Fuck Dear, you're so tight tonight!

Ugghhhhhhhhh..." Four Eyes grunted as he held Ling Li's hip. "

Dear... moan for me... I love to hear you moan loud as you ride my cock..."

"Aaahhhhhh..." Ling Li moaned loudly as Four Eyes held and kneaded one of her breasts.

"Fuck Dear..."

Ugghhhhhh...

Ugghhhhhh...

Faster... Yes!" Four Eyes grunted.

Ling Li rode his cock fast, wild, and deep with her head tilted back, eyes closed. She was like the Goddess of seduction. "I'm gonna suck you dry, Honey..."

"Yes..."

Ugghhhhhh... Dear...

Please... suck me dry tonight...

Cum for me... I want to feel that tight pussy clench my cock...

Ugghhhhhhh..."

"I'll water you as I suck your cock dry..."

Aaahhhhhhh...

Aaahhhhhhh..." Ling Li said, rocking her hips up and down.

"I'm cumming with you, Dear..."

Fuck yes...

Ugghhhhhhh... suck it with your pussy!" Four Eyes said, in between breaths, as his muscles tightened, his cock was ready to explode.

The erotic, passionate night between the couple continued until dusk.

The Next Morning – Departure Preparations

Dawn broke over the Bamboo Pavilion like a blade cutting through night's veil. The sky was painted in hues of molten gold and blood crimson, colors that seemed prophetic given the journey ahead. The courtyard bustled with controlled chaos as the Li Clan gathered for departure. Dozens of voices called orders and confirmations. The crisp sting of icy air bit at their cheeks, weaving through the ring of weapons being checked and the rustle of packs being secured, all blending into a symphony of preparation. It spoke of a clan mobilizing for something far more significant than a simple journey.

Li Shenwu stood at the courtyard's highest point, his commanding presence heavy. He watched over every detail, missing nothing that could affect success or Failure.

Li Tianyuan moved through the chaos, directing disciples with sharp clarity. He checked supplies and weapons meticulously, his reputation for thoroughness possibly saving lives.

Ling Li and Four Eyes moved among their children — Ren, Shi Min, Lily, and the irrepressible twins with the practiced efficiency of parents who had long ago learned to manage powerful personalities. Ling Li steadied nerves with quiet words and meaningful looks. Chu Yan kept order through a combination of gentle humor and strategic distraction. His literal four eyes let him watch multiple children at once, catching mischief before it fully manifested.

In a fleeting moment, his gaze locked onto Lily's eyes, catching a flicker of doubt she thought she had hidden beneath her confident front. Noting her vulnerability, his expression softened momentarily, seeing beyond appearances to the complex emotions beneath.

Their friends — Chatty, Fatty, Shun, El Padre, El Capitan, Butler Oda, and the Seven Shah — mingled with Ling Li's loyal staff: Mushu, Pharsa, Jack, Reginald, Goldie, Rockie, Nicu, and Ailun, each preparing in their own way.

The courtyard was alive with tension and anticipation, the air crackling with nervous energy barely contained. Every face reflected the gravity of the journey to the Hidden Valley: some showed determination, others worry, still others a kind of grim excitement at finally facing the challenges they'd trained for. They all understood: this wasn't a diplomatic visit.

A nervous disciple stumbled into Tianyuan's path and blurted, "But what if we fail, Master?" Tianyuan's sharp gaze cut through the crowd as he replied tersely, "Failure isn't an option. Focus." His voice, like a blade through silk, echoed her scattered thoughts.

Chapter 427: PRAGMATISM OF A CLAN LEADER

Ren's Training – Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts

'The Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts' demand absolute precision — there is no margin for error, no second chances when facing actual danger. One breath to center yourself. One strike to pierce fate itself. Mind, body, and spirit must align perfectly, or the technique will consume the practitioner rather than empower them.

With a sliver of time before departure, precious minutes stolen from the chaos of preparation, Ren knelt in the training yard, her fingers trembling slightly as she held a set of silver needles that gleamed like captured moonlight. Each needle was impossibly thin, impossibly sharp, forged from exhaled breath. Ren exhaled slowly, feeling her qi flow from her core through her meridians, down her arm, into her fingertips, where it merged with the needle itself until weapon and wielder became one.

As the needle shot forward in a silver blur, slicing through the air with a hiss like a serpent's warning, a chill seeped into her fingertips, stealing warmth and blurring her vision momentarily. It covered twenty

paces in a heartbeat before embedding itself into the wooden post with such force that it sank halfway through the hardwood, deadly accuracy that would have pierced flesh, bone, and vital organs with equal ease.

"Focus!" Shinsei commanded. "The Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts demand precision. One breath, one strike."

Ren exhaled slowly, channeling her qi. The needle shot forward, slicing through the air with a hiss, and embedded itself in a wooden post with deadly accuracy.

Li Shenwu, watching from the training yard's edge, the stillness of a mountain observing the valleys below, stroked his beard thoughtfully, his eyes gleaming with approval and a grandfather's pride carefully masked beneath the pragmatism of a clan leader. "Her control is raw, unrefined, like unpolished jade. But the art suits her temperament perfectly — precision, sacrifice, and willingness."

Ren's chest swelled with pride at her Seven-great-grandfather's words, though sweat beaded her brow and trickled down her temples, her breathing already labored from just a handful of strikes. Each strike drained her — not just physically but spiritually, drawing from reserves she was still learning to replenish.

The toll of the technique was evident in the slight tremor of her hands, the pallor creeping into her cheeks. Still, she pressed on with stubborn determination, launching needle after needle until her fingers bled from the friction. She would master this technique before entering the 'Eye,' or die trying. There was no middle ground. Yet, as her Master's gaze rested upon her with approval, a single thought cut through her focus:

'What if I fail them all?'

Meanwhile, Lily returned to the pond seeking guidance one final time before departure, kneeling at its edge with the reverence of a supplicant approaching a shrine. The Spirit Carp surfaced once more as if they had been waiting for her, their golden scales shimmering like fragments of dawn captured in living form, each scale catching the morning light and refracting it into patterns that held meaning for those who knew how to read them, perhaps even the fabric of destiny itself.

Lily and the Carp

Lily, kneeling at the edge of the pond. The Spirit Carp jumped, their golden scales shimmering like fragments of dawn.

She closed her eyes, shutting out the visual world to focus entirely on the connection forming between her consciousness and theirs. She listened with more than her ears — with her spirit, her intuition, the parts of herself that existed beyond flesh. As she tuned in to the whispers, Lily perceived them as flavors on her tongue, a mixture of sweet and bitter that spoke of ancient truths and warnings.

The sensations filled her with a warmth and a chill, as if she were experiencing the carp's words as a breeze or a sunbeam. The whispers came faintly at first, like voices carried on water from a great distance, then grew clearer as she opened herself fully to their ancient wisdom.

"Shadows gather in the depths, wearing faces you will recognize — the 'Eye' hungers for truth, for sacrifice, for blood. Balance must be held between you and your sister, or both will fall. Trust the bond. Trust the flame and the wind. Only together can you survive what waits in darkness."

As Lily concentrated, a vision flickered into her mind — an image of a blood-stained feather slowly drifting onto a dark pool. This cryptic symbol left her both puzzled and fearful, raising questions that

demanded answers. Her heart tightened with the weight of responsibility — not just for herself but for Ren, for their entire family whose fate now rested on two sisters barely past childhood.

But Lily smiled softly, an expression of acceptance and determination. "I hear you, ancient ones. I understand what you're asking of me." She placed her palm flat against the water's surface, feeling the connection pulse through her. "I'll guide them through the shadows. I'll guide her when the flames burn too bright. I won't let us fall."

Chaos of the Twins

Not far away, providing comic relief to the otherwise tense atmosphere, Kim Kim and Chin Chin caused their characteristic chaos in the courtyard, their high-pitched voices cutting through the organized preparations like knives through silk.

"We're coming too! You can't leave us behind!" Kim Kim shouted with the absolute conviction of a six-year-old who recognized no authority but her own will, dragging a bundle twice her size that left a trail through the dust.

"Yeah! We'll fight shadows and ducks and anyone who tries to hurt our sisters!" Chin Chin added, chasing the Mischievous Spirit Duck in zigzag patterns, her tiny legs pumping furiously. The duck quacked with indignant fury and darted between startled disciples, causing three near-collisions and one actual tumble before disappearing under a supply cart.

Fatty tried to calm the twins with offerings of candied fruit but tripped over an improperly placed pack, landing with a crash that sent supplies scattering. Shun sighed deeply, rubbing his temples as if trying to massage away an impending headache, his meditation clearly ruined by the pandemonium.

Ling Li finally snapped, her patience exhausted by the chaos threatening to derail carefully laid plans. With a swift and precise flick of her wrist, she sent a silk cord snapping through the air, a motion so sharp it silenced the courtyard instantly. Her voice cut through the now quiet space like a whip crack, sharp enough to freeze everyone in place.

Chapter 428: THROUGH THE FOREST

"Enough! Kim Kim, Chin Chin, listen to me very carefully." Ling Li fixed them with a stare that had made clan elders quail. "You two will stay within arm's reach of me at all times. If you run off, if you cause trouble, if you so much as think about chasing that cursed duck, I will personally tie you to the carp pond with silk rope and leave you there until we return. Am I absolutely clear?"

Chatty laughed until tea spilled from his cup, his booming guffaws drawing annoyed glares from those trying to concentrate.

The twins pouted dramatically, bottom lips protruding in identical expressions of wounded innocence, but nodded their agreement with exaggerated solemnity. Still, their eyes gleamed with barely suppressed mischief, and several nearby disciples exchanged knowing looks — the journey to the Hidden Valley had just become significantly more unpredictable, and not just because of the enemies waiting there.

As they exchanged a secret grin, a fleeting thought of their mischief somehow tipping the balance in a crucial moment flickered through everyone's mind, hinting that their playful troublemaking might one day become a pivotal part of their adventures.

The Caravan Sets Out

As the sun rose over the eastern peaks, burning away the morning mist, the clan mounted their horses and carriages, moving with practiced precision. The Li Clan's banners, vibrant crimson silk with golden

phoenixes, snapped sharply in the wind, announcing their journey to observers. The caravan carefully traversed bamboo groves where the light formed a green mosaic.

Elder members chanted ancient protective prayers, while allies exchanged wary glances, hands near their weapons, ready for any threat. Hawks circled overhead, their sharp eyes on the caravan's every move. The air itself seemed to hold its breath as if unseen forces from the Hidden Valley were measuring their strength and counting their numbers.

The Caravan Moves Forward

The Li Clan caravan pressed onward with relentless momentum, its banners snapping in the wind like whip cracks, crimson and gold blazing defiantly against the pale morning sky. Hooves struck the packed earth in a steady rhythm, a drumbeat of purpose that echoed off hillsides and announced their approach from miles away.

Among the riders, Xiao Ren, Li Tianyuan's assistant, felt the familiar twist of anxiety in his chest. The terrain seemed to remind him of his last, ill-fated expedition — a journey that had ended in disaster for his family. It was not merely the landscape that triggered his dread but a vivid sensory memory. He could almost smell the copper-tinged air of that day when blood had stained the earth, or hear the haunting snap of a rein breaking in the chaos, a sound etched into his memory.

Each jingle of the harnesses now brought back memories of that day, vivid and unending, and yet, the symphony of movement around him pushed him on. Together with the creak of carriage wheels and the soft conversations of voices, he was part of a living organism, flowing across the landscape toward its destination.

The bamboo groves gave way to rolling hills carpeted in wild grasses that rippled like ocean waves, where morning mist clung stubbornly to the valleys despite the climbing sun, pooling in low places like

ghostly lakes. Streams glittered like silver threads woven through green fabric, their waters cold enough to numb flesh and swift enough to sweep away the unwary, forcing the caravan to cross at carefully scouted fords.

Disciples guided nervous horses across slick stones worn smooth by centuries of water flow, speaking soothing words while maintaining iron grips on reins. Elders muttered prayers to ward off misfortune — invocations to river spirits and mountain gods, asking safe passage through territories that belonged to powers older than human memory.

Everywhere, the air seemed charged with potential energy — alive with unseen currents that made hair stand on end and skin prickle with awareness. It was the feeling before lightning strikes, before storms break, the electric tension of forces gathering for inevitable collision.

Through the Forests

As the caravan entered dense forests of ancient growth, the light dimmed dramatically, filtered through layers of canopy until it arrived weak and greenish on the forest floor. The scent of damp earth and decaying pine needles thickened the air, an aroma both rich and cloying. Towering pines loomed overhead like silent sentinels that had witnessed centuries pass, their branches whispering secrets in the wind, or perhaps warnings.

Every step forward released a symphony of subtle sounds: the soft rustle of leaves brushing leather garments, the crunch of twigs beneath footfall. An occasional, inexplicable rustling came from deeper within the forest, like fabric being pulled across a rough surface, just barely perceptible at the edge of consciousness.

Shadows stretched long across the narrow path, twisting into shapes that seemed almost alive, almost deliberate: reaching hands, crouching figures, watching faces that disappeared when looked at directly

but reappeared in peripheral vision. The forest seemed to breathe with them, an unseen presence pressing against their senses, making the uncanny tangibly felt.

Ren rode near Shinsei, maintaining the position of apprentice beside master, her eyes constantly scanning the treeline for threats both mundane and mystical. Her fingers brushed the needles tucked at her belt in a nervous habit she'd developed, feeling their cool metal through the silk pouch, drawing comfort from their presence.

Her mind replayed Shinsei's words on an endless loop: "Sacrifice." The word had weight, implications she was still unraveling.

'What would she have to sacrifice?

How much blood would the technique demand?'

The thought of failing clenched at her heart; she risked losing Shinsei's trust, her status in the clan, and perhaps even her chance to fulfill her own potential as a warrior.

This unspoken fear sharpened her resolve, anchoring her focus. In a moment of determination, she decided to ride closer to the treeline, placing herself in a position that would be first to encounter any danger. It was a small decision, but one that symbolized her willingness to offer herself, testing her resolve against the unknown challenges ahead.

Beside her, Lily's gaze drifted toward a stream running parallel to the path, its waters clear enough to see smooth stones on the bottom, quick enough to create white foam where it tumbled over obstacles.

She found herself searching the water for golden scales, for the reassuring presence of the Spirit Carp, but these were ordinary waters, devoid of ancient wisdom.

Chapter 429: EYES ARE ON US

Just then, a fleeting ripple disturbed the surface, an unusual movement as if something unseen had just passed by beneath the water. It sent a chill through Lily, a visual echo of the carp's whispers faintly returning to her memory like voices calling from a great distance: "Shadows waiting in the Eye." The warning sent a shiver down her spine despite the warm afternoon sun. She clutched the reins tighter, knuckles going white, and sent a silent prayer to whatever powers might be listening that she and Ren would prove strong enough for what awaited them.

The twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, rode in a luxurious carriage with Ling Li, their endless chatter breaking the tension like sunshine through storm clouds. They seemed utterly oblivious to the weight pressing down on everyone else, their childhood innocence a shield against adult fears and political machinations.

Nearby, a weary guard trudged alongside the procession. "I wish I could see the world as they do," he muttered, casting a glance at the cheerful twins. His voice carried a note of longing, underscoring the gravity of their journey.

Noticing his gaze, Kim Kim giggled and chirped, "Maybe you just need to look at the trees like we do!"

Chin Chin added with a grin, "Yeah, maybe you'll see dragons too!"

The guard chuckled softly, feeling a fleeting lightness in his heart. Yet, beneath his smile lay a subtle catch, a flicker of fear creeping into his expression as though he sensed the storm beyond the innocence. It was a fragile shield, one that might crack when shadows gathered.

Kim Kim shouted with enthusiasm, pointing at the trees, "Look! Look! That tree looks exactly like a duck!" She nearly tumbled from the carriage, saved only by Ling Li's quick hand.

"No, you're seeing it wrong! It looks like a dragon with its mouth open!" Chin Chin countered with equal fervor, standing up to get a better view until their mother pulled her back down with a warning look. Their laughter rang out clear and bright, drawing smiles from even the grimmest warriors, a reminder of what they were protecting, what made the coming trials worthwhile.

Even in their chaos — perhaps mainly because of it — their innocence served as a fragile but precious shield against the heaviness pressing down on the caravan, a reminder that not everything in the world was about power struggles and deadly trials, that some things remained pure and untouched by the politics of cultivation.

Into the Cliffs

By midday, when the sun reached its zenith and cast little shadow, the caravan reached the jagged cliffs marking the final approach to the Hidden Valley, a natural fortress that had guarded its secrets for millennia.

The road narrowed dramatically, winding precariously along sheer drops that plunged hundreds of feet to the infamous Black Gorge, a chasm known in legend as the Mourning Abyss. Its ragged edges had been the doom of many — once home to the tragic fall of the Crimson Mercenaries, whose cries were said to echo in the wind that perpetually howled like a living creature in agony.

This wind was strong enough to pluck the careless from the path and dash them on stones at the gorge's pit, which had claimed countless victims over the centuries. Trailing feathers and silver leaves from

previous travelers marked where the last fluttering pleas had been silenced. One wrong step, one spooked horse, one moment of inattention could mean death.

Li Shenwu rode at the front, his Immortal aura steady as a mountain despite the treacherous terrain, his experienced eyes constantly scanning the horizon for ambush points and defensive positions.

Li Tianyuan barked orders with military precision, ensuring the caravan kept a tight formation despite the narrow path and positioning their strongest fighters at vulnerable points. The allies showed their defining traits through their actions under pressure: Chatty, usually verbose, kept silent, his eyes darting nervously as he scanned the surroundings, ready to alert at the first sign of trouble.

Fatty persisted, each breath measured, his resolve a testament to an enduring spirit. Shun, with his hand near his sword hilt, exuded an air of readiness, prepared to draw at any flash of movement. El Padre and El Capitan flanked the sides, their tactical awareness manifesting in their calculated glances, gauging potential threats.

Butler Oda coordinated the supply wagons with precision, a silent leader maintaining essential order even amidst looming danger. The Seven Shah, ever vigilant, communicated in rapid, coded phrases, their synchrony a pattern of anticipation and readiness, as they steeled themselves for any potential ambush.

The cliffs seemed to watch them with the patient malevolence of ancient stone that had witnessed countless travelers meet their end on these heights. Hawks circled overhead in tightening spirals, their cries sharp and piercing, echoing against stone walls until the sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

Once, a shadow flickered across the path ahead — too swift, too deliberate, too large to be mere bird or cloud. It moved with purpose, with intelligence, there and gone in a heartbeat. As it passed, a sudden

chill seeped into the air, an icy breath that sent shivers down spines, and a faint trace of sulfur lingered as if the earth itself exhaled a warning.

Disciples stiffened immediately, hands tightening on weapon hilts, eyes darting to scan cliff faces and overhangs where attackers might be positioned. The tension ratcheted higher, and everyone was now hyperaware that they were being observed, assessed, perhaps targeted.

"Eyes are on us," Li Tianyuan muttered, his voice barely above a whisper, pitched to carry only to those immediately around him. His hand rested on his blade with the casual readiness of a master swordsman who could draw and strike in a single fluid motion.

"Multiple positions. They're tracking our progress, counting our numbers. This feels like reconnaissance before an attack." Urgency settled over the group like a suffocating shroud. Li Tianyuan's insight demanded immediate action.

"We can't risk moving further into their sights," he continued, his voice now steadier, louder. "We should take the higher ground at the next ridge; it's defensible, and we can gauge their approach from there." His suggestion rippled through the ranks, inciting hurried whispers and a shift in the caravan's movement.

Allies glanced at one another, silently calculating the risks, acknowledging the pressure. With a quick gesture, Li Shenwu signaled agreement, setting his horse in motion toward the ridge, prompting others to follow. The urgency was palpable, the narrative of their journey quickening with each deliberate step toward strategic advantage.

Chapter 430: THE HIDDEN VALLEY: ARRIVAL

Ominous Signs

As dusk approached and long shadows began their inexorable conquest of the landscape, the caravan descended into a valley where the air grew unnaturally still. The dead calm after hours of howling wind felt wrong, oppressive, the temperature dropping noticeably until breath became visible in the suddenly cold air.

The wind, when it finally stirred, carried faint echoes. These whispers, in no recognizable language, seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once, pressing against the ears of all who listened with an insistence that demanded attention. As they strained to decipher the message, one phrase materialized and lingered: 'Shadows are watching.' An eerie silence followed, as if the very air held its breath, amplifying the chilling impact of those words.

Ren's heart pounded so hard she could feel it in her throat, hear it in her ears. She thought of the carp's warning, of shadows waiting in the 'Dragon's Eye,' and suddenly wondered if those shadows had emerged early, if they were here now in this cursed valley, surrounding them in the gathering darkness. Her hand brushed the needles at her side, and this time she drew one completely, holding it ready between her fingers.

As she did, the sharp point pricked her skin, drawing a single drop of blood that traced a line down her palm. The slight sting cemented her focus, sealing her vow with a vivid mark. Her resolve hardened from anxious steel into something diamond-hard and unbreakable. Let the shadows come. She would pierce them all.

Lily closed her eyes, shutting out the visual distractions to focus entirely on the spiritual currents swirling around them. She listened with every sense she possessed, reaching out with the connection the carp had awakened in her.

For a moment — just a heartbeat — she swore she heard them again despite the impossible distance, faint and distant as voices calling from another world: "Balance must hold." The words resonated in her

bones, a reminder, a warning, a promise. She opened her eyes and immediately sought Ren, finding her sister already looking back.

In a synchronized motion, both sisters, as if guided by an unseen force, raised their hands simultaneously to their chests, touching their hearts. It was a gesture of unity and strength, a silent vow to face whatever lay ahead together, embodying the very essence of balance and togetherness. This symbolic movement, small yet profound, echoed the carp's message. They would face this together.

The elders exchanged wary glances weighted with decades of experience reading danger signs. Their expressions communicate entire conversations without words. Disciples whispered nervously of omens and ill portents, of rival sects already positioned in the valley ahead, of traps laid and ambushes prepared.

Speculation ran wild, fear spreading like contagion through the younger members. Even the twins fell silent for the first time all day, their wide eyes fixed on the darkening cliffs that now seemed less like stone formations and more like crouching beasts waiting to pounce. Kim Kim pressed closer to Ling Li, while Chin Chin clutched her sister's hand.

In the cold, gathering darkness, a lone banner of the Li Clan fluttered against the horizon, its crimson phoenix now appearing as if scorched by the sunset light. This single, haunting image pierced the atmosphere, a stark reminder that their journey teetered on the brink of peril. The air was still, almost breathless, marking the first awareness of something terrible waiting in the shadows ahead.

Arrival at the Hidden Valley

By late afternoon, when the sun hung low and painted the world in amber and crimson, the jagged cliffs gave way abruptly to a vast basin shrouded in perpetual mist, as if it existed independent of weather or season.

The Hidden Valley stretched before them in breathtaking scope — an expanse of shadowed forests so dense they appeared black from this height, winding rivers that caught the dying light like veins of liquid silver, and mountains that loomed like silent guardians keeping eternal watch over secrets buried in the valley floor.

The air was heavy, almost syrupy in its density, charged with a strange energy that prickled against the skin like invisible needles, making hair stand on end and setting teeth on edge. This was a place where the barrier between mortal and immortal realms had worn thin over millennia, where qi pooled thick enough to taste on the tongue.

At the valley's heart, positioned at the convergence of three rivers in accordance with ancient geomantic principles, rose the Li Clan's ancestral mansion. This sprawling complex had stood for ten generations.

Jade-green tiles covered roofs that swept upward in elegant curves, each ridge adorned with protective talismans disguised as decorative elements. Towering ironwood pillars, each requiring ten men to encircle, were carved with intricate reliefs of dragons and phoenixes engaged in their eternal dance, the craftsmanship so exquisite that the creatures seemed to move from different angles.

As the caravan drew closer, Li Shenwu, leading the procession, tilted his head slightly to appreciate the mansion's glowing walls, a habitual gesture that momentarily softened his steely demeanor. The mansion's walls gleamed faintly in the fading light, not with mere reflected sun but with inner luminescence, as though infused with centuries of accumulated qi from generations of powerful cultivators who had lived, trained, and died within these walls.

The caravan's approach triggered the lanterns along the gates to flicker to life in cascading sequence; they were not lit by human hands but by formation arrays responding to the clan's return, casting long shadows across the courtyard that seemed to bow in welcome.

The mansion stood not merely as a home, but as a fortress of legacy and accumulated power — a physical manifestation of the Li Clan's endurance through wars, political upheavals, and the rise and fall of rival sects. Its very presence commanded reverence from all who entered, from the lowest servant to visiting sect leaders who had ruled their own domains for centuries. To stand before these gates was to stand before history itself, and to be judged by the weight of ten generations watching from beyond.