

PROTEGE 431

Chapter 431: RIVAL SECTS GATHERING

Atmosphere of the Valley

The valley itself was alive and bursting with visitors, transforming its usual isolation into something resembling a massive festival ground. Sects bearing banners from distant provinces, noble Clans with centuries of documented lineage, entire Families of Cultivators traveling together for protection, and individual Cultivators who had journeyed alone for months across treacherous terrain all had converged on this single location.

They came from every corner of the cultivation world to enter the 'Dragon's Eye', the legendary trial ground that only opened once every four years when celestial alignments reached the precise configuration required. This sacred trial, governed by the ancient energies of the valley, tests the essence of one's spirit, demanding both skill and purity of heart, separating actual cultivators from the eager throng.

This quadrennial opening made the normally Hidden Valley extraordinarily lively, packed with cultivators of every rank and discipline. Temporary camps sprawled across available land, cooking fires sent smoke spiraling into the mist, and the air rang with a dozen dialects and languages as cultivators from vastly different traditions found themselves shoulder to shoulder, united by a single purpose yet divided by countless rivalries.

Seeing the Li Clan's caravan arrive in complete ceremonial formation, those who recognized the distinctive Red and Golden banner, a crimson silk embroidered with phoenixes in gold thread, halted immediately, conversations dying mid-sentence. A ripple of awareness spread through the valley like a stone dropped in still water.

Cultivators jostled for better vantage points, eager to see who was representing the legendary Li Clan, which members of that storied bloodline would be entering the 'Eye' this cycle.

Snippets of conversation floated through the air — a young disciple whispered, "I heard the sisters can speak to the spirits themselves." At the same time, a seasoned cultivator boasted, "They say their power rivals our own sect leaders." These murmurs added an aura of awe, emphasizing that rumor was one thing, but witnessing the clan's power in person was quite another.

While others watched with scrutiny bordering on hostility, calculating whether the Li Clan represented opportunity or threat, some gazed in genuine awe at the sheer concentration of power on display. Even cultivators with limited spiritual perception could easily tell that this clan had numerous Immortals among their ranks from the auras they were emitting — waves of pressure that rolled off the caravan like heat from a forge, making the air shimmer and distort.

Lesser cultivators felt their own qi instinctively recoil, recognizing the vast gulf in power. Some even stepped back involuntarily, wearied by the oppressive weight of so much concentrated strength, suddenly afraid of accidentally offending such a powerful faction through careless words or gestures.

In the cultivation world, offending the wrong person could mean death — or worse, a fate that made death seem merciful.

The news of the Li Clan's arrival in the Hidden Valley spread like wildfire through the temporary camps and established sect compounds. Within minutes, messenger birds took flight, communication talismans flared with urgent signals, and runners sprinted between camps.

Every major faction needed to know: the Li Clan had arrived in force, with what appeared to be their whole leadership and their most promising younger generation. Strategies would need to be adjusted,

alliances reconsidered, and plans accelerated or delayed depending on each sect's relationship with the powerful clan. The game board had just received its most significant piece.

Rival Sects Gathering

Already, the valley was not theirs alone.

Iron Fang Sect disciples lingered at the edges of the cliffs in deliberate positions that advertised their presence, their heavy armor glinting like scales in the fading light, every piece designed for intimidation as much as protection.

Their eyes tracked the Li caravan with sharp contempt barely disguised, lips curled in sneers that promised violence. They watched with predatory patience, the stillness of hunters who had already chosen their prey and were waiting for the perfect moment. Among themselves, they whispered of strikes to come, of how they would crush the Li sisters in the Eye's trials, of the glory and resources their sect would claim from the Li Clan's humiliation. Their hands rested on weapon hilts with casual readiness, fingers drumming in anticipation.

Crimson Lotus Sect figures moved like shadows among the trees, their crimson robes treated with special dyes that seemed to absorb light and blend with the mist, making them appear and disappear like ghosts.

Unlike the Iron Fang's blatant aggression, their presence was subtle, insidious, and far more dangerous for its concealment. They positioned themselves not to be seen but to see, to observe, to gather intelligence. Their eyes gleamed with schemes yet unspoken, with poisons yet undeployed, with illusions yet unwoven.

They smiled to themselves, knowing that while the Iron Fang prepared for open confrontation, the Crimson Lotus would strike from within, corrupting the trials themselves, turning the Eye's opening into weapons that would destroy the Li sisters from the inside out.

Moonshade Clan mystics stood near the riverbanks in a loose circle, their silver mirrors catching the last rays of the sun and reflecting them in patterns that held divinatory significance for those trained to read them.

This practice, rooted in the ancient Luminarum Treatise, guided their readings, lending their predictions an air of respected authenticity. The Treatise, a cornerstone of their cultural heritage, details how celestial alignments influence reflections in mirrors, thereby offering insight into future paths.

They performed their observations openly, making no effort to hide their presence; neutrality was their shield, and they wielded it with confidence. They whispered among themselves in voices pitched to carry just far enough, debating whether to ally with the Li Clan or betray them, whether the sisters represented the valley's salvation or its doom. Their voices were carried by the wind like riddles, like prophecies deliberately obscured, ensuring that anyone who overheard would gain information but not clarity.

The Moonshade Clan was playing its own game, and none of the other factions could be sure which side they would ultimately choose — perhaps not even the Moonshade themselves.

The valley buzzed with tension so thick it seemed to vibrate in the air itself, a frequency felt in bones and teeth. Rival sects gathered not openly in direct confrontation — that would violate the ancient protocols that governed the Eye's opening — but with the quiet menace of predators circling a watering hole, each waiting for prey to stumble, for weakness to show, for the perfect opportunity to strike while maintaining plausible deniability.

Every glance carried weight, every gesture held meaning, every position chosen was a statement of intent to those trained to read such things. The valley had become a chessboard, and dozens of games were being played simultaneously, overlapping and interfering with each other in ways that would determine who lived, who died, and who emerged with power.

Chapter 432: THE DRAGON'S EYE: STIRRED

The Clan's Arrival at the Mansion

The Li Clan caravan passed through the mansion's gates in precise formation, the massive ironwood doors swinging open silently on hinges that had been maintained for generations. Li Shenwu dismounted first with the fluid grace of a master despite his advanced age, his aura pressing down like a mountain settling its weight on the earth, an almost physical pressure that made the air dense and breathing difficult for anyone nearby.

As he gazed across the valley with the keenness of a hunting hawk, his thoughts briefly returned to a memory from decades past — a siege that had nearly shattered the clan. Back then, Shenwu had stood atop the very walls of this mansion, rallying his clan against overwhelming odds, the smoke from burning fields staining the horizon red. It was the same silent resolve he felt now that hardened his expression into stone, clear and unmistakable: he saw them all, he knew what they planned, and he dared any of them to step closer, to test the Li Clan's defenses, to discover personally why his clan had endured for ten generations while others had crumbled to dust.

Li Tianyuan directed disciples into defensive formation with the precision of a military commander who had fought in actual wars, his voice carrying clearly across the courtyard as he assigned positions, established patrol routes, and set up overlapping fields of observation. He ensured the clan's defenses were not merely ready but layered, redundant, and poised to face threats from multiple directions at once.

Meanwhile, Ling Li guided her children — Ren walking with the careful control of someone managing internal turmoil, Lily with her head tilted as if listening to distant voices, Shi Min scanning for threats

with a warrior's perpetual vigilance, and the twins finally subdued by exhaustion and the weight of so many watching eyes — into the courtyard's protective embrace. Her eyes remained sharp, missing nothing, while her presence radiated steady confidence, a matriarch who would burn the world before allowing harm to reach her family.

Their allies — Chatty already analyzing sight lines and defensive weaknesses, Fatty checking that food supplies were secured and potentially poisoned items isolated, Shun positioning himself where he could respond to threats from any direction, El Padre and El Capitan establishing a perimeter with military efficiency, Butler Oda coordinating the logistics of housing and feeding such a large group, the Seven Shah conferring in their native tongue while their hands moved in subtle signals, Mushu sharpening weapons that were already razor-keen, Pharsa preparing medical supplies for inevitable injuries, Jack and Reginald organizing the supply inventory, Goldie and Rockie securing the mounts and establishing escape routes, while Nicu and Ailun set up communication networks — took their places with practiced efficiency.

Each was acutely aware that the mansion was not merely a sanctuary offering rest, but the staging ground for the trial to come, the last safe haven before they entered territory where ancient rules and modern enmities would collide with potentially catastrophic results.

The in-house Butler, Butler Fuxi — a man whose silver hair and weathered face belied a cultivation base that rivaled many sect elders, whose decades of service to the Li Clan had made him as much family as servant — stood at the forefront of the welcoming formation, his posture impeccable, his eyes sharp with the satisfaction of seeing Clan Head return safely.

Behind him, arranged in perfect hierarchical order that spoke of rigid discipline and meticulous training, stood all the inner disciples of the Li Clan: those who had been born into the bloodline or adopted through ritual, who trained in the clan's most guarded techniques, whose loyalty had been tested and proven through trials both mundane and life-threatening. Their robes bore the clan's colors with subtle variations denoting rank and specialization — some marked as combat specialists, others as formation masters, still others as diplomatic envoys.

Beside them stood the outer disciples who had arrived earlier to prepare the mansion: cultivators affiliated with the Li Clan through oath or contract rather than blood, who had journeyed ahead by weeks to ensure everything was ready, who had cleaned every room, tested every defensive array, stocked supplies, and gathered intelligence on rival sects' movements. Their faces bore the exhaustion of complex preparation but also the pride of their thoroughness.

And finally, stretching in long lines along both sides of the courtyard, stood all the household staff — servants who had served the Li Clan for generations, whose families had been bound to this household through centuries of mutual loyalty and protection.

Cooks who could prepare meals for hundreds, gardeners who maintained the grounds with both aesthetic and defensive purposes in mind, cleaners who knew every secret passage and hidden room, messengers who could navigate the valley blindfolded, guards who manned the walls in shifts that never left a gap in coverage. Each stood tall despite their varying ranks, their presence a silent testament to the Li Clan's power: that even their servants commanded respect, that the household's collective strength extended far beyond just the cultivators who bore the family name.

Foreshadowing of the Eye

As night fell like a curtain dropping over the world, the valley grew eerily quiet, as if the silence were unnatural and oppressive. The mist thickened until visibility dropped to mere feet, transforming the landscape into a ghostly realm where solid objects became suggestions and sounds lost all sense of direction.

The air grew heavy with anticipation, with potential energy building toward inevitable release, like the moment before lightning strikes. Somewhere deep within the valley, in a location known to the ancient families but hidden from newcomers, the 'Dragon's Eye' stirred after four years of dormancy.

Its energies converged from ley lines that crisscrossed the valley floor, drawn by celestial alignments that occurred with clockwork precision. Its hunger awakened — not for food or blood, but for truth, for the testing of souls, for the opportunity to judge another generation of cultivators and find most of them wanting. The 'Eye' was waking, and the valley trembled in response.

Ren felt the weight of Shinsei's gift pressing against her chest, like a physical burden, the jade pendant warm against her skin as if in response to the Eye's awakening. Her needles trembled at her side, vibrating with subtle frequency, resonating with the qi currents flowing through the valley. She pressed her hand against them to still their movement, but couldn't stop her own trembling — whether from fear or anticipation, she couldn't say.

Lily closed her eyes, shutting out the visual chaos of the mansion's activity, and immediately heard faint whispers from the carp even here, impossibly distant yet somehow reaching across the miles. They warned of shadows that waited with inhuman patience, of trials that would test not just power but character, of choices that would define who they were and who they would become. When she opened her eyes, they glistened with unshed tears. She knew, with the certainty that only true prophecy brings, that nothing would ever be the same after they entered the 'Eye.'

Chapter 433: CELESTIAL DRAGON IS NO ORDINARY BEAST

The mansion's lanterns burned bright, their flames steady and defiant against the encroaching darkness, protective formations woven into their light creating barriers visible only to those with cultivated sight. But beyond its walls, beyond the fragile safety of ancestral ground and ancient wards, the valley was alive with enemies who sharpened blades and refined poisons, with omens that whispered of futures both glorious and catastrophic, and with destiny itself gathering like a storm, preparing to break over them all with the force of heaven's judgment.

The night before the 'Eye' opens is always the longest, filled with final preparations, whispered prayers, and the terrible knowledge that some who made plans tonight would not live to see their completion. In the darkness, the valley waited, and the 'Eye' hungered, and the sisters tried to find sleep that would not come.

The Night Before the Dragon's Eye Opens

A gentle heat emanated from the hundreds of lanterns adorning the Li Clan mansion, their warmth subtly defying the night's chill and reaching into every corner of the valley. The gentle crackle and pop of flames played softly against the carved ironwood pillars, their dark, polished surfaces reflecting the flickering light like still water kissed by a breeze.

The mansion itself seemed to breathe with life, windows illuminated in sequence as rooms filled with returning clan members, protective formations humming at frequencies felt rather than heard. Outside, the valley was restless like predators circling before a kill, mist curling like serpents through the temporary camps. Rival sects murmured in their encampments, their voices carrying undertones of threat and promise, the air charged with anticipation so thick it felt like standing in the moment before lightning strikes. The night itself seemed to hold its breath, waiting for dawn and the opening of the 'Dragon's Eye'.

Inside the great hall, a cavernous space with a soaring three-story ceiling and pillars carved with the Li Clan's ten generations of history, Ling Li gathered everyone who would participate in the opening of the 'Dragon's Eye'.

The disciples sat in disciplined rows, their backs straight, faces a mix of determination and anxiety. Allies and family stood in protective clusters: Chatty and Shun formed one group, another was composed of El Padre and El Capitan. The Seven Shah maintained their formation, while Butler Oda coordinated quietly with Mushu and Pharsa.

At the head table, elevated on a dais that symbolized authority, sat Shinsei, his ancient eyes filled with wisdom, alongside Li Shenwu and Li Tianyuan, whose mere presence demanded silence, making even breathing seem disrespectful in this moment's gravity.

Why It Is Called the Dragon's Eye

Ling Li rose from her position beside the head table, her robes flowing like liquid midnight as she moved to stand where all could see her clearly. Her voice carried with perfect clarity across the vast hall, steady and solemn, each word carefully chosen and weighted with the responsibility of preparing her clan for mortal danger.

"Firstly, for those entering for the first time, understand that the 'Eye' is actually called the Dragon's Eye, and the name carries profound significance." Ling Li's voice took on the cadence of ancient storytelling, of legends passed down through countless generations.

"It is said that long ago, in an age before the great sects were founded, when this valley was being carved by rivers of qi flowing from the world's heart, a celestial dragon descended from the heavens themselves. The celestial dragon was no ordinary spirit beast, but a primordial dragon whose very existence shaped reality. Its gaze pierced the earth with the force of divine judgment, burning through layers of stone and soil, leaving a scar of pure, concentrated energy that has never healed, raw and potent even after millennia.

That scar became the 'Eye' — a wound in the world that serves as a doorway, a place where heaven and earth converge, where the boundaries between realms grow thin, where truth and illusion intertwine so thoroughly that even masters cannot always distinguish between them.

To step inside is to step into the 'Dragon's Eye' itself, to see the world as that ancient being saw it, where nothing can be hidden, where every soul is laid bare, where pretense burns away like morning mist under the sun's scrutiny. But what if, in witnessing such truth, we uncover questions even the 'Dragon's Eye' cannot answer?"

Ling Li's words hung heavy in the air, each syllable carrying a weight that seemed to press down on those listening. The disciples shifted uneasily, some exchanging nervous glances, others staring at the floor as if suddenly questioning their readiness to enter such a place.

A few of the younger ones looked genuinely frightened, their earlier bravado crumbling under the reality of what lay ahead. One young disciple, Mei, felt her heart pound with apprehension as she recalled a recurring nightmare of being lost within the Eye's depths, alone and forgotten. Yet, the duty to her clan, the weight of the Li name upon her shoulders, stilled her trembling hands.

The elders, who had heard this legend countless times and some of whom had entered the 'Eye' themselves in their youth, nodded in reverence, their weathered faces showing respect for forces far beyond human comprehension, for powers that had existed before humanity learned to cultivate and would exist long after the last cultivator turned to dust.

Ling Li continued after a measured pause to let the legend sink in, her tone sharpening from storyteller to tactician, from mythmaker to military commander preparing troops for battle.

"Inside, the 'Dragon's Eye' is like a mad god's maze — chaotic yet purposeful, random yet meaningful." Ling Li's hands moved as she spoke, tracing patterns in the air that helped visualize the impossible geometry she described.

"Corridors twist and shift according to no physical laws, defying the basic principles of space and direction. Paths rearrange themselves behind you, cutting off retreat, forcing you forward into unknown dangers. What seems whole and solid one moment fractures the next into passages that lead nowhere or everywhere simultaneously. Each chamber is a piece of the puzzle, demanding not just strength but insight, not just power but courage, not just skill but clarity of purpose to move forward.

The deeper you go into the 'Eye's' depths, the more the puzzle actively resists your progress, reshaping itself specifically to test your resolve, adapting to your weaknesses, probing for the cracks in your determination.

It learns from you as you navigate it, becoming more challenging with each step. Within this daunting labyrinth, talismans of determination could be found, their surfaces etched with intricate patterns imbued with the wisdom of generations past. "

Chapter 434: NOT A FRIENDLY GATHERING

Carrying a faint scent of sandalwood, they were a testament to the clan's resilience, a sensory reminder of the courage instilled in each member from childhood. Every touch to these talismans brought forth a hum of familiar energy, offering a sense of connection to the clan's values as they navigated the corridors of uncertainty.

"Only those who can see beyond confusion, who can maintain their sense of self and purpose even when reality itself becomes uncertain, will reach the heart where the greatest techniques await. Most turn back long before that point, content with lesser rewards, unable to bear the psychological strain of a world that refuses to follow consistent rules."

The Miasma

Ling Li's gaze turned specifically toward Four Eyes, her husband, locking onto him with an intensity that made him straighten under the weight of her attention. Her voice grew firm, carrying the unmistakable tone of a command rather than a suggestion.

"The further you enter, the more miasma you will encounter, both black and white. Avoid the black miasma, especially you, Chu Yan. Inside it dwell all dark cultivations. Do not be surprised to see people enter it; they are dark cultivators. But we are not one of them."

Chu Yan's mind flickered with an uneasy thought, a shadow of curiosity mixed with an ambiguous pull towards the forbidden. This reaction surprised him, stirring something profound within that he could not entirely dismiss.

'What would it be like?' He wondered for a fleeting moment, 'to step into the black miasma? To grasp at its dark power despite its treacherous nature?' Shaking his head slightly, he pushed the thought away, reminding himself of the path of righteousness the clan had always stood for.

The hall stirred with nervous energy, disciples whispering in hushed tones, some asking clarifying questions, others sharing rumors about dark cultivators who had entered the black miasma and emerged as monsters wearing human skin.

A few glanced toward Four Eyes with concern, wondering what temptations he might face given his unique constitution, which sometimes attracted unusual cultivation opportunities. The elders remained silent, but their expressions showed approval of Ling Li's warning — this was a boundary that must never be crossed.

"The deeper you go inside the 'Eye', the higher the chance you get a higher grade cultivation techniques." Ling Li added.

Warnings and Shadows

Ling Li's eyes swept across the room in a slow, deliberate arc, making eye contact with key disciples, ensuring each understood the gravity of what she was about to say.

"As you have seen outside when we arrived, cultivators from all over the world have converged on this valley to participate in the Eye's opening. This is not a friendly gathering or a cooperative endeavor." Ling Li's voice hardened, taking on the edge of a general briefing troops before battle.

"Expect fierce competition for the best techniques, for the deepest chambers, for resources that only appear once every four years. Be wary of anyone with ill intentions toward you, and assume that most factions harbor such intentions, whether openly like the Iron Fang Sect or subtly like the Crimson Lotus."

"Do we know how the Iron Fang Sect marks their territory?" a disciple interrupted, his voice tinged with concern. Ling Li paused, acknowledging the question. "They signal with red flags. Stay vigilant and avoid their proximities," she replied, her voice firm.

"Trust no one outside this hall unless I have explicitly vouched for them. Protect yourselves without hesitation, defend yourselves with lethal force if necessary — the 'Eye' does not punish self-defense. But do not provoke. Do not strike first. Do not give our enemies the moral high ground or the 'Eye's judgment against us. Let them bear the weight of aggression while we maintain the righteousness of our cause."

She paused, letting the tactical briefing settle before delivering the information that would change everything. Her voice lowered, forcing everyone to lean forward, to strain to hear, creating an intimacy that made the revelation more impactful.

"There is something else you must know, something that changes the nature of the threat we face. Lily heard the message from the Spirit Carp last night — ancient beings who have witnessed ten thousand years of valley history, who swim through the currents of time itself. They do not speak lightly or often.

Their warning was clear and terrifying: Shadows are waiting in the Dragon's Eye. Not natural shadows cast by light and form, but deliberate ones, enemies who have infiltrated the trials themselves, corrupting what should be sacred ground.

Traps are explicitly designed for our disciples, illusions crafted to prey on your specific fears and weaknesses, and poisons tailored to our clan's cultivation methods. Picture this: as you navigate the labyrinth, you may encounter a mirror that reflects not your true self but a twisted image meant to sow doubt and confusion. Or perhaps a mentor figure from your past appears, seemingly offering guidance but subtly leading you down the path that weakens your resolve. These dangers are crafted with such insidious intent that this threat is unprecedented.

The 'Eye' has always been neutral territory, but our enemies have grown so bold, so desperate to stop our rise, that they have violated ancient protocols and seeded the trials with their agents and their malice."

The hall fell into a silence so complete it felt as if the air itself had been sucked away. Faces paled. Hands moved unconsciously to weapons.

Some disciples looked to their neighbors for reassurance and found only the same fear reflected back at them. Even the elders looked grim, understanding the implications: if the trials themselves had been corrupted, then the rules they had relied on for generations no longer applied. They were walking into enemy territory disguised as sacred ground.

The Sentience of the Eye

Ling Li's tone grew solemn, almost reverent, as she shifted from warning about external threats to explaining the 'Eye's fundamental nature — the one constant they could rely on even when everything else had been corrupted.

"You must understand something fundamental about the 'Dragon's Eye' — it is not merely a trial ground or a treasure vault, but a sentient force with its own ancient intelligence, perhaps a fragment of that

primordial dragon's consciousness still lingering after millennia." Ling Li's voice carried genuine reverence now.

Chapter 435: LING LI'S TALE

"As Shi Min explained earlier, the 'Eye' does not tolerate deceitful hearts. It reads intentions with perfect clarity, as easily as we read scrolls, piercing through every pretense, every hidden motive, every lie we tell ourselves about our own purity. There is no deception possible within its gaze.

When you step inside, your hearts must remain absolutely pure — crystalline in their clarity, transparent in their honesty. Your sole intention must be what it should be: to be granted a cultivation technique, to grow stronger for righteous purposes, to serve your clan and protect those weaker than yourselves. If you enter with greed, with desire to harm others, with corruption in your heart, the 'Eye' will know. And it will judge you accordingly.

This is actually our most excellent protection against the enemies who have infiltrated the trials — they cannot hide their malice from the 'Eye's perception, and that will be their downfall."

Li Shenwu's Reminder

Li Shenwu stroked his beard with the satisfied air of someone about to deliver wisdom earned over centuries of experience, his voice booming across the hall, enough to make the lantern flames flicker.

"Hm, that is correct. And now for a practical matter that has claimed more lives than any enemy within the trials — do not be reckless and end up trapped inside when the 'Eye' closes. Remember to come out before the 'Eye' seals itself on the third day! This is not negotiable, not optional, not something you can push for 'just a little longer.' Whether you are granted a cultivation technique or not, whether you are in the middle of a breakthrough or on the verge of discovering a legendary art, you must come out.

The 'Eye' opens for three days and then closes for four years. If you are inside when it closes, you will be trapped in that space between worlds for the entire duration. Four years without proper food, without seeing the sun, without human contact beyond whatever other fools got themselves trapped. Some go mad. Some die. Some emerge so changed they are no longer recognizably human."

He snorted with the particular combination of exasperation and amusement that only comes from watching someone you care about do something monumentally stupid and somehow survive it, his tone perfectly balanced between disdain and humor.

"In fact, I knew someone personally who was trapped there for two years — and she is sitting at this very table!" His eyes gleamed with mischief as he gestured dramatically toward Ling Li.

Ling Li flushed, color rising in her cheeks as decades of carefully maintained dignity threatened to crumble under familial teasing. "Great-great-grandpa, do you have to mention it? In front of everyone?" Her voice carried both genuine embarrassment and reluctant affection for the ancient cultivator who could still make her feel like a scolded child.

Shi Min chuckled, clearly enjoying his mother's discomfort in the way only a son can. "Mom, since Seven-great-grandpa has already revealed your secret, why don't you share with everyone the full story of how you were trapped inside the 'Eye' for two years? I'm sure the disciples would benefit from hearing about your... extended cultivation retreat." His tone was respectful but edged with playful mockery.

Ling Li glared at her son with a look that promised retribution later, but the damage was done. Four Eyes leaned forward with obvious curiosity, his eyes widening with interest, and suddenly the entire hall was leaning in, eager to hear a story their usually composed matriarch clearly didn't want to tell. The tension that had built during the warnings broke slightly, replaced by very human curiosity about their leader's past misadventure.

Ling Li's Tale

With resignation written across her face, Ling Li exhaled slowly, accepting the inevitable. If the story was going to be told, better she control the narrative than let rumors and speculation fill in the gaps.

"Alright, I'll tell you, though I'm not particularly proud of the foolishness that led to my predicament." Ling Li's voice carried both resignation and a hint of wry humor at her younger self's recklessness. "When I entered the 'Dragon's Eye' during my generation's opening, I was ambitious — perhaps too ambitious. I pushed deep into the white miasma, deeper than most dare to venture, driven by determination to prove myself worthy of the Li name. There, in chambers that few had reached before me, I was gifted the rare 'Daoless Heaven technique'." She paused, letting them absorb the significance.

"For those unfamiliar, this technique overrides all elements, all natural laws of cultivation. It renders divine weapons powerless, nullifies skills regardless of their grade, and can even temporarily suppress an opponent's cultivation base by negating the 'Dao' itself — the fundamental principles that allow cultivation to function. It is a technique that makes the impossible possible, that allows the weak to challenge the strong, that turns the hierarchy of the cultivation world on its head. Naturally, this made me a target."

Gasps filled the hall, the sound rippling through the assembled crowd like a wave. Disciples sat wide-eyed, many of them having never heard the whole story of their matriarch's legendary technique, suddenly understanding why she commanded such respect despite rarely displaying her full power.

Even the elders who had heard versions of this tale before seemed breathless, caught up in the retelling. 'The Daoless Heaven' technique was the stuff of legends, a cultivation method that appeared in ancient texts but that most believed had been lost to time. To learn that their own matriarch possessed it, that it could be obtained within the 'Eye', sent calculations racing through every mind present.

Ling Li continued after letting the revelation sink in, her voice steady now, the embarrassment replaced by the gravity of memory, of events that had shaped who she became.

“I was ambushed by a group of cultivators who could not push deeper into the white miasma themselves but who recognized the technique I had been granted. Earlier, as I pressed further into the miasma, I had sensed their presence, lingering on the periphery like vultures waiting for their moment to strike. It was my own ambition, my refusal to heed the warnings in the whispers of the wind, that led me there, unprotected and alone. They sought to steal it, to kill me, and somehow extract the knowledge from my corpse or force me to teach them before my death.

In defending myself — and I killed three of them before the others fled — I was driven to the edge of a cliff. The ground crumbled beneath me, and I fell. My cultivation at that time was not high enough to fly, barely sufficient to slow my descent enough that the landing didn't kill me outright. I found myself in the depths of the 'Eye' that are not meant to be accessible, areas that exist outside the standard trial structure.

Chapter 436: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

There, broken and alone, I explored the caverns where I had landed, searching for a way back up or a way out. Instead, I found a cave sealed by ancient formations. Inside, two ancient cultivators—a husband and wife—lay in eternal rest, their spirits bound not by defeat but by purpose. Their presence began my transformation, a destiny that would touch our world. Ling Li smiled at the memory; the pain, over time, had become something precious.

The wife was a legendary alchemist, a master of both medicine and poison whose knowledge had been lost to the world for three hundred years. The husband was a formation-and-array expert whose techniques could reshape battlefields and protect entire cities. At the same time, he possessed a 'Body Refining System.'

The Body Refining System works by refining the 108 acupuncture points, known as 'thunder' and 'fire.' As one practices, warmth spreads to the palms, and a tingling rises along the spine, signaling the

awakening of these points. It builds an indestructible body and teaches techniques like the 'Eight Path platforms' and the 'Nine Divine Star.' Martial artists using this system gain unrivaled strength, fueled by primordial energy. This energy gives them presence, the ability to take any form the mind imagines, and explosive speed."

Ling Li Reveals the Body Refining System

Ling Li's voice softened as she recounted the memory, but her eyes gleamed with quiet fire. She raised her hand; the air shivered, as if a sudden coolness swept the hall. A low hum filled the space, blending with the scent of ancient stone and fresh blossoms. Currents of qi gathered around her palm. A crackle raised goosebumps, inviting everyone not just to witness but to feel the awakening power.

With a flick of her wrist, Ling Li channeled her intent. Wind blades appeared, sharp and translucent, slicing through the air with a whistle. In a brief instant, her will became form. The blades hovered, then darted forward, carving patterns into the stone floor but leaving no crack. As quickly as they came, the blades turned to mist, leaving only an echo of their power.

The hall plunged into silence. Disciples, elders, and guards felt the weight of her display; a forceful energy as if it reshaped the very air around them.

Ling Li lifted her other hand, and qi coursed through her meridians. For a moment, her body glowed, her skin turning translucent. A constellation of acupuncture points gleamed beneath. The hall gasped as the Nine Divine Star shimmered across her frame, each point pulsing like a miniature sun.

The Clan's Reaction

Li Shenwu leaned forward, his breath caught in his throat. His eyes widened, not with fear but with reverence. "Such mastery... It's like glimpsing the secrets of the Great Celestial Mirror itself." His voice trembled, betraying awe he rarely allowed himself to show.

Li Tianyuan chuckled nervously, knuckles white at his sides. "No wonder you walk so calmly. With this system, you could rule nations — or defend them." His tone brimmed with both respect and unease.

Elder Meiyun pressed a hand to her chest, her stern composure cracking. "To refine thunder and fire, to shape energy into thought — this is not mortal cultivation. This is immortality made flesh," she said, as if witnessing lightning trapped in glass, alive with power. Awe filled her voice, as if she had seen a river rise to heaven, breaking the laws of nature.

In the thick silence that followed, one disciple bowed his head deeply. A single tear traced a path down his cheek, catching the flickering torchlight, as awe threatened to overwhelm him. His reaction encapsulated the collective reverence and wonder that swept through the hall, a quiet testament to the profound impact of Ling Li's display.

Chatty, ever the one to break the tension, muttered under his breath, "Explosive speed, indestructible body... I'd settle for just not tripping over my own feet." His nervous humor drew a ripple of laughter, his chuckle echoing oddly in the charged air, briefly lifting the suffocating awe without dispelling the weight of the moment. The enfield, which was wrapped around his neck, gave him a disdainful look.

Shun stayed silent, his stare sharp and calculating. He traced Ling Li's glowing acupuncture points with focused eyes, etching every detail in memory. Jaw set, not with fear, but with resolve — he would study, he would master, he would grow.

Ling Li's Presence

Ling Li lowered her hand, the glow receding, yet the hall still vibrated with residual qi. Her expression remained serene, while her aura pressed against every soul, a reminder that she was more than a matriarch — she was a force capable of reshaping the world.

Ling Li's voice softened, carrying the memory like a treasured jewel. Her smile was gentle, almost wistful. "The couple taught me day after day, pouring centuries of wisdom into me. They also guided me to master the Daoless Heaven Technique, revealing layers beyond the Eye's initial gift. Their legacy endures in me, and through me, in this clan."

Slowly, Ling Li bent and picked up a small vial filled with a vibrant elixir said to hold the ancient alchemist's life's work. She raised it high to illuminate every face — and share its lore through generations. The vial passed among the disciples, each inscribing a sigil on a living scroll to bind their destinies one day. This echoed the couple's enduring teaching.

The disciples bowed instinctively, some trembling, others with tears in their eyes. The elders exchanged solemn nods, acknowledging that what they had witnessed was not just power — it was destiny.

The Weight of Fortune

The hall remained hushed, every heart heavy with the realization that her suffering had given birth to their salvation. The disciples looked at her not only as their matriarch but as the living embodiment of sacrifice, perseverance, and divine favor.

The qi in the hall lingered, charged but reverent. The faint scent of ozone and crushed herbs—remnants of her alchemist training—mingled with the earthy tang of stone. This smell suggested healing and hidden danger, reflecting Ling Li's mastery of medicine and poison. As if on a precipice, the clan sensed a legacy stretching beyond centuries, now borne by Ling Li.

"When I finally found my way out and returned to the world, as guided by the couple, I discovered that two years had passed outside — time flows differently in those deep places. Falling from that cliff was a blessing in disguise, perhaps the greatest fortune of my life." Ling Li said.

Chapter 437: THE DRAGON'S EYE AWAKENING

Li Shenwu snorted again, louder this time, breaking the reverent silence that had fallen.

"A blessing only because you came out alive! If you had died down there, it would have been a tragedy and a waste of the Li bloodline. Never romanticize recklessness, even when it works out!" But his eyes gleamed with pride despite the gruff words, proud of his descendant's strength and fortune.

Ling Li giggled softly, a sound that seemed incongruous coming from the stern matriarch but that reminded everyone she was also a person, a woman who had once been young and reckless and impossibly lucky. Her eyes grew warm with the memory, with affection for the ancient cultivator who still scolded her after all these years.

"Remember this crucial fact about the 'Dragon's Eye': cultivating inside is the fastest in existence due to the concentration of qi and the distortion of time itself. One hour inside equals ten days outside in terms of cultivation progress. This is why those two years I spent trapped actually allowed me to master techniques that would have taken decades in the normal world." Ling Li leaned forward, her expression intense.

"Once you are granted a technique, find a safe place to cultivate immediately — a hidden chamber, a defensible position, somewhere you can focus without constant vigilance. The sooner you begin integrating the technique, the more powerful you will be when you emerge. But never, ever let your guard down completely. Sleep lightly. Keep weapons within reach. Set warning formations if you know how. The 'Eye' may be a sacred place, but our enemies have made it a battlefield, and battlefields have no safe spaces, only temporarily secure ones."

Atmosphere and Preparation

The hall was silent in the aftermath of Ling Li's tale, every disciple absorbing her words, turning them over in their minds, measuring themselves against the challenges she had described. Awe mingled with fear in expressions that shifted between emotions too quickly to name.

Determination warred with doubt, ambition with self-preservation, the desire for glory with the very reasonable fear of death or worse. The lanterns flickered as if responding to the emotional currents in the room, their flames bending in winds that didn't exist, shadows stretching long across the walls and ceiling, taking on shapes that seemed almost deliberate, almost watchful.

Some of the more superstitious disciples shivered, feeling as though the 'Dragon's Eye' itself was listening to this briefing, as though that ancient intelligence was already taking their measure, already deciding who would be worthy and who would be found wanting.

Shinsei's ancient gaze swept across the assembled disciples, seeming to see not just their physical forms but their spirits, their potential, their hidden flaws. When he spoke, his voice was calm but sharp as a blade drawn from its sheath, carrying the weight of centuries of wisdom.

"Tomorrow, when dawn breaks, and the 'Dragon's Eye' opens, you step into the dragon's vision — into a place where pretense burns away, where truth is the only currency, where your very soul will be laid bare and judged.

Remember three things above all else: clarity of purpose, courage in the face of the impossible, and balance between ambition and wisdom. These three qualities will see you through when power fails,

when techniques falter, when everything you thought you knew proves insufficient." He paused, letting his words sink deep. "Anything less, and the 'Eye' will consume you — not your body, perhaps, but your mind, your spirit, everything that makes you who you are. You will emerge as an empty shell, or you will not emerge at all."

Li Tianyuan added, his tone commanding, in the manner of a general who had led troops in actual warfare and understood that discipline saved lives.

"Formations will be set at dawn, before the 'Eye' opens. We have spent weeks planning our approach, our positioning, our mutual support structures — March together in coordinated groups, not as a scattered mob. No one enters alone — that is a death sentence when enemies are waiting inside.

You will move in teams of three to five, with at least one experienced cultivator in each group. You will maintain communication through the signal talismans we provided. You will have designated rally points if you become separated. You will follow the protocols we have drilled, or you will not be allowed to enter. Is that understood?"

The clan bowed in unison, the movement synchronized through years of training and discipline, their backs bending at precisely the same angle. "We understand and obey," they responded as one, their voices steady despite the tremor in their hearts, despite the fear that threatened to crack their composure, despite the knowledge that some of those bowing now might not return from the 'Dragon's Eye'.

But they were Li Clan, and the Li Clan did not show weakness, did not falter when duty called, did not turn away from destiny, no matter how terrifying its face. They would enter the 'Eye' tomorrow, and they would emerge victorious, or they would not emerge at all. There was no middle ground, no compromise with fate.

The night before the 'Dragon's Eye' opened was for preparation, for final words, for making peace with the possibility of death.

As dawn approached, the Li Clan banner, with its emblem of the celestial dragon, caught the first rays of the sun. It unfurled majestically against the morning sky, its vibrant colors a symbol of their enduring legacy and unwavering resolve. Tomorrow was for triumph.

Dawn at the Dragon's Eye

The first light of dawn broke over the Hidden Valley, illuminating the ancient cliffs in shades of red and gold, as wine spilled across stone. Among the stands of silver-barked willows, Ren stood still, observing the beauty of the morning. As she felt the mist roll off the twin rivers in soft layers, an inexplicable tremble coursed through her, though the air was windless. The stillness felt thick and charged, a prelude to a storm, as if the valley itself was holding its breath in anticipation. Shun stood beside her, giving his silent support to his fiancée.

A deep vibration started from somewhere beneath the bedrock, as though rising from the molten core of the earth. 'The Dragon's Eye' was awakening. Its pulse echoed through the valley like a heartbeat, sending tremors into the ground and up through the soles of people's feet, even rattling their teeth.

Chapter 438 438: THE HIDDEN VALLEY'S ENERGY

Disciples stumbled, startled by the sensation. A sudden drop in temperature enveloped the area, the breath of the gathered people visible in the now chilly air. A metallic taste clung to the back of their throats, as though the valley exhaled its own ancient breath. Elders braced themselves, gripping weapons or talismans. On the mansion's terraces, paper lanterns swung and flickered, their flames pulled sideways, all pointing toward the valley's center, as if drawn by an ancient force.

Ren pressed a palm to her sternum, feeling the thrum sync with her own pulse until she couldn't tell where the valley's heartbeat ended, and hers began. Not far from her, Lily's eyes slid shut, lashes

trembling. The mist carried voices — not words exactly, but impressions that crystallized into language inside her skull: 'The Eye stirs. Shadows gather.' When she opened her eyes again, her pupils had contracted to pinpoints despite the dim light.

The Threshold of the Eye

The Hidden Valley thrummed with barely contained energy. Every street and alley buzzed with motion. Today was the day the valley existed for, when the 'Dragon's Eye' opened, and legends were born or buried.

Processions of cultivators wound through the cobblestone streets like serpents made of silk and steel. Clan members marched in regimented columns beneath banners that snapped in the wind. Sect disciples moved with the synchronized precision of trained dancers. Family cultivators formed smaller, tight-knit groups. Lone wanderers walked with the careful awareness of those who trust no one. Each faction announced itself through color and symbol — crimson sashes, iron insignias, silver thread embroidered with moon phases.

Some traveled on foot, boots ringing against stone. Others rode horses whose coats gleamed like polished wood or sat in lacquered carriages that creaked under the weight of provisions and ambition. The sky held its own traffic: airships drifted overhead like wooden whales, their hulls inscribed with glowing formations and buoyed by spirit stones that pulsed with contained lightning. Modern aircraft were forbidden here. The valley's ancient wards saw to that, so these vessels moved with the slow dignity of another age.

Yet, amid the grandeur, a feeling of unease snaked through the air, like a whispered warning of danger lurking just beneath the surface.

Locals lined the streets three and four deep, children perched on their parents' shoulders or clinging to windowsills for a better view. They cheered and waved strips of colored cloth, shouting blessings and luck-words in the old tongue. Some threw flower petals, white lotus for purity and red chrysanthemum for courage, that settled on the cultivators' shoulders like blessings or omens.

Vendors had risen before dawn, their stalls already fragrant with steamed buns, candied fruit, and tea brewed with herbs meant to sharpen the mind or calm the spirit. They called out in sing-song voices, competing for attention, eyes bright with the prospect of coin. For them, the 'Dragon's Eye' meant survival through winter, dowries for daughters, repairs to leaking roofs. They sold hope in small, edible portions. Mei, a vendor with deep-set, hopeful eyes, glanced periodically at a small portrait of her son tucked beside her jars of candied fruit. Each transaction brought her closer to freeing him from the apprenticeship debt that held him away in a distant town. Her voice rose above the crowd as she called out, her wares a lifeline she clung to with fierce hope.

The Li Clan caravan moved with the fluid coordination of a single organism. Their crimson banners unfurled like wings against the pale sky. At the vanguard rode Li Shenwu and Shinsei, mounted on a Red Hare stallion whose coat was the color of fresh blood. Its muscles coiled and released with each stride. The legendary breed was known to outrun the wind and carry riders through battlefields where lesser horses would collapse. The two immortals sat straight-backed. Their combined aura pressed outward like a physical force — immovable, ancient, patient as stone shaped by centuries of water.

Behind them, the main contingent rode Fergana horses. Their coats dappled gold and cream, tall enough that their riders surveyed the crowds from an elevated vantage. Li Tianyuan commanded them with subtle gestures and a low, carrying voice. He adjusted formations with the ease of long practice. To his left rode Ling Li, and beside her, her husband Four Eyes. His spectacles caught the light. Each held one of their twins — small bundles that watched the world with unsettling, knowing eyes. Behind this core moved their older children: Ren, whose hand never strayed far from her weapon; Shi Min, scanning the crowd with methodical attention; and Lily, whose presence seemed to bend the space around her, making people step back without understanding why.

Their allies formed a protective constellation around them, each moving with purpose as they scouted the path ahead. El Padre, in his weathered coat that had seen too many battles, whispered prayers under his breath, his rosary beads clicking softly at his belt as he surveyed the terrain. El Capitan, with

his scarred hands resting on twin pistols that hummed with inscribed wards, kept a vigilant eye on the horizon for any threats that might emerge.

Butler Oda, moving with the silent efficiency of a shadow, examined the ground for signs of recent movement, his elderly frame belying the reflexes that could split seconds into fragments. As they advanced, the Seven Shah shifted into a tight formation, their matching scimitars catching the light, a promise of violence in each measured step.

Mushu, Reginald, Goldie, Rockie, and Pharsa followed closely, each a legend in their own right, their eyes scanning the surroundings as they quietly shared warnings through subtle gestures. Shun, with his easy grin that never reached his calculating eyes, signaled to Chatty and Fatty to flank the group, ensuring no angle was left unguarded. The inner disciples then formed a disciplined rank, their grim focus mirrored by the outer disciples, who, though newer, remained no less determined. Each person carried not just their own hopes. But the accumulated weight of their clan's expectations, their family's sacrifices, and their own fear of failure prepared them to face whatever lay ahead.

Chapter 439 439: THE EYE AWAKENS

The sight of the Li Clan's horses alone stopped traffic. Conversations died mid-sentence. Children pointed with sticky fingers. Even rival cultivators paused to stare, professional jealousy warring with genuine appreciation. The Red Hare was the stuff of paintings and poems, a bloodline so pure that only three dozen existed in the known world. The Fergana horses, with their impossible height and metallic sheen, were the mounts of emperors and immortals. To see so many together was like watching a constellation descend to earth.

Whispers rippled through the crowd:

'How much wealth does the Li Clan command?'

'What alliances secured such steeds?'

'What price did they pay?'

Each question hung in the air like a foreshadowing, hinting at the sacrifices made for such power and privilege.

The path narrowed between two standing stones that leaned toward each other like conspirators, then opened into a clearing so vast it seemed to hold its own pocket of weather. At the clearing's center lay the 'Dragon's Eye', a black stone circle sixty paces wide, etched with runes in an ancient script older than the current dynasties. The mist churned within: distinct black and white strands twisted close but never blended, like oil and water in eternal motion. Within the circle, the temperature dropped, frost forming on the grass. The stone pulsed with a slow movement, resembling the body of a massive, sleeping creature that might wake at any moment, its ancient, hungry gaze fixed on the onlookers.

Rival Sects Gathering

They were not alone.

The Iron Fang Sect had arranged itself in parade-ground formation. Known for their armor, polished to a mirror shine, reflecting the morning sun in aggressive flashes. Each piece was articulated steel, designed more for intimidation than mobility — the armor of those who expected to overwhelm rather than outmaneuver.

Their eyes tracked the Li Clan with naked contempt. It was the kind of disdain that came from old money looking at new blood. Their leader stepped forward, his face bearing the particular cruelty of someone

who'd never faced real consequence. With a theatrical sneer, he addressed the crowd in a voice dripping with mockery:

"Well, well, if it isn't the carp's daughters, daring to swim in a dragon's domain. Shall we see if their bravado matches their bloodline or if they'll falter like leaves in the autumn gust?" The insult was calculated.

Carp were bottom-feeders, common fish that dreamed of transformation. Dragons were divine. The implication was clear and meant to draw blood without drawing weapons. Yet.

The Crimson Lotus Sect didn't stand — they lingered, their crimson robes seeming to bleed into the morning mist until it was unclear where fabric ended, and vapor began. They moved little, but when they did, it was with the fluid grace of smoke or serpents. Their eyes reflected light strangely, pupils dilated despite the brightness, gleaming with the particular malice of those who dealt in poisons and illusions — deaths that came from within, from betrayal of one's own senses.

They whispered constantly among themselves, lips barely moving, and those whispers seemed to carry farther than they should, intruding on other conversations like intrusive thoughts. Several cultivators nearby shifted uncomfortably, scratching at phantom itches, wondering if that tea they'd drunk earlier had tasted slightly off.

Near the riverbank, where water met stone in a line of smooth pebbles, the Moonshade Clan mystics had gathered in a loose circle. They held silver mirrors, polished to impossible smoothness, that caught and fractured the dawn light into geometric patterns. The mirrors were tools of their trade: scrying devices, weapons, shields, and sometimes prisons. Their robes were the color of fog, making them seem perpetually out of focus. They spoke in hushed tones, but their body language betrayed conflict — some leaning in, others pulling back, hands gesturing in argument or emphasis.

As the light flickered across one of the mirrors, it revealed a fractured reflection of a Li Clan banner, its image broken into shards. It was a symbolic prophecy, a caution that the Moonshade Clan's future actions would impact alliances.

They were debating something crucial: alliance or betrayal, cooperation or opportunism.

Their reputation was for neutrality, but neutrality was just another way of saying they waited to see who offered the better deal. Their eyes, when they glanced toward other sects, revealed nothing—trained into blankness, reflecting only what the observer expected to see.

Smaller sects and wandering cultivators clustered around, each hungry for opportunity, each wary of rivals.

The clearing vibrated with barely suppressed violence, the kind of tension that made hands drift toward weapons and made every glance a potential challenge. Rivalry thickened the air until it felt difficult to breathe — too many predators in too small a space, each waiting for the others to show weakness.

The clans had erected temporary pavilions that were anything but temporary in appearance: silk walls embroidered with gold thread, carved wooden pillars, furniture that must have required three carts to transport. It was a competition of wealth and status, each clan trying to project power through luxury. Banners snapped in the wind — azure, crimson, silver, iron-gray, and more — each one a declaration of identity and intent. Servants moved between the pavilions, carrying refreshments and messages, their eyes down, trying to be invisible. Smart ones knew that when cultivators gathered like this, the safest place was beneath notice.

The Eye Awakens

The hum dropped an octave, then another, until it resonated in the body rather than the ears, a frequency felt deep in the bone marrow and teeth. Conversations stopped. Birds fell silent mid-song and took flight in confused flocks. The runes carved into the 'Dragon's Eye' flared to life, each character igniting in sequence like a message being written in real-time.

The light was old, not the clean brightness of fire or sun, but something that had been buried in darkness so long it had forgotten warmth. The mist responded, erupting upward in twin columns that spiraled around each other, black and white threading together in a double helix, forming shapes that almost resembled dragons — serpentine bodies, suggestions of claws, the curve of wings — before dissolving and reforming in new configurations.

Changes in air pressure left ears popping and lungs straining for breath. Some disciples dropped to their knees, blood trickling from their noses as they grappled with the bone-deep resonance. Others stood transfixed, hands trembling at their sides, unable to look away even as tears streamed from their eyes.

Chapter 440 440: THE EYE IS READY

The 'Dragon's Eye' opened with geological slowness, the stone at its center beginning to shift and separate. Massive blocks, each weighing tons, moved with impossible silence, sliding apart and rotating like pieces of a three-dimensional puzzle being solved by invisible hands. Corridors formed in the depths, their walls lined with more runes that pulsed with bioluminescent light.

Then those corridors dissolved, the blocks rearranging into entirely new configurations, new paths, new geometries that hurt to look at because they suggested dimensions the human mind wasn't built to process. The 'Eye' was alive, or close enough to make no difference. It was showing them entrances, possibilities, promises.

Ren remembered the Elders' warning: 'Find the heart shard and return.' This singular goal anchored her to reality as the maze beckoned, whispering promises of power to those brave or foolish enough to enter. But nothing about it suggested these paths would remain stable. The labyrinth was rewriting itself even as they watched, and it would continue to do so once they were inside.

Across the clearing, the response was immediate and visceral. Disciples stiffened, hands flying to weapons or talismans, with training overriding their fear. Elders began muttering incantations under their breath: protective wards, clarity mantras, prayers to ancestors who had entered similar trials and never returned.

Rivals who had been trading insults moments before now exchanged glances, sharp with reassessment:

'How many of us will actually come back?'

Which alliances matter when the Eye itself is the enemy?'

The trial had transformed from an abstract concept to an immediate reality. It was no longer something that would happen — it was happening, now, with the entrance open and waiting. And waiting felt wrong, because the 'Eye' did not wait passively.

It was present, aware, and hungry in the way ancient things are hungry: patient, inevitable, and utterly without mercy.

The mist reached toward them like fingers, and several people stepped back before they could stop themselves. Amidst this, Ren whispered a vow that cut through the ambient dread like a blade: 'I will see the heart shard and return.' Her words resonated within her, converting the charged atmosphere into a force of personal resolve, promising courage in the face of the unknown.

Ling Li noticed the subtle change in pressure before anyone else. The 'Dragon's Eye' was ready. She moved through the assembled lines with the precision of a field surgeon before battle. Her silk robes whispered against the stone, and the lacquered tray she carried was inlaid with dragons, and upon it rested jade vials, glowing softly. She called her family first: Four Eyes, Ren, Lily, then their closest disciples: Shun, Fatty, and Chatty. Into each palm, she pressed an enhancement pill, the herb emitting a medicinal scent.

Ling Li's voice cut through the tension. "Take this enhancement pill now," she commanded, her gaze steady. She snapped, "Expect sharpened senses. Every sound, every color, even the air will change." There was a heartbeat of silence. She continued, voice clipped, "Qi stability is critical — this will prevent fragmentation when the 'Eye' resonates." Another pause, weighty. In a softer tone, she added, "The moment you cross that threshold, your meridians may burn. Don't fight it. Breathe through." Eyes locked, the stakes unspoken but keenly felt.

They swallowed in unison. Faces tightened as each pill dissolved unusually fast, warmth spreading swiftly through their bodies. Several blinked, pupils dilating as they adjusted to the sudden clarity.

Ling Li observed each response, watching for adverse reactions. Satisfied, she drew out small jade containers divided into two wax-sealed compartments.

"The first compartment," Ling Li said, tapping the left side of each container, "contains Healing elixir. If you're injured — by blade, broken bone, internal bleeding, or poison — take one immediately. It will knit flesh, purge toxins, and stabilize meridians. You have three doses each. The elixir tastes like copper and honey. Don't let the taste make you hesitate." She paused, recalling the quest for the rare Sky-Bloom herb. When she resumed, her voice softened, reverent.

Moving her finger to the right compartment, she lowered her tone: "The second contains a single Boosting pill for critical moments only. It will surge your strength and technique beyond your natural limit for roughly one incense stick's time. After, you'll experience severe fatigue. Don't repeat within twelve hours or risk qi deviation." She fixed her gaze on them, voice hardening. "Your safety is paramount. If the cultivation technique isn't granted now, there will be another opportunity. Do not

force your limits. I would rather see you return whole than chase glory into an early grave." Ling Li hesitated, her voice gentler as a memory surfaced: her father's tales of comrades lost to ambition, names etched in the family shrine. That memory fueled her insistence on caution.

Ling Li gestured for Jack, Nicu, and Ailun to approach. The younger disciples hurried forward, their shoulders tense, eyes fixed on her hands. She distributed enhancement pills and jade containers to each, her movements now precise and efficient as she handled the items one by one.

"Little Jack," she said, pressing a leather satchel into his hands — it clinked softly with additional vials — "you'll carry reserve sets for the inner and outer disciples. Distribute them now and confirm your counts before entry. Once inside, you stay within arm's reach of my husband. Understood?" Jack nodded, already opening the satchel to verify contents.

Ling Li turned to the other two. "Nicu, Ailun — guard Shun as much as you can. When the paths shift and the formation needs to rotate, he leads the point. That makes him the most exposed. If something comes for him, you intercept it. No heroics, no individual glory. Just keep him alive."

"Yes, Madam," they answered, voices tight with determination. They moved down the ranks, soon joined by the sounds of preparation: corks popping, liquid sloshing, and the crisp medicinal scent of concentrated herbs. Disciples checked containers several times, securing them in inner pockets for safety.