

PROTEGE 441

Chapter 441: A CULTIVATOR ALIVE CAN RETURN, A CORPES CANNOT

Li Shenwu's Advice

Li Shenwu rose slowly from his seat, and the effect was like a mountain deciding to stand — a force of nature that reshaped its surroundings with mere movement. Conversations died mid-word. Even the wind seemed to pause. His presence consumed all available space, leaving nothing else. When he spoke, his voice was deep and resonant, echoing as a forbidden sea within an ancient abyss, a voice that carried the weight of centuries lived and battles survived. It was the voice of someone who had seen empires rise and fall, who had walked through the 'Dragon's Eye' before and emerged changed.

"Remember this," Li Shenwu began, each word deliberate. His voice resounded. "The 'Dragon's Eye' rewards clarity but punishes arrogance. Do not chase glory — others grant it only after survival. Chase living. Chase the next breath, step, decision that keeps you alive." He paused, studying their faces. Somber, he said, "A cultivator alive can return. A corpse cannot." Lowering his tone, he recalled, "Shattered dreams whispered through the corridors, his name now only a cautionary echo." He let the memory linger. His eyes fierce, he warned, "A corpse becomes a cautionary tale. Trust your comrades — they are your only certainty in a place designed to disorient. Guard your heart against temptation and despair. And never forget: the 'Eye' sees deeper than your blade. It sees your intentions, fears, and hidden desires. It will use them against you."

He paused, stroking his beard in contemplation. His gaze swept the disciples. "If you falter, retreat immediately. There is no shame in recognizing your limits. If you are tempted by treasure or power that comes too easily, resist. Easy rewards in the 'Eye' are always traps. If you become lost — when the paths shift, and you lose your bearings — remember the way out before the 'Eye' closes. Once it seals, those inside remain until the next opening... if they survive." His voice dropped to a whisper: "Destiny favors the patient. The patient cultivator studies the terrain; the reckless one becomes part of it."

The hall was silent, every word etched into the hearts of those listening.

Shinsei's Blessing

Shinsei stepped forward, his monk's robes the color of undyed silk, flowing as though moved by a breeze no one else could feel. His calm aura hinted at hidden depth. He raised both hands in the traditional blessing mudra, fingers positioned with ritual precision. When he spoke, his voice was soft but carried to every ear with clarity, as though he were speaking directly into each mind.

"May your steps be steady on shifting ground," Shinsei intoned, voice measured, addressing the assembly. "Your hearts are pure despite corruption's whisper, your intentions righteous even when righteousness offers no reward." He paused, letting the words settle.

Then he turned, gaze fixing on Ren. His voice gentler, he continued: "Ren, my disciple, remember the needle's dance. Precision: every movement must have purpose. Patience: the perfect moment is worth waiting for. Sacrifice: sometimes the smallest offering yields the greatest result." A slight smile touched his lips. "Let your art pierce not only the heavens but also your doubts. Your greatest enemy in the Eye will not be external. It will be the voice that tells you that you are not enough."

Ren bowed deeply, folding at the waist until her forehead nearly touched her knees, hands pressed together in respect. Her heart trembled in her chest, a hummingbird trapped in a cage of ribs, with both fear that threatened to paralyze and resolve that burned like swallowed fire. When she straightened, her eyes were bright with unshed tears, but her jaw was set. She would not dishonor her master's faith in her.

Farewells and Bonds

Ling Li pulled her daughters into an embrace so tight it bordered on painful. She wrapped her arms around both girls, holding them close in a determined attempt to memorize the solidity and warmth of their bodies. Her voice wavered with emotion as she spoke directly to them.

"Both of you, please be safe. Be smart. Be careful. Don't try to be heroes." She swallowed, breath hitching as she continued, "I will wait for your safe return. Every hour, every day, however long it takes. I will be here when you come back." Then, loosening her grip just enough, she placed her palms on their cheeks and forced herself to meet their eyes. She finished, words trembling, "You are my heart walking outside my body. Come back to me."

As the sisters nodded, their outward calm belied the churning sea of doubt within. Beneath their confident smiles, whispered fears clawed at their resolve.

'What if we're not strong enough?'

'What if we make a mistake?'

These silent questions echoed between them like a hidden dialogue they dare not voice. Despite their shared promise to their mother, each felt the weight of their unsaid worries: the uncertainty of an untested path, the unspoken promise to protect each other — a vow as fragile as it was fierce.

Ling Li stepped forward, releasing the girls, and immediately, Four Eyes turned to her. His hands trembled visibly as he pulled her close, and she melted into him, her face pressed against his chest.

"Honey," Ling Li said, voice muffled by fabric and emotion, "please be careful and return safely. Remember to avoid the black miasma — don't test your resistance, don't assume you can handle it. Just avoid it." Her hands clutched his robes.

"I, the twins, and the triplets I'm carrying — we will all wait for you. We need you to come home." She added. Four Eyes' breath hitched audibly, his embrace becoming almost crushing in its intensity, as though he could keep both of them safe through sheer force of will.

Four Eyes whispered back, his lips against her hair, "I promise. I will succeed and come back. Nothing in that place will keep me from you and our children. Nothing." He pulled back just enough to look into her eyes, his own wet behind his spectacles. "You stay safe as well. Take care of yourself and our babies. Don't overwork. Let the others handle things while I'm gone."

Chapter 442: ENTERING THE DRAGON'S EYE

Shi Min approached, his posture straight and his voice steady despite the tightness in his throat. "Paps," he said, "I will take care of Mom and the twins. I'll make sure she rests, that she eats properly, that she doesn't try to do everything herself." He met his stepfather's eyes directly. "Don't worry about them. Don't let concern for us distract you in there. Focus completely on your journey and return safely. We'll be fine. I'll make sure of it."

Four Eyes felt warmth bloom in his chest, spreading through him like good wine. He reached out and tapped Shi Min's shoulder firmly — once, twice — a gesture of acknowledgment between men, of trust given and accepted. No words were needed.

Shi Min then turned to his sisters and to Shun, Fatty, and Chatty, offering his blessing with a deliberately bright, deliberately confident smile, carefully constructed to mask the worry gnawing at him. He was the one staying behind. He had to be their strength, their certainty, even if he felt neither.

The Dragon's Eye Opens

The ground trembled — not violently, but with the slow, deliberate movement of something massive stirring from sleep. A low hum rose from deep within the valley, climbing in pitch until it resonated through stone and bone alike, making teeth ache, and hearts stutter.

As the runes carved into the 'Dragon's Eye's threshold flared with ancient light — not the warm glow of fire but the cold luminescence of things that had been dark for centuries — a collective exhale escaped the assembled clan, every breath synchronized into a single, unified sigh of anticipation. Mist poured upward from the 'Eye's center in twisting streams, black and white spiraling around each other like competing dragons, rising fifty feet into the air before dissipating into the morning sky.

The Dragon's Eye opened fully, the stone at its center pulling apart with the sound of continents separating. Its interior shifted like a living puzzle constructed by a mad architect — corridors forming from nothing, dissolving back into mist, rearranging themselves in endless geometric patterns that hurt to look at directly.

Walls rose and fell. Staircases inverted. Doorways opened onto other doorways in impossible recursions. The air grew heavy, thick enough to taste, charged with an ancient intelligence that felt less like observation and more like judgment. The 'Eye' was awake, aware, and waiting.

The Entry

One after the other, cultivators, disciples from different families, sects, and clans entered.

The Li Clan disciples stepped forward in tight formation, moving as a single organism. Four Eyes took point with his personal assistant, Jack, at his right shoulder. Ren, Lily, Shun, Fatty, and Chatty formed the

inner circle, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched. Nicu and Ailun flanked Shun like guardian statues, their eyes constantly scanning.

The inner disciples formed the next ring, weapons drawn, and the outer disciples anchored the sides and rear, creating a mobile fortress. Their footsteps echoed against the ancient stone in perfect rhythm, each step synchronized, each step pulling them deeper into the dragon's vision, into the maw of something that had swallowed countless cultivators before them.

The moment they crossed the threshold, reality warped like heated glass. The familiar courtyard behind them dissolved into formless mist, all reference points vanishing as though they'd never existed. The ground beneath their boots shifted from solid stone to fractured tiles that clicked and slid, rearranging themselves like a jigsaw puzzle, constantly solved and unsolved by invisible hands.

Walls rose from nothing with the grinding sound of stone on stone, held for a few breaths, then fell back into the floor. Corridors twisted, their geometry defying natural law — paths that should have been parallel intersected, halls that went left somehow ended up going right. The path ahead was never the same twice.

Looking back, they saw a different architecture from the one they'd just walked through. The 'Eye' was not a place. It was a living test, and it had just begun examining them.

Threshold effect

White miasma brushed against their shoulders and faces like cool silk, and where it touched, effects manifested immediately: colors sharpened until edges seemed to cut the air, distant sounds clarified into distinct layers, stray thoughts quieted as though someone had closed doors in a noisy house. It was enhancement, purification, clarity made manifest.

But black miasma gathered in knotted skeins along the floor and in corners, pulsing faintly with a rhythm that didn't match any heartbeat. Where the white miasma clarified, the black confused. It created pressure on the mind — not painful, exactly, but insistent, like fingers pressing against a bruise. It tugged at intent, made purposes waver, whispered that maybe turning back wouldn't be cowardice, perhaps it would be wisdom.

Four Eyes felt a flicker of doubt, a flash of uncertainty. What if the white miasma's clarity only masked fear? The black mist seemed to amplify his hesitation, pushing him to reconsider every step. This internal conflict mirrored the mist's contradictions, a struggle he had to overcome not only in his surroundings but also within himself.

The tiles beneath their boots slid with audible clicks, locking into new configurations that formed patterns — dragon scales, celestial maps, warning symbols in dead languages. The walls around them breathed like living things, expanding outward then contracting inward, the stone somehow flexible. Then they split vertically with a sound like tearing fabric, revealing three branching halls, each engraved with overlapping dragon-scale patterns that seemed to shift when viewed from the periphery.

The far-left hall dimmed as thick eddies of black miasma moved with predatory intent. The center hall shimmered with concentrated white miasma, almost too bright to look at directly, promising clarity and advancement. The right hall flickered unstably between both, black and white warring for dominance, creating a strobing effect that induced immediate nausea in anyone who stared too long.

Lily's lashes fluttered rapidly, her eyes moving beneath the lids as though watching something no one else could see. When she spoke, her voice was distant, channeling information from elsewhere.

'Whispers' —deliberate, not random. They're coordinated.

'Traps are set along the mixed paths, the unstable ones. Designed to separate groups, pick off stragglers.'

She lifted two fingers in a prearranged signal. Immediately, the formation compressed, everyone stepping closer, shields moving outward to create a bristling perimeter, eyes up and scanning for threats from above, where the ceiling kept shifting.

Ren's needles trembled at her side, her qi resonating with the shifting puzzle.

Chapter 443: THE EYE'S MAZE

First Ominous Signs

The deeper they advanced, the thicker the miasma became, until they were wading through it like water.

White mist curled around their legs and torsos harmlessly, even helpfully, glowing with faint bioluminescence that lit the shifting darkness. But black miasma slithered along the floor and walls like serpents hunting for warmth, pressing against the edges of their chosen path, testing the boundaries, looking for weakness or wavering intent. Where the two types of miasma met, they hissed and sparked like oil meeting flame.

From within the densest concentrations of black mist, faint silhouettes moved with predatory grace — dark cultivators who'd entered before them or perhaps had never left from previous openings. Their eyes gleamed with malice and something worse: anticipation.

One figure paused at the edge of visibility, his outline wavering as though not quite solid. He turned to face the Li disciples directly, and even through the obscuring mist, they could see the smile that curled

across his face — too wide, showing too many teeth. Then he stepped backward and vanished into the shadows as though the darkness had swallowed him whole, leaving only the echo of that smile burned into their vision.

Within the left hall, more figures moved through the concentrated darkness — robes trimmed with iron studs that should have caught light but didn't, masks covering their faces that reflected nothing, as though made from solidified absence. One turned toward the Li Clan disciples, and though his mask had no mouth hole, they all somehow perceived him smiling — a smile without teeth, without warmth, without anything human. Then he sank into the miasma like a stone into water, the black mist closing over him, and vanished completely. But the feeling of being watched remained, intensified.

Without warning, the puzzle shifted violently. The corridor they'd been advancing through collapsed into formless mist with a sound like a massive exhalation, forcing the clan to pivot sharply or be caught in the dissolution.

Four Eyes barked orders, and they changed direction in practiced unison, reforming around the new path. The air temperature dropped precipitously — breath misting, fingers going numb, frost forming on metal. Whispers echoed from unseen mouths, coming from everywhere and nowhere, speaking in languages both familiar and alien, saying things that almost made sense but dissolved into nonsense when you tried to focus on them.

The right hall buckled with a grinding shriek of tortured stone. Its ceiling jittered like an image with corrupted data, then began dropping shard-like tiles that should have shattered on impact but instead reassembled midair into new configurations, new threats.

Fatty's hand shot out, grabbing Chatty's collar and dragging him backward with surprising speed for his bulk. A massive slab slapped the floor exactly where Chatty had been standing a heartbeat before, hitting with enough force to crack the surrounding tiles and send up a cloud of stone dust. Chatty exhaled a shaky laugh, more reflex than humor, then fell silent as the reality of how close that had been sank in. His face went pale. Fatty didn't release his collar for several more seconds.

Then came the intent test. A ripple passed through the center hall — not visible but felt, like a wave of pressure moving through water. For a single breath, everyone felt their own motives pulled forward and examined, like pages yanked from a private journal and held up to harsh light. Intentions, desires, secret ambitions, hidden resentments — all of it was suddenly exposed to something that was reading them with clinical precision.

Those with steady hearts and clear purposes felt the pressure slide off like water off oiled silk, uncomfortable but manageable. Those with restless ambitions or conflicted motives went pale as corpses, as though an invisible hand had reached inside their chests and found their secrets. Some gasped.

One outer disciple, Lulu, hesitated slightly, her feet shuffling as she battled the urge to mask her intentions with a quick lie, which sent a ripple of unease through her. Her companion noticed, reaching out to steady her. The 'Eye' seemed to linger on her longer, categorizing them, deciding what tests each deserved. This momentary lapse hinted at potential turmoil yet to unfold within their ranks.

Four Eyes' voice cut through the rising panic like a blade through silk — clean, sharp, allowing no argument.

"Center path. White miasma. We take the clarity route." His tone was absolute command. "Form tight. Close the gaps. Shields overlap." Then, without looking away from the path ahead: "Jack — headcount."

"Everyone present, sir," Jack answered immediately, his voice only slightly strained. His response was instant. He was terrified but functional. That would have to be enough.

As they stepped into the center hall, the floor transformed beneath them into an elaborate mosaic — carp swimming in eternal circles, portals opening onto other portals, needles arranged in acupuncture patterns, and eyes, so many eyes, all interlocking in designs that suggested meaning just beyond comprehension.

The tiles tested their pace with immediate feedback: move too fast and the ground softened like mud, threatening to trap their feet; move too slow, and it hardened like iron, tilting to throw them off balance.

Ren found herself instinctively matching Shinsei's teaching cadence, the rhythm he'd drilled into her during needle practice, the pace of patience and precision. Lily issued concise directives, code-words that had become second nature to the clan.

"Shift left, Dragon Align," she said softly, the phrase crisp and clear as a bell. Instantly, the group adjusted, stepping aside as one cohesive unit. "Ebb Boost, hold steady," came the following command, signaling to sustain their current pace against the dynamic environment. Shun rotated the flank smoothly, keeping Nicu and Ailun positioned to guard the most vulnerable members, adjusting to threats before they fully materialized.

From somewhere deeper in the 'Eye's maze, a low chuckle drifted toward them — neither echo nor wind, but something that traveled through the miasma itself, carried on the back of the 'Eye's awareness. It was a sound of amusement, of anticipation, of someone who'd set a trap and was watching prey approach.

The white miasma thinned ahead, like a curtain being pulled back, revealing a chamber beyond. Its walls were circled entirely with mirrors, each one etched with dragon script so intricate it seemed to move, to rearrange itself into new characters. One mirror flashed black for half a heartbeat — a void where reflection should be — then went clear again, showing their own faces staring back, pale and determined.

Chapter 444 444: DIVIDED

Lily swallowed hard, her throat clicking audibly in the sudden quiet.

"Deliberate shadows," she whispered, her voice thin and strained. "Not random. Not environmental. They're watching the watchers. We're being observed by something that's simultaneously observing our observers." Her eyes darted to the mirrors, then away, as though afraid of what might look back. "Layers of surveillance. We're not just in a maze. We're in an arena."

Four Eyes lifted one hand, fist closed, then opened it — the signal to advance. The Li Clan disciples stepped into the first chamber together, formation intact, weapons ready, hearts pounding in synchronized rhythm.

The 'Dragon's Eye' breathed in — they felt it, a pulling sensation like being inhaled by something vast — and the temperature dropped another ten degrees. The mirrors reflected them from impossible angles. The floor began to shift again. And the puzzle began in earnest, not as a test of strength or speed, but as an examination of everything they were, everything they feared, and everything they might become if they survived.

Shun's hand tightened on his blade until the leather wrapping creaked under the pressure. His voice was low, meant only for those closest. "They're watching us. Waiting for us to make a mistake, to show weakness, to separate." He didn't specify who "they" were — the dark cultivators, the 'Eye' itself, other sect disciples, or something worse. Maybe it didn't matter. Perhaps they were all the same thing here.

Ren's heart pounded so hard she could feel it in her throat, in her fingertips, in her temples. Lily's whispers grew more urgent, coming faster now, the information stream accelerating as the danger increased. And the clan pressed forward because there was no other choice, no path but through, their unity the only shield against the 'Eye's living maze, their trust in each other the only weapon that might prove effective against a place designed to isolate, corrupt, and consume.

The Chamber of Division

The Li clan disciples stepped into the first chamber, its walls lined with mirrors etched in dragon script. A faint scent of burning incense, both comforting and ominous, filled the air. The floor beneath them shifted, tiles sliding and locking into new shapes. A deep hum reverberated through the chamber, and suddenly the mosaic fractured, splitting into three paths.

The walls rose between them, shimmering with white and black miasma, forcing the disciples into separate groups.

Group One: Ren the Unerring, whose precision guides them, Shun the Watchful, ever alert, and Nicu the Bold, backed by several inner and outer disciples.

Group Two: Lily the Harmonious, balanced in spirit, Fatty the Jovial, always quick with a plan, and Chatty the Joker, whose humor lightens their trials, accompanied by several inner and outer disciples.

Group Three: Four Eyes the Focused, unwavering in his resolve, Jack the Nimble, fleet-footed and agile, and Ailun the Determined, with an eye for the meticulous.

Ling Li, outside, with her eyes closed, felt her heart tighten as the puzzle dictated its will. 'The Dragon's Eye' had chosen the divisions.

Ren's Trial – The Path of Precision

Ren's group found themselves in a narrow corridor lined with floating needles of light. Each needle pulsed faintly, vibrating with qi.

A voice echoed from the walls: "Precision is resolved. Strike true, or be consumed."

The corridor shifted, needles darting forward like arrows. Ren's training surged to the forefront; her Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts demanded sacrifice. Each time she channeled the technique, it was as if a piece of her essence was siphoned away, each thrust costing her a day of cultivation. A sharp fatigue pulled at her limbs, and her qi reserves dwindled noticeably. She steadied her breath, guiding her qi into her own needles, intercepting the glowing darts with flawless timing, but each successful deflection added to her growing exhaustion.

Shun guarded her flank, his blade flashing to deflect those she missed, while Nicu and the other disciples shielded them both, absorbing stray strikes.

Ren's resolve was tested with every heartbeat: 'Can I master this art, or will it master me?'

Her grip on the Heaven-Piercing Needle wavered for a brief moment, the slightest tremor betraying her inner turmoil. As she steadied herself, her breath faltered for a heartbeat, a silent acknowledgment of the fear lurking beneath her determination. In a sudden lapse, her needle skimmed past her intended target, grazing a stone wall with a sharp clang. The slip sent a chill down her spine, echoing her inner struggle, before she quickly regained her focus, masking the mishap with a renewed surge of concentration.

Lily's Trial – The Path of Balance

Lily's group entered a chamber filled with water. Spirit Carp illusions swam through the currents, their golden scales glowing faintly.

A voice whispered: "Balance is resolve. Hear truth, or drown in lies."

The water rose, currents pulling them in different directions. Fatty panicked: short gasps, breaths hitching. Water splashed around him. Lily closed her eyes, calm and unhurried, listening not to the water but to the carp.

The whispers guided her: "Step where the current bends. Trust the flow."

She led her group across shifting platforms, each Step requiring faith in her gift. Fatty steadied himself, following her lead, while Chatty muttered jokes to mask his fear. Together, they crossed, but Lily's heart trembled: The carp warned of shadows. 'What if the whispers turn false?'

Four Eyes' Trial – The Path of Endurance

Four Eyes, Jack, and Ailun entered a chamber of stone pillars. The air grew heavy, pressing down like a mountain. For a fraction of a moment, everything froze, an oppressive silence dominating the air as if the world held its breath. Then, with a deafening crash, the silence was shattered, and the pillars resumed their relentless fall.

The pillars began to fall, one after another, threatening to crush them. Four Eyes braced himself, his qi surging as he pushed back against the weight. As Jack darted between the falling columns with agility

and precision, it was a skill he had honed during their training sessions with Master Aeris, the Shah of Wind, weaving through obstacles like a natural dancer. He guided Ailun to safety, showcasing a familiarity with Ailun's capabilities.

In a fluid motion, Jack handed Ailun a talisman inscribed with the symbols of wind — something both of them had crafted in their downtime. The exchange was seamless, a testament to their synchronized energy. With the talisman clasped in his fingers, Ailun's arrays flared with renewed resilience beneath the coursing wind, intertwining Jack's agility with Ailun's array work in a perfect synergy.

Ailun, with his deft fingers and a calm focus, immediately set to work reinforcing Four Eyes with defensive arrays, a craft he had mastered under Master Veyro, Shah of Dusk, as he always sought to improve his arts. Their synchronized defense had been practiced countless times before, turning this high-stakes moment into a seamless execution of skill and trust.

Sweat poured down Four Eyes' face, his breath ragged. He thought of Ling Li, of the twins, of the triplets waiting in her womb. 'I cannot fall. I must endure.'

Chapter 445 445: THE TWINS PLAN

The Chamber's Sentience

As each group struggled, the chamber itself seemed to watch. The mirrors flickered, reflecting not their bodies, but their hearts — Ren's fear of failure, Lily's doubt in her gift, Four Eyes' desperation to succeed and protect and return to his family.

The 'Dragon's Eye' was not merely testing skill — it was probing intent, peeling back layers of resolve.

Outside the Dragon's Eye

The moment the last cultivator vanished into the swirling mist, the clearing grew eerily quiet. Amplifying the hush that settled around them, a faint, rhythmic thudding resonated like a distant heartbeat, anchoring everyone to the moment. The earthy scent of damp moss mingled with the crisp bite of mountain air, providing a gentle backdrop to this scene of silence. A subtle chill slithered across their palms — a sensation of unease blanketing the gathering. As the crowd of cultivators began to disperse into their respective camps, each sect retreated to their tents to wait, plot, and whisper.

The Seven Shah dissolved into the crowd. Through the eyes of the valley itself, their presence was a whisper of power, then nothing more. Trained as Otako's shadow guards, their disappearance was so seamless that even seasoned immortals barely noticed. They were part of the landscape, as if the valley held and then released them back into its shadowed embrace. Eyes unseen, blades held, their melding into the terrain was as eerie as a magician's final act, leaving an unsettling quiet in their wake.

Ling Li and the Elders

Ling Li sat with Li Shenwu, Li Tianyuan, and Shinsei inside the Li Clan's command tent. The lanterns burned low, casting long shadows across their faces. Li Shenwu sought to restore the family's honor, feeling the weight of leadership press heavily upon him. Li Tianyuan feared betrayal, anxious that any weakness might provoke their rivals. Shinsei, dedicated to the clan's future, aimed to pierce the duplicity of their enemies. With these conflicting desires, tension hung thick in the air.

Li Shenwu broke the silence first, his voice rumbling like distant thunder.

"Three days. That is all they have. The Eye will not wait for anyone." Doubt whispered at the edges of his resolve, a lingering shadow. Hours slid away like blood on steel, each one sharpening the urgency he felt. The deadline loomed, relentless, its pressure a reminder of the enormity of their task.

Li Tianyuan frowned, his fingers drumming against the table.

"Competition is fierce. The Iron Fang Sect will strike if given the chance. We must be ready to intervene if the rules are bent."

Shinsei's gaze was calm, his tone measured.

"The 'Eye' itself enforces truth. But men are not true — they are ambitious. As shadows will move outside as surely as inside," Shinsei's fingers tightened slightly around his teacup, a subtle gesture revealing the undercurrent of concern beneath his calm demeanor. "Guard your hearts, and guard your Clan." His words hung in the air, heavy with both caution and insight. Ling Li felt a shiver run through her, a premonition that this counsel foreshadowed more than just the immediate danger, hinting at her own looming rite of passage. The challenge might transform more than their lives; it might shape the very essence of what they were destined to become.

Ling Li's eyes narrowed, her voice sharp.

"My daughters carry omens. That alone makes them targets. If the carp's warning proves true, enemies will not wait for the Eye to judge — they will act." As Ling Li spoke, she recalled the night of that ominous prophecy when she visited the pond in Bamboo Pavilion, where the Spirit Golden Carps were in the middle of the night before their departure. A ghostly carp had emerged from the mountain stream, its scales shimmering with an otherworldly glow. As the creature flicked its tail, ribbons of water spiraled into the air, forming intricate patterns that no mortal could decipher. This singular, striking vision of the carp's prophecy made it unforgettable, an omen woven deeply into the fabric of their world.

Shi Min and the Allies

Nearby, Shi Min sat with El Padre and El Capitan, their laughter subdued but their eyes sharp.

El Padre leaned back, arms crossed.

"Your sisters are strong, but strength draws wolves. If rival sects think they can break them, they'll try."

El Capitan smirked, his hand resting confidently on his well-worn blade. A faint nick marred its edge, a testament to countless battles fought. With a swift motion, he flipped the blade in his palm, the metal flashing under the dim light as he spoke. "Let them try. I've seen Ren's resolve and Lily's gift. They'll carve their way through shadows."

"Let them try. I've seen Ren's resolve and Lily's gift. They'll carve their way through shadows."

Shi Min smiled faintly, though his eyes betrayed worry. For a fleeting moment, doubt flickered across his mind, a shadow of uncertainty that threatened his resolve. What if his protection wasn't enough, if the forces outside were too great for him to hold back? His foot took a half-step toward the tent flap, the movement tentative, revealing the inner turmoil that momentarily gripped him. But he pushed this aside, holding onto the promise he made.

"I'll protect Mother and the twins here. But inside... they must walk alone."

The Twins Under Watch

The twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, were restless, bouncing on their cushions inside the tent. Kim Kim leaned in with a sly grin, her voice a soft whisper, "Let's sneak into the 'Eye'! It'll be epic, like we're the real bosses of this adventure!"

Chin Chin giggled in response, shaking her head. "No, let's chase the duck again, Kim Kim! Round and round we'll go, just like last time! You remember how it kept disappearing and reappearing?" She repeated the phrase in a singsong tone, adding a musical cadence to their playful debate. Little did they know that the whimsical duck, a creature with mysterious origins, might hold secrets tied to the trials they would face.

Pharsa "...."

Pharsa's sharp gaze pinned them instantly. "You will do neither. Sit. If you wander, I'll tie you to the tent pole myself."

The twins pouted, whispering conspiracies to each other, but Pharsa's watchful eyes never wavered.

Chapter 446 446: SPLIT APART

Mushu and the Guards

Outside, Mushu, Butler Oda, and the rest of Ling Li's staff stood on high alert. Their hands rested on weapons, their senses stretched outward. Rival sects lingered nearby, their tents glowing faintly in the mist.

Mushu muttered, "The valley is too quiet. Rival eyes are watching. If they move, we must be ready." Just then, a sharp crack echoed through the trees, like the breaking of a dry branch underfoot. Mushu's senses heightened, a ripple of tension breaking the calm. It was a small sign, but enough to validate his suspicion and stir an impending sense of conflict within the stillness.

Butler Oda nodded, his expression grim. "The Eye tests those inside. But the true battle may begin out here."

Other Sects' Camps

Iron Fang Sect: Their tent buzzed with harsh voices. Elders scoffed at the Li Clan, boasting that Ren's needles would snap like twigs. Yet beneath their bravado, unease lingered — they knew the carp's omens carried weight. Amid these declarations, one shadow guard sat quietly, his mind swirling with doubt. He had witnessed the carp's prophecy firsthand and felt its chilling significance while he was secretly spying in the Bamboo Pavilion. While the elders spoke of certain victory, he could not shake the feeling that their path was far more perilous than they dared admit. His eyes darted around the tent, seeking some reassurance. He found none.

Crimson Lotus Sect: Their camp was silent, disciples kneeling in meditation. Their leader whispered of illusions and poison, plotting how to twist the Eye's trials against rivals.

Moonshade Clan: Their mystics gathered around silver mirrors, watching reflections of the 'Eye'. Some urged alliance with the Li Clan; others whispered betrayal. Their indecision was a storm waiting to break.

The valley itself seemed alive, a breathless hush settling over its vast expanse. An oppressive climate of moisture clung to the air, the humidity as tangible as a predator's gaze lurking through the undergrowth. At intervals, the eerie cry of a distant bird echoed against the stone escarpments, further imbuing the

landscape with an unsettling animosity. Each sect waited like a beast on the prowl, watching for the slightest misstep, a moment of weakness that might turn the balance.

Shift Back Inside the Eye

Inside the 'Dragon's Eye', rival sect disciples struggled against the living puzzle.

Almost half of the Iron Fang disciples forced their way through black miasma, their armor cracking under its corrosive touch. Some fell, consumed by shadows, while others pressed forward with grim determination.

Crimson Lotus disciples wove illusions to mask their path, but the 'Eye's sentience pierced their deceit, unraveling their tricks and leaving them exposed.

Moonshade disciples hesitated at the crossroads. Their mirrors reflected paths that shifted too quickly to follow, echoing the turmoil within them as one disciple caught a glimpse of their own reflection, an image from deep within surfaced — a childhood memory of standing alone in a sun-dappled clearing, unsure whether to follow the distant call of adults or remain hidden in the safe embrace of the trees.

This fleeting vision, like a specter from the past, compounded the moment of self-confrontation where doubt clouded clarity and mirrored their inner uncertainties. This hesitation, intensified by personal memory, cost them precious time, as the puzzle reshaped itself around their wavering resolve.

The 'Eye' was merciless. It tested not only strength, but intent. And already, shadows moved deliberately — traps laid, enemies waiting.

The mist inside the 'Eye' thickened as dawn broke outside. For those trapped within, time felt distorted — hours stretched like days, and every heartbeat echoed against the living puzzle. The disciples knew: this was the second day, the day when the Eye's trials grew merciless.

The 'Dragon's Eye', which had grown restless around them. Each group huddled together in rare camaraderie. They shared quiet jokes and wistful observations. Fatty laughed and patted his stomach, teasing Chatty about his seriousness. Shun rolled his eyes with a grin, teasing Ren. Their voices bounced off ancient walls, echoing unity and creating warmth that contrasted with their ominous surroundings. Beneath their laughter, an unspoken understanding connected them — a crucial realization that only those with unwavering resolve would endure the challenge ahead.

The Puzzle Splits Them Apart

Without warning, the chamber convulsed with terrifying ferocity. Mirrors lining the walls erupted in blinding flashes, casting searing light. The Li Clan disciples shielded their eyes. Dragon script blazed across the surfaces like liquid fire as the disciples staggered back, searching for footing. The stone floor cracked beneath them — the sound of splintering bone echoing as a sinister warning. The mirrors' intense heat thickened the atmosphere, making the air shimmer with menace and causing the disciples to gasp for breath. Tiles lurched and rotated, inducing vertigo. Each disciple steadied themselves, every step a desperate gamble.

The corridors twisted and reformed violently, directed by the 'Dragon's Eye's malicious will. Before anyone could cry out, invisible forces seized each Li Clan disciple. One by one, they were dragged into separate passages that sealed shut behind them with grim finality.

Jack's breath caught in his throat, eyes widening as he watched the stone wall materialize between him and his master. "Boss... Chu Yan!" His arm shot forward, fingers clawing at empty air as the barrier

solidified with a grinding finality. Desperation surged within him, and he pounded his fist against the unyielding stone.

Each strike resonated with his growing frustration, a futile attempt to reach his master. Ling Li's voice haunted him. He recalled Madam's stern expression, her warm hand on his shoulder, and her parting words: 'Whatever happens, never leave his side.' His hands trembled, cold sweat beading on his palms. Channeling his remaining qi, he willed energy into the wall, hoping to shatter it. The power dissipated harmlessly, leaving him helpless. 'Madam entrusted me to protect him... and I've already failed.' The memory sharpened his self-reproach with piercing clarity.

Ailun and Nicu each appeared alone in dim corridors, standing frozen, shoulders tense. They trembled from the force that tore them from their friends, breath ragged. Each took a hesitant step, straining to see ahead in the darkness, uncertain whether to move or wait.

"I was supposed to shield Shun," Ailun whispered, his voice cracking. His fingers dug into his palms until they ached.

"If Shun falls, it's my fault." The thought carved itself into Nicu's mind as he forced himself to take a calculated step forward, every muscle coiled tight with dread.

Chapter 447 447: THE TEST

Meanwhile, Fatty stumbled into a narrow corridor. Lily was gone, and the absence struck like a physical wound. His eyes burned with unshed tears. His throat tightened until he could barely breathe. He reached into his pocket for a snack he always saved for comfort, then let his hand fall, the snack untouched. This time, the sight unsettled his stomach — a poignant reminder of simpler times.

"She's my anchor... I can't lose her." The words came out broken, desperate. Fatty pressed his fist against the cold stone wall and closed his eyes, steadying himself. "Lily, be careful. I swear I'll find you."

As he moved on, that untouched snack would come to mean something more. It became his symbol of resilience, a reminder of his promise and the strength he needed to find her.

At the same time, Shun staggered into his corridor alone, instantly aware of Ren's absence. His fists clenched, knuckles whitening as he stopped to listen for any sign of her.

"Ren... where are you???!!" he called, voice echoing off stone, filling the emptiness. Jaw set in determination, he promised, "She's strong, but she carries too much. I can't let anything happen to her. I won't. I must find her." Marking the walls with qi-infused symbols, he pressed his palm firmly against the stone and traced each sign, tracking his path to ensure he didn't retrace his steps and could navigate the 'Dragon's Eye' more efficiently.

This commitment, he believed, marked the first step toward reuniting with Ren. But first, he reminded himself, he had to finish the reason he came.

Meanwhile, Ren appeared in a new passage, clutching at her chest as panic tightened her breath. She staggered a step, then steadied herself by gripping the cold stone wall.

"Lily... please be safe," she murmured. Her hand trembled over her heart. "Shun, please stay strong. For both of us." Ren wiped her eyes and pressed forward into the gloom, unwilling to stop.

Somewhere else, Chatty collapsed against the wall and slid down, panic clawing up his throat. Without his Enfield, he felt naked — defenseless. His body shook, muscles turning to water. Humiliation threatened to betray him; pressure built in his bladder. Suddenly, Li Shenwu's voice lashed across his memory: 'Coward!'

Something shifted. The chaotic drumbeat of Chatty's heart slowed, the panic giving way to calm. Torchlight flickered near him, then steadied, casting warm light on cold stone. Something hardened in Chatty's chest. His jaw clenched. He planted his palms on the ground and pushed himself upright, spine straight despite the tremors. "I'll prove them all wrong!" he declared, voice steel wrapped in silk. "I am not a coward!"

Separated and stripped of their companions, each disciple made the same silent vow: survive the trial, claim whatever power awaited them quickly, and reunite with those who mattered most. The 'Dragon's Eye' had split them apart. They would forge themselves back together.

The deeper they went, the stronger the pull of cultivation techniques waiting to be claimed — but so too grew the danger.

Ren's Trial – The Test of Sacrifice

Ren staggered forward, her qi drained from the previous trial. The needles of light now pulsed brighter, demanding more of her essence.

A voice whispered: "Sacrifice is not once, but always. To wield power, you must bleed for it."

Ren stepped through an archway into a vast chamber. Her breath caught. Thousands of needles floated in the air like suspended rain, each glowing with eerie phosphorescent light. Shadows danced across the walls. Her healer's instinct kicked in, analyzing each luminescence as a living pulse. The needles hung motionless, waiting. In the chamber's center, a black jade pedestal rose from the floor. On it rested a cultivation scroll, shimmering with a faint, pulsing light as if it breathed.

A voice whispered from everywhere and nowhere, ancient and hollow: "Sacrifice is resolve. To gain, you must give."

The needles stirred, then shot toward her in silver streaks. One pierced her shoulder — not deeply, but icy numbness quickly spread. Her fingers tingled, as if she'd plunged them into frozen water. She gasped, staggered back. More needles struck: arm, thigh, side. Every impact seemed to drain her strength, making her heartbeat falter. Her body, heavy and cold, fought back. Her Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts awakened, resonating with the chamber's energy; it demanded qi she could not spare. The scroll pulsed brighter with each Sacrifice, greedily feeding on her essence. The chamber's intent was unmistakable: to claim the scroll, she would bleed herself dry.

Ren's breath came in ragged trembles, vision blurring at the edges.

'Do I give my strength?

My blood?

My future?'

Ren steadied her hand, choosing to bleed her qi into the needles, each strike piercing her essence. As the energy flowed from her, Ren remembered the unwavering trust Shun had shown her during their most precarious moments. It was his faith that had held her strong, and now, her Sacrifice was a tribute to that bond. The scroll glowed brighter, promising a cultivation technique forged from Sacrifice itself.

She pressed on, knowing that only by offering herself could she reach the cultivation scroll meant for her. Her resolve hardened: 'If Sacrifice is the price, I will pay it.'

However, Iron Fang Sect warriors ambushed Ren, their blades aimed to cut her down before she could claim her scroll.

Lily's Trial – Where Truth Bleeds and Lies Devour

Lily stepped through the obsidian archway, uncertainty churning inside her. The chamber mocked her sense of reality—water and light interweaving in a space that both mesmerized and unsettled.

A shallow pool of liquid mirror stretched across the floor, its surface so perfectly still it might have been polished glass, yet it breathed with subtle life. Lily paused on the threshold, her breath hitching, as the crystalline perfection disoriented her. Not a single ripple disturbed the surface, and she fought the urge to test if she truly stood suspended between two identical worlds —one above, one below, both equally real and equally false.

Mirrors of every conceivable size and shape lined the walls, stacked and ordered in dizzying, overlapping arrangements that resembled the compound eyes of some cosmic insect. Some were no larger than Lily's palm, their surfaces framed in smooth jade and glinting bone; others towered twenty feet high, set in tarnished silver or materials she couldn't name. Each mirror reflected the chamber with uncanny precision. But as Lily gazed deeper, she saw infinite recursive versions of the space—reflections multiplying, fragmenting reality into endless overlapping tableaux, each simulating the world slightly differently, each one a possible truth woven into the tapestry of deception and revelation.

Chapter 448 448: THE ILLUSIONS

Through the liquid mirror beneath her feet, Spirit Carp illusions glided with hypnotic grace — ethereal creatures woven from living light and ancient magic. Their scales shimmered with colors that had no names in mortal tongues: shades that existed between blue and sorrow, hues that tasted of forgotten memories, luminescences that sang of futures yet unborn. Each fish trailed ribbons of opalescent mist in its wake, leaving temporary wounds in the fabric of space that healed slowly, reluctantly.

The whispers pressed in with suffocating intensity, voices layering confusion upon her, eroding her certainty until she teetered at the edge of panic; every promise and riddle threatened Lily's grip on meaning.

One immutable rule governed this treacherous place, carved into the very bones of reality: every lie spoken—whether deliberate falsehood or unconscious self-deception—deepened the pool by precisely one inch. The water would rise with patient inevitability, threatening to swallow Truth itself beneath an ocean of accumulated deceit, drowning the unworthy in the weight of their own fabrications.

Then another voice surged up—deeper, ancient, implacable. It reverberated through the water, making Lily flinch. Every word settled like a weight inside her, inevitable and cold as the grave:

"Truth is resolved. Lies will drown you."

The words froze her blood; threat and promise braided together, hanging over her with silent menace.

The mirrors shimmered, each surface alive with reflections not of the Lily she knew, but of who she might become. Each alternative Lily struck her with a surge of hope or dread — her possible futures suddenly, aching close.

One Lily smiled serenely, eyes wise and robes shining. Another wept blood, her face beautiful but pained. A third stood wreathed in shadow, eyes hollow and mouth twisted with hunger.

Dozens more variations emerged from the depths of the glass like ghosts rising from graves: Lily the Tyrant, crowned in thorns and wreathed in flame. Lily the Martyr, crucified on blades of light. Lily the Deceiver, wearing a thousand masks. Lily the Destroyer, standing atop mountains of ash. Lily the Healer, hands glowing with gentle mercy. Lily the Mad, laughing as reality crumbled around her.

Each reflection whispered with seductive urgency, their voices a siren song of infinite possibility. A tumult of hope and devastation rose in Lily's chest as she listened. They promised power beyond measure, love beyond death, Truth beyond understanding — different paths through the labyrinth of fate, different futures waiting to be claimed, different truths that could all be equally real if only she would reach out and grasp them. Lily ached with the agony of choice, torn between longing and growing dread.

The illusions tormented Lily through endless cycles of light and darkness before, exhausted and raw, she began to distinguish Truth from trickery.

Four Eyes' Trial – The Test of Loyalty

Four Eyes plunged deeper into the labyrinthine heart of the 'Dragon's Eye', pushing past his limits with each blood-soaked battle, driven by the tantalizing promise of a legendary cultivation technique. After each enemy fell, he paused for a fleeting moment, listening to the echo of his own heartbeat, a solitary drumbeat in the silence that roared louder than the fiercest combat. The gentle voice of his grandfather flickered in his mind, recounting tales of warriors who never surrendered, no matter the odds. That whisper of legacy kept him standing when exhaustion clawed at him. For nearly a full day and night, he carved his path through waves of spectral guardians and shadow, his blade singing through flesh and mist alike, until exhaustion clung to his bones like frost.

Then, at last, he crossed an invisible threshold and materialized in a chamber that defied nature itself. Black miasma roiled through the space like a living ocean, so dense and viscous it seemed less like vapor and more like liquid shadow given form. As the corrupted air coiled around his skin with the persistence of phantom fingers, a metallic taste of fear clung to his tongue, grounding him in the reality of the

danger. Each tendril pressed and probed, heavy with malevolent intent. His lungs burned with each labored breath, as if he were drowning in darkness itself.

Visibility collapsed to a suffocating three-foot radius, the world beyond swallowed by an impenetrable curtain of churning black. Each step forward became an ordeal, his boots sinking into the oppressive atmosphere as though wading through tar-thick quicksand. The miasma's weight settled over his shoulders, dragging at his limbs with invisible hands and transforming every movement into a grueling test of will. Time itself seemed to slow in this forsaken place, stretching each second into an eternity of struggle.

Whispers seeped from the darkness — not words exactly, but doubts given voice, each one burrowing into his mind like parasites. It was as though the very atmosphere conspired to pin him in place, a malevolent force sapping his will to move.

A voice thundered through the miasma, shaking the stone: 'Loyalty is resolved. Betray, and be consumed.'

The black miasma coiled around his thoughts like serpents, injecting venom directly into his consciousness. Visions erupted: Ling Li turning her back on him, her face cold with disgust. His children grew up without knowing his name, calling another man father. His clan elders pointed accusatory fingers, their voices united in scorn. Each vision felt viscerally real — he could smell Ling Li's perfume as she walked away and hear his daughter's laughter fade into silence. His heart wavered, cracking under the assault. Confusion flooded his mind like black water, drowning certainty.

The black miasma whispered: "Abandon them. Save yourself."

The strong black aura within him suddenly resonated with the black miasma, the two forces recognizing each other like old friends. For a moment, the aura tempted him with visions of forbidden power and

strength that surpassed imagination. It whispered of domination and triumph, urging him to embrace its darkness rather than repel it. His heart wavered, caught between the seductive promise of power and the fear of losing himself. His knees buckled, slamming against stone. Cold sweat poured down his face, dripping onto the floor where it hissed and evaporated.

Then, through the drowning darkness, a memory surfaced: Ling Li's embrace, warm and real and solid. Her voice, not cold but tender: 'I, the twins, and the triplets in my womb will wait for you.' The words ignited something primal in his chest. His Loyalty surged like wildfire, burning through the miasma with searing heat.

Chapter 449 449: THE DRAGON'S EYES JUDGEMENT

In that moment, Four Eyes understood the paradox — by harnessing the aura's energy rather than succumbing to it, he could transform it into unexpected strength. He roared, not in despair but in defiance, "I will never betray them!" His Loyalty burned like fire, pushing back the shadows, forcing them to recoil. The black aura within him bent to his will, becoming a weapon instead of weakness.

As the miasma retreated, a cultivation scroll materialized before him, glowing with steady silver light: the power of Loyalty made manifest. It was waiting for his grasp — but rival sect disciples lurked nearby, drawn to his struggle.

Moonshade Clan mystics shadowed Four Eyes, waiting for his Loyalty to falter so they could steal his cultivation.

The carp's warning echoed true: Shadows waiting. Traps deliberate.

Within the Merciless Dragon's Eye, Unworthy Souls Meet Their Fate

Throughout the serpentine depths of the 'Dragon's Eye', rival sect disciples met their reckoning and crumbled beneath its weight. The air was stifling, heavy with the tang of blood and sulfur. Sweat beaded on even the seasoned. In one chamber of obsidian walls veined with crimson qi, the Iron Fang champion's triumphant roar turned into a bone-chilling scream. His legendary gauntlet, forged in dragon fire and tempered in demon blood, fractured like porcelain. The splinter reverberated like a death knell. The 'Eye' drank his cultivated power, leaving him hollow and gasping, a mere shadow of the warrior who entered.

In a nearby chamber veiled by ethereal mist tasting of copper and regret, a Crimson Lotus disciple — master of nine-fold deceptions, watched horror mount as his illusion unraveled like silk in flames. The ornate mirror before him splintered into shimmering fragments, each one reflecting not his crafted facade, but the quivering truth of his terror — a kaleidoscope of despair piercing deeper than any blade.

In another chamber carved from living shadow that whispered forgotten names, a Moonshade Clan acolyte froze. Terror gripped him. His hand flew to his chest as if struck by an invisible arrow. Torn between clan duty and allegiance to a forbidden master, he faltered. The floor yawned open, black miasma surged, and serpentine tendrils dragged him down. His screams faded to gurgles — a brutal testament to the 'Dragon's Eye's merciless judgment, its scales weighing souls and finding many wanting.

The 'Dragon's Eye' was merciless — ancient as creation, absolute as death. This primordial crucible, forged by forgotten immortals, granted power only to the rare souls whose resolve burned pure and unshakeable. All others — the wavering and weak-hearted — it consumed without hesitation or regret, grinding ambitions to ash and scattering essence to the void like dreams.

Day Three – The Dragon's Eye Contracts, Hungry and Impatient

A metallic taste lingered on every tongue — the flavor of copper and ozone and something older, something that tasted like the dreams of dying gods. The 'Eye's essence seeped into their veins like liquid mercury, cold and invasive, rewriting their blood with each labored breath. Some disciples swore they could feel it crawling beneath their skin, burrowing deeper, claiming them inch by inch.

The third dawn inside the 'Dragon's Eye' was unlike anything that had come before — a twisted parody of morning that brought not hope but creeping dread. The mist thickened with malevolent purpose, congealing into a suffocating shroud that clung to exposed skin like funeral silk. It pressed against mouths and noses, forcing its way into lungs with each desperate gasp. Visibility collapsed to mere feet, transforming allies into phantoms and every shadow into a potential threat.

The corridors themselves seemed to writhe with newfound urgency, twisting and reshaping faster than memory could track. Passages that had existed moments before sealed themselves with wet, organic sounds. New pathways yawned open like hungry mouths, exhaling breath that reeked of ancient decay. The architecture had become fluid, predatory, actively hunting those trapped within its ever-shifting geometry.

The 'Eye's hum — constant, maddening vibration — grew louder, swelling to a thunderous resonance that shook teeth and set bones vibrating in harmony. It pulsed like a colossal heartbeat, each throb sending tremors through stone and flesh, a countdown to some terrible finality.

Everyone knew, with the certainty of prey sensing the predator's approach, the 'Eye' would close soon. The ancient mechanism was winding down, its patience exhausted, its judgment nearly complete. Those who had not yet claimed their destined techniques faced three equally grim fates: surrender and flee empty-handed, their ambitions reduced to ash; remain trapped forever in these corridors, becoming part of the Eye's eternal collection of failures; or be consumed entirely, devoured body and soul by the ravenous darkness that waited in every corner.

The Li Clan disciples pressed forward through the thickening nightmare, driven by desperation and iron will. Each could feel the pull of their destined scrolls now — a magnetic tug in their chests, a whisper in their bones, an invisible thread connecting them to power that lay tantalizingly close yet impossibly far. The sensation grew stronger with each step, sweet as honey laced with poison, urging them deeper into danger.

Suddenly, without warning: a flicker of movement in the mist. Not the random swirl of vapor but something purposeful, predatory. A sibilant hiss slithered through the air — the sound of steel leaving its sheath, or perhaps a serpent tasting the air with its forked tongue. The noise sent shivers cascading down their spines, raising every hair on their bodies and triggering instincts older than civilization itself.

An Iron Fang assassin materialized from the mist like death given form — a shadow wrapped in shadows, his body language speaking of coiled violence and absolute certainty. His blade caught the dim, sourceless light, glinting with an edge so sharp it seemed to cut through the very fabric of reality. Black cloth masked his face, but his eyes burned with cold professional focus.

In one fluid motion — swift as lightning, graceful as a dancer, final as the grave — he closed the distance to a minor disciple from a lesser clan who had been trailing behind the Li group. The blade sang its brief, terrible song. Blood misted the air in a crimson spray that hung suspended for one eternal heartbeat before gravity remembered its duty.

The body fell without sound, crumpling like a puppet with severed strings, and was swallowed by the gloom before it even finished falling. One moment, a living, breathing person with hopes and fears and dreams of glory. The next: nothing. Erased. As though they had never existed at all.

The Li disciples froze as one, their forward momentum arrested by the sudden, brutal reminder of mortality. The weight of that loss—a life extinguished in less time than it took to draw breath—sharpened their senses to razor keenness. Adrenaline flooded their systems. Hands moved instinctively to weapons. Eyes scanned the mist with new paranoia, seeing threats in every swirl and eddy.

Chapter 450 450: CLAIMING THEIR SPOILS

Rival Sects

Assassins had been stalking them all along, patient as spiders spinning silk in moonless darkness, allowing exhaustion and the Eye's oppressive atmosphere to weave their insidious work. These phantom predators lurked in the bleeding shadows, their eyes gleaming like polished obsidian as they watched their quarry deteriorate — muscles trembling with each labored step, qi reserves flickering like dying embers, proud shoulders sagging under invisible weights. They waited, motionless and merciless, for that exquisite moment when bone-deep fatigue would dull once-sharp reflexes to rusted edges, when gnawing desperation would cloud razor judgment into fog, transforming these once-mighty cultivators into stumbling, hollow-eyed prey ripe for the slaughter.

Now, as the 'Dragon's Eye' began its inexorable descent toward closure and desperation clawed its way to a fever pitch, the hunters tasted blood on the wind. The time had ripened like rotting fruit. They were poised to strike — swift and surgical, then again with calculated brutality, and again with savage efficiency — to cull the weak like wheat before the scythe, to tear the coveted techniques from dying fingers, leaving nothing behind but cooling corpses sprawled in crimson pools and the glittering fragments of shattered dreams scattered across blood-soaked earth.

The mist shifted like a living shroud, writhing with malevolent purpose. Multiple shadows materialized within its ghostly folds — fluid, predatory silhouettes that moved with the terrible grace of hunting cats. The Li disciples felt ice crystallize in their veins as realization struck like a hammer blow: they were surrounded, trapped in a tightening noose of killers who had chosen this moment, this place, to end them.

Ren – Claiming Sacrifice

Ren staggered into her chamber's heart, body trembling from countless needles draining her qi. The black jade pedestal pulsed brighter, the cultivation scroll shimmering like a living flame. The pain was relentless, each needle a reminder of her vow to her younger brother Shi Min. His smiling face flashed in her mind. She had promised to protect the family with him, never letting anything tear them apart. The memory fueled her determination, turning the needle ritual into an emotional crucible.

Her Heaven-Piercing Needle Arts resonated vibrantly, demanding more of her essence. Ren pressed her palm to the pedestal, bleeding qi into it. The scroll unfurled, glowing with a technique forged from sacrifice: Needle of the Crimson Vein, which let her pierce any defense at a steep cost. Each strike drained her life force, shortening her lifespan. Every thrust brought her closer to the edge, mortality looming as the price for power. Every blow with the Needle of the Crimson Vein costs a month of life, turning each battle into a countdown.

Before she could grasp it fully, Iron Fang assassins burst from the shadows, blades flashing. "The Li girl dies here!" one spat. Ren's eyes blazed. "Try me. My steel shapes destiny now," she snapped, her voice hard as tempered steel.

Lily – The Moment Truth Awakens

Lily stood at the water's edge, breath catching as a golden scroll rose from the depths, like a phoenix from primordial seas. The parted waters shimmered, droplets hanging in the air like liquid diamonds. Her reflection in the mirror-smooth surface revealed not the uncertain girl who began this trial, but the real Lily beneath layers of doubt. That reflection smiled serenely, eyes bright with newfound clarity.

Lily's trembling fingers steadied as she reached forward. Upon contact, the scroll burst into golden motes—fragments of ancient wisdom. They circled her, then streamed into her chest, rooting deep within, intertwining with her spirit until she and the technique were inseparable.

The technique sang through her consciousness like a chorus of crystal bells. Its name resonated in her bones: Voice of the Carp—an ancient cultivation art whispered about in forbidden texts, thought lost to the ages. Power unfurled within her like lotus petals at dawn. It granted her the sublime ability to hear the fundamental truth woven into the fabric of any sound. Every whisper. Every cry. Every silence now carried its hidden meaning, laid bare before her awakened senses. Illusions became transparent as morning mist. Lies rang discordant as shattered glass. Deception turned luminous and obvious, unable to hide from her transformed perception.

In her moment of transformation, with Lily's guard lowest and her spirit vulnerable, disciples of the Crimson Lotus struck. They emerged from the mirrored chamber walls—three assassins draped in blood-red silk, forms twisting from illusion to lethal reality. Curved blades gleamed as they closed in with supernatural speed, killing strikes aiming for her exposed back.

Lily's awakened gift ignited. Her senses expanded—she heard the lie in their steps, the desperation behind feigned confidence, the doubt beneath their cries. Time stretched; each heartbeat became a span of perfect awareness.

She moved like water, twisting with grace as the first blade missed her throat by a hair. Her counter-strike — swift and certain — struck her opponent's solar plexus with new power.

"The truth never falters," she declared, her voice ringing with cosmic authority. Eyes blazing, she struck again, moving with the clarity of one who has glimpsed reality's core.

Four Eyes – Claiming Loyalty

Four Eyes, drenched in sweat, finally forced the black aura into submission. His roar echoed through the chamber, loyalty burning brighter than the miasma. As he faced the darkness within, he understood that failing to conquer the aura meant losing not only his power but perhaps his very soul to the shadows. As if marking the moment his loyalty transformed into raw power, his trembling hand clenched into a steady fist. His posture straightened, every breath now controlled and deliberate, embodying the strength of his resolve.

Then, a silver scroll materialized, glowing with steady light.

He grasped the scroll and absorbed its technique: Shield of the Loyal Heart. This art of cultivation allows him to turn his aura into an impenetrable barrier, protecting allies at the cost of his own strength. Each use of the shield drains a portion of his energy, leaving him significantly weaker for an hour. If used consecutively, the cooldown between uses increases, further straining his stamina and limiting the number of times it can be effectively deployed in battle.

Moonshade Clan mystics stepped from the shadows, mirrored armor reflecting Four Eyes' struggle. They surrounded him, eyes narrowed. "Your loyalty will be your downfall," one hissed, angling his mirror to challenge Four Eyes. Their clan's history was marred by betrayal and mistrust, teaching them to fear alliances, believing that loyalty weakened the spirit. To them, unwavering allegiance was a fragile bridge, waiting to be shattered at any moment.

Four Eyes raised his shield, his voice defiant: "My loyalty is my strength!"