

PROTEGE 451

Chapter 451 451: SILENT INK DAO

Reflections twisted and warped around the Moonshade Clan mystics as their own mirrors turned against them. Shards of glass began to shimmer, distorting reality until their own images stretched and fragmented in a surreal dance. Prismatic light splintered in every direction, casting fleeting glimpses of fear-stricken faces before the mirrors engulfed them entirely. Warped screams echoed in the air, then were silenced as the mystics were swallowed whole, their struggles mirrored infinitely in the reflective abyss.

However, a golden brush emerged in front of Four Eyes. Its golden light was so bright that it almost blinded Four Eyes. The Golden brush moved toward him, its glowing light surrounded him as he absorbed its ancient text and techniques.

Silent Ink – Heavenly Technique: Essence of the Technique

Silent Ink Dao is not a cultivation of noise or spectacle. It is the Dao of erasure, rewriting, and inevitability. Where others roar like dragons or blaze like suns, Silent Ink moves in shadows. Each brushstroke is a command to reality itself, reshaping qi, sealing fate, or unraveling illusions.

Four Eyes held the brush and channeled his dark aura into the ink brush, and with every stroke, the world bends quietly to his will. Silence is its weapon — no thunder, no flame, only inevitability.

Silent Ink Abilities

Ink of Binding: A single stroke seals an opponent's qi channels, locking their cultivation as if words themselves had chained them. This ability forces Four Eyes to confront the lesson of restraint; the power to bind makes him realize the delicate balance between power and control, urging him to avoid overreliance on force as the solution to every challenge.

Script of Erasure: With a sweep of the brush, Four Eyes can erase formations, talismans, or even memories, leaving only emptiness.

Silent Glyphs: Invisible characters written in the air linger like traps. When stepped upon, they explode into shadowy force, unseen until too late.

Black River Flow: His brush conjures streams of Ink that move like rivers, swallowing attacks and dissolving them into silence.

Truth in Silence: Unlike Lily's gift of discernment, Silent Ink reveals lies by erasing false qi signatures, leaving only the raw essence of truth.

Silent Ink Symbolism

Ink: Represents permanence and impermanence — what is written can endure, but what is erased vanishes utterly.

Silence: The absence of sound is the presence of inevitability. Silent Ink does not announce its power; it simply is.

Brush: A tool of artistry and destruction. Each stroke is both creation and annihilation.

How Four Eyes Wields It

When Four Eyes lifts his brush, a profound stillness descends. The faint, earthy scent of Ink mingles with the hush of settling dust, enveloping the hall in a moment of sensory tranquility. As if the air itself anticipates what is to come, the hall grows heavy. Darkness pools at his feet, and the brush tip gleams faintly with shadowed qi. He writes in the air, characters shimmering for a heartbeat before vanishing. Yet their effects remain: walls reinforced, enemies weakened, allies shielded.

His strokes are deliberate, patient, and merciless. He does not waste motion. Each line is a verdict, each curve a destiny rewritten. To face Silent Ink is to feel one's fate being quietly edited, as if the world itself has already decided the outcome.

Outside of the Eye: Clan's Reaction

Elders felt the air: Awed and unsettled, whispering that Silent Ink is not merely a technique but a law of heaven hidden in shadow.

Disciples: Some tremble, sensing their qi falter under his presence. Others stare in reverence.

Ling Li watches calmly, recognizing that Silent Ink complements her own Body Refining System — where her power is forceful and radiant, this is subtle and inevitable. "I wonder who was able to receive such heavenly technique?" She murmured with her brows raised and a smirk.

Shensei, who is beside Ling Li, smiles faintly, murmuring, "Silent Ink... the brush that writes destiny without sound."

Li Shenwu stroked his silvery beard, "I'm sure it's among our disciples," he said proudly.

"That aura... don't you think it belongs to Paps?" Shi Min said with furrowed brows.

"Yes! That's Daddy's aura!" Kim Kim chimed in.

Ling Li chuckled softly, her eyes twinkling with amusement. Of course, she knew it was her husband. She didn't want to be too presumptuous in front of everyone. The light-hearted exchange offered a brief respite from the seriousness that lay ahead.

"Brat! You knew from the start it's your husband, right?" Li Tianyuan spat out on Ling Li, his expression caught between teasing and exasperation.

Ling Li, who was trying to be humble "....."

Legacy of the Silent Ink

Silent Ink is feared not for its noise or spectacle, but for its quiet certainty. It is the heavenly technique of shadows, artistry, and inevitability. In Four Eyes' hands, it becomes the perfect reflection of his aura—dark, enigmatic, and absolute.

Shun's Descent into the Eye

For two relentless days, Shun, alone, pressed deeper into the 'Eye'. The air was thick with black and white miasma, each swirl gnawing at his lungs and spirit. The black miasma clawed at his mind, whispering doubts and despair, while the white miasma suffocated his body, draining his strength with every breath.

His robes were torn, his skin burned raw by corrosive qi, yet his eyes blazed with determination. Each step he marked with a flicker of fire qi, leaving behind glowing embers to trace his path. Without them, the labyrinth would have swallowed him whole.

By the third day, his body trembled on the edge of collapse. His flame sputtered, nearly extinguished. Yet he clenched his fists, whispering through cracked lips:

"I will not falter. If fire is my destiny, then I will burn until the end."

The Chamber of the Phoenix

At last, the miasma parted, revealing a hidden chamber. Its walls glowed faintly with ancient glyphs, each shaped like feathers aflame. The air was heavy, but no longer suffocating — it carried the scent of ash and rebirth.

At the center stood a pedestal of obsidian, upon which rested a scroll bound in crimson silk. The silk shimmered faintly, as if alive, and the glyph of a phoenix rising from fire pulsed across its surface.

Shun staggered forward, his knees nearly buckling. As he reached for the scroll, the chamber erupted in flame. A spectral phoenix burst forth, wings spanning the chamber, its cry shaking the walls. Its eyes locked onto Shun, testing his resolve.

The miasma surged back, black-and-white currents twisting into a storm. Shun's fire qi flared, his embers igniting into a blazing inferno. He thrust his hands forward, channeling every ounce of his will.

"I will lead. I will burn away chaos. I will rise!"

The phoenix shrieked, then folded its wings and bowed its head. The storm dissolved into sparks, and the scroll floated into Shun's hands.

Chapter 452 452: THE EYE'S CLOSING

Unveiling the Phoenix Command Sutra

As Shun unwrapped the crimson silk, the chamber filled with golden light. The scroll unfurled, its ink shimmering like molten fire. Words etched in divine script burned into his mind:

"The Phoenix Command Sutra—fire that guides, flame that commands, rebirth that unites.

The torch that rallies nations, the blaze that dispels fear, the wings that rise from ruin."

Shun's body convulsed as the Sutra's power surged into him. His meridians blazed, his qi ignited into banners of flame that rose above him, unfurling like standards on a battlefield. The phoenix glyph etched itself into his chest, glowing with authority.

He gasped, then steadied, his eyes burning with clarity. For the first time, he felt not just fire—but command. His flames no longer consumed blindly; they organized, rallied, and illuminated.

Shun whispered, awe in his voice:

"This... is not just fire. It is leadership. It is destiny."

The phoenix's spectral form circled him once more, then dissolved into his qi. The chamber fell silent, save for the steady hum of his flame.

The Other Disciples

Jack, hands trembling but eyes steady, found his scroll resting atop a pedestal. Taking a breath, he reached for it, determined to follow through on his vow to protect Four Eyes. As his fingers closed around the scroll, he focused on the surge of guardianship energy, the fear in his body giving way to resolve. For the first time, Jack's resolve outweighed his hesitation, marking his first step toward inner growth.

Ailun and Nicu, separated, each discovered cultivation arts tied to defense, their techniques resonating with Ling Li's command to shield Shun.

Fatty, gripping his untouched snack, claimed his cultivation art of resilience, focusing as his bond to Lily steeled his determination. When a skirmish broke out near him, Fatty saw Four Eyes slashed by a stray blade. Acting on instinct, he dashed forward and pressed the snack to the wound, watching in surprise as its strange properties instantly began to seal the gash. What had been a comfort became a life-saving tool, his quick thinking proving pivotal as the snack's mysterious efficacy shifted the tide in their favor.

The two of them unknowingly reunited.

Chatty, spine straight, claimed a cultivation art of courage, his vow to prove Li Shenwu wrong transforming into power.

The Eye's Closing

The 'Eye's hum swelled to a roar. Stone creaked. Walls bent. Time slipped. The Dragon's Eye was shutting.

Rival sect assassins grew frantic, striking with desperation. Iron Fang blades clashed against Ren's needles,

Crimson Lotus illusions shattered against Lily's truth, Moonshade mirrors cracked against Four Eyes' shield.

The carp's warning echoed again: Shadows waiting. Traps deliberate. Amid the clamor, a faint splash rippled through the hall — a haunting reminder of the hidden dangers prophesied. But the Li Clan disciples, each armed now with their cultivation techniques, stood their ground. Their resolve burned pure, crystalline, unyielding. At that pivotal moment, the clan sigils on their uniforms began to glow in unison, casting a unified light against the encroaching shadows. The sigils shone as a singular emblem of their collective stand, leaving a memorable snapshot of unity amid the swirling chaos.

The Exit from the Dragon's Eye

The corridors of the 'Eye', once chaotic and shifting, steadied as if acknowledging the disciples' resolve. Paths cleared, guiding them toward the exit. Their reunion was marked by sights and sounds that resonated with pent-up emotions.

Ren and Shun embraced fiercely, their tears falling like hot droplets on the cool stone floor, sizzling softly. Lily clutched Fatty's arm, her fingers trembling, her relief as palpable as the warmth radiating from him. As Lily and Ren held each other, the familiar scent of their favorite flower from back home filled the air, binding them tighter than ever by shared trials.

Chatty let out a broken whimper upon seeing Four Eyes and Fatty, his best friends, before straightening with pride, his heart racing loud enough for them to hear. Four Eyes exhaled a long sigh of relief, the sound echoing softly in the corridor as he looked upon his family and comrades reunited, his chest heavy with gratitude.

Inner and Outer disciples assembled. Some bore the bodies of fallen kin. The sight was harrowing, a stark reminder of the Eye's ruthlessness and rival sects' cruelty. As the grim reality took hold, hesitation flickered among the disciples. Their loss weighed heavily, quietly shaping their next moves. Four Eyes, feeling their grief, paused. He adjusted the formation to protect those carrying the dead — a silent tribute to their sorrow and the need for vigilance.

Four Eyes' voice was solemn.

"Jack, headcount."

Jack bowed his head. "We are missing two more Outer Disciples."

Four Eyes scanned the weary faces around him, feeling the weight of leadership. Amidst his composed exterior, a flicker of doubt crossed his mind, questioning whether he could truly safeguard them all. "We have six hours," he stated, then turned to Jack with a nod. "Jack, organize the guards. Your eyes are sharp, ensure our safety." Jack bowed, accepting the task with resolve.

"Nicu, Ailun," Four Eyes continued with a decisive tone, "assist Jack. Remain vigilant." The two disciples moved into position without hesitation.

"The rest, cultivate with intensity," Four Eyes ordered. "Let the qi flow through you. Harness this time to its fullest," he added, embodying the authority and determination now etched into his being.

The rest sat cross-legged and focused inward. The qi inside surged like a river, abundant and pure. Ling Li's words echoed in their minds: One hour inside is ten days outside. Elders whispered this was the result of an ancient pact between the 'Dragon's Eye' and celestial forces — a temporal sanctuary for the worthy. Ling Li had emphasized this in past teachings; the truth was clear now. They cultivated fiercely, letting the newfound techniques embed more deeply.

After five long hours spent waiting and hoping, the missing disciples never returned. Realizing that time was up, Four Eyes led the survivors toward the exit, marking the end of this stage in the 'Eye'.

Chapter 453: THE EYE DOES NOT GRANT MERCY

The Aftermath Outside the Eye

As the light of the 'Eye' receded, stillness settled over the disciples. Four Eyes stood silent, gazing forward, contemplating all they had endured. In his hand, he held a cracked talisman, etched with the 'Eye's trials. This reminder symbolized their transformation, its fissures marking loss and newfound strength. Each trial shaped them, leaving scars and new power. Though the loss was heavy, the resilience they forged showed their unity and determination.

Ling Li, her eyes reflecting the pain and pride of their journey, took a deep breath, acknowledging the sacrifices made. She recognized that crossing this threshold was more than a physical exit; it was a transition from the ordeal they had faced to the challenges that awaited them beyond. Inwardly, she whispered a vow to honor their lost disciples by leading with courage.

With renewed resolve, they prepared to face the aftermath, knowing that their hearts, tested by the 'Eye', had emerged stronger and resolute.

A month passed outside the 'Eye'. The valley remained tense with anticipation. At last, the 'Eye's gates shimmered open. Mist poured outward, and as the Li Clan disciples emerged one after another, an involuntary murmur ran through the crowd of onlookers.

The air crackled; an unseen force brushed their skin, making seasoned elders shiver. Birds nearby fell silent, amplifying the strange energy. An elder's eyes widened, steps faltering; he stepped back, showing the disciples' palpable change. Their sigils glowed faintly, a testament to the trials they had faced. Their auras exuded undeniable transformation.

At the forefront stood Ling Li, her eyes sharp yet glistening with relief. She rushed forward, embracing Ren and Lily, her hands trembling as she touched their faces. "You came back," she whispered, voice breaking.

Li Shenwu stood tall, beard trembling as he stroked it. "Hmph. You survived. Good. The 'Eye' does not grant mercy — it grants truth. You have proven yourselves." Pride filled his voice, but unease simmered beneath. The disciples' new power could shift the clan's politics. Behind his gruff exterior, he feared what could happen if this strength went unchecked.

Li Tianyuan nodded, his gaze sweeping across the disciples. "Losses are heavy, but your strength has grown. The clan endures."

Shinsei raised his hands in blessing, his voice calm. "You have walked through sacrifice, truth, and loyalty. The dragon's vision has marked you. Guard your hearts, for the world will test you again. Soon, you'll face the trials at the Grand Celestial Summit, where politics and prowess will clash. Prepare yourselves, for it will not only challenge your strength but also your unity."

The Li Clan Changed

The disciples stepped out of the 'Eye' transformed. Their backs were straighter, their gazes sharper, their auras honed into blades of resolve. As they emerged, the hiss of the wind against scorched stone filled the air, mingling with the acrid scent of smoldering earth, grounding them in the present. They had been tested, broken, and reforged in the crucible of the 'Dragon's Eye'. Every breath they took carried with it the warmth of ash and the coolness of lingering smoke, symbols of the transformation they had undergone.

Ren, her needles glowed faintly, each pulse a reminder of the price she had paid. Her lifespan had shrunk, yet her resolve never wavered. Every moment lost carried echoes of her mother's lullabies — a tune she longed to sing to a child of her own. That dream dimmed, but in its place burned a fiercer sacrifice. Her cultivation had shifted to the 'Golden Needle Sutra', needles that no longer demanded blood with every strike but carried the weight of loyalty and sacrifice as their eternal fuel.

Lily, her voice rang clear, piercing lies with effortless precision. Even without the carp's whisper, she could discern truth from falsehood, her spirit attuned to honesty itself. Yet each use of her gift carried a cost. Her throat would often feel raw, and the strain on her vocal cords left her hoarse, a reminder that truth comes at a price. In addition, deploying her 'Voice of Resonant Truth' left her vulnerable to spiritual backlash, a push and pull that required constant vigilance. Her cultivation had become the Voice of Resonant Truth, a heavenly technique that wove sound into shields, unraveled deception, and steadied hearts.

Four Eyes, his shield shimmered, a fortress of loyalty and silence. His cultivation had crystallized into the 'Silent Ink Dao', strokes of shadowed script that erased illusions, bound enemies, and rewrote fate itself. His aura was dark yet steady, a quiet inevitability that pressed against every soul, and the 'Shield of the Loyal Heart' let him turn it into a protective barrier.

Shun, emerging last, his steps were firm, his aura radiant. Flames rose around him like banners unfurling on a battlefield. The disciples who saw him felt their hearts ignite, courage surging as if his fire had touched their souls. Elders bowed their heads, recognizing that Shun had not merely survived — he had claimed the 'Phoenix Command Sutra', a technique of fire and leadership. His flames rallied allies, dispelled fear, and promised rebirth even in ruin.

Fatty. His cultivation awakened into the 'Stoneheart Resilience', a technique that turned his body into an unyielding bastion. His qi condensed into layers of stone-like armor, each strike against him absorbed and redirected. He became the wall others could lean on, steady and unbreakable.

Chatty. In the chaos, his voice resonated with something more profound. Animals stirred in the distance, their qi responding to his call. His cultivation awakened into the 'Beastbond Communion', a technique

that allowed him to communicate with and tame beasts, weaving their strength into the clan's defense. His bond with creatures became a living shield and weapon, a harmony between man and beast.

Jack, his movements pierced through the storm like lightning. His cultivation awakened into the 'Swift Gale Reflex', a technique of speed and precision. Each strike whipped against his foes before danger could reach him, his body flowing like wind, his reflexes cleaving sharper than blades. He became the clan's spear, striking first and striking true.

Nicu. His qi manifested as a protective flame, wrapping around allies like a mantle. His cultivation awakened into the 'Guardian's Ember', a technique that shielded comrades from harm, burning away curses and weakening enemy strikes. His fire was not destructive — it was protective, a promise that Shun would never stand alone.

Ailun, his aura surged with quiet authority. His cultivation awakened into the 'Iron Oath Sentinel', a technique that bound his spirit to Shun's. Whenever Shun faltered, Ailun's qi reinforced him, doubling his strength. His presence was a vow of loyalty, a sentinel who would never break, even if the heavens themselves turned against them.

Chapter 454: LET THE WORLD WATCH

The Clan's Reflection

Four Eyes looked upon them all, his voice steady, carrying the weight of both grief and triumph.

"We lost fellow disciples. We gained power. We carry both with us. The clan will remember."

The echo of his words hung in the air like a specter. In the distance, the bamboo creaked softly in the wind, a gentle reminder of those who had passed. Silence stretched, heavy with unspoken thoughts, until he finally voiced the question that lingered in every heart:

“What price are we willing to pay next?”

A murmur rippled through the crowd, disciples exchanging glances, elders bowing their heads.

Ren stepped forward, her voice tinged with hope and a quiet bitterness.

“If we must pay a price, then let it be for something greater than ourselves. Let it be for unity.”

Four Eyes nodded, absorbing her words, the murmurs of agreement and dissent weaving into a shared contemplation. It was not a question that demanded a single answer, but a bond that tied them together.

Ling Li's Declaration

Ling Li's gaze swept across her disciples, her heart heavy yet proud. Her aura pressed against them like a mantle, reminding them of the strength she carried.

“The 'Dragon's Eye' has judged you. And you have endured. Now, the world will see the Li Clan anew.”

The Li Mansion shimmered in the distance. As Ling Li finished speaking, the light shifted subtly, bathing the trees in a golden hue as if acknowledging their newfound strength. Spectral dragons circled overhead, their cries softer now, lending a touch of reverence to the air. The Li Clan stood reborn, their techniques awakened, their unity tested, their destiny reshaped.

The Wider World Reacts

The valley trembled not only with the Li Clan's emergence but with the whispers that spread beyond its borders. Messengers carried news like wildfire, and soon the entire cultivation world turned its gaze upon the clan that had survived the 'Dragon's Eye'.

Neighboring Clans

The Azure Crane Clan, known for its scholars and strategists, gathered in hushed councils. Their patriarch stroked his beard, murmuring, "The Phoenix Command Sutra... a technique of leadership. If Shun rises, he will not only guide his clan but also command nations. We must prepare for a world where the Li Clan sits at the center."

The Stone Serpent Clan, hardened warriors, scoffed outwardly but tightened their defenses. Their matriarch whispered to her generals, "Ren's needles glow with sacrifice. Lily's voice pierces lies. Chu Yan's shield cannot be broken. They are no longer mere disciples — they are pillars. If they march, the ground itself will tremble."

Rulers of the Realm

In the Hidden Valley's imperial court, ministers debated feverishly. Some saw opportunity: "If the Li Clan aligns with the throne, stability will follow." Others feared upheaval: "If they defy us, their unity and power could fracture the empire itself."

The duty leader, representing Otako, listened in silence, his gaze distant. He finally spoke: "The carp's prophecy has awakened. The Li Clan has endured. Whether ally or rival, they will shape the age to come."

Rival Sects' Reaction

Around the valley, rival sects watched with narrowed eyes, each spokesperson embodying their sect's distinct menace.

Iron Fang Sect: Their leader, rough and sharp-tongued, spat words like daggers. His voice rasped like stone.

"Ren carries a cursed technique. It will kill her. Let her cling to it," he growled, venom in every word. He leaned to his inner circle with a sly glint. "When her guard is lowered, strike. Prepare our assassins. Await my signal. Begin forging an alliance with the Moonshade Clan. Their influence will turn the tide." His intent was clear: to destabilize the Li Clan before their strength could solidify.

Crimson Lotus Sect: Elegant yet cold, their disciples murmured with serpentine sibilance. Their spokesperson, voice smooth as silk, sneered:

“The carp’s voice shields Lily. We cannot twist her truth, but we will find another way.” The words dripped with false courtesy, bitterness hidden beneath polished tones.

Moonshade Clan: Mystics projected an aura of ethereal coolness. Their representative spoke with a rhythm that echoed the moon’s cycles:

“Ling Li’s husband’s shield is too strong. His loyalty binds him. We cannot break it.” His cadence was deliberate, as if each word marked a phase of inevitability.

“Don’t forget about his Silent Ink Dao.” One elder said.

The rival sects had hoped to cripple the Li Clan inside the ‘Eye’. Instead, they watched the clan emerge stronger than before, cultivation techniques blazing like banners of victory.

The Curse’s Whisper

As the Iron Fang leader finished, a fleeting chill rippled through Ren’s pulse, tracing her spine like an icy finger. A subtle ache blossomed in her chest, while a fine crack etched itself across the surface of her needle case, unnoticed but insidiously profound. The rhythmic throb beneath her skin, almost audible, reminded her of the curse’s whisper beneath her new strength. Ren clenched her fists, forcing her breath steady. ‘If this curse is the price, then I will bear it. But I will not let it break me.’

Her words were quiet, but those nearest felt their weight. The rival sects saw her falter for a heartbeat, and their eyes gleamed with predatory hunger. Yet the Li Clan disciples stood taller around her, their unity a shield against the world’s schemes.

Ling Li's Warning

Ling Li's gaze swept across the valley, her aura pressing against friend and foe alike. Her voice carried like thunder wrapped in silk:

"The Dragon's Eye has judged us. We have endured. Let the world watch, let rivals plot. The Li Clan will not be broken. We are reborn."

The rival sects fell silent, their whispers swallowed by the weight of her words. The wider world had seen the Li Clan anew—and none could deny that the age of their rise had begun.

Ling Li's Reunion with Four Eyes

After the formalities, Ling Li's composure cracked. She rushed into Four Eyes' arms. Her breath caught as tears gathered. She inhaled — the faint sandalwood of his robe wrapped her like a blanket. Four Eyes held her steady, grounding himself after the 'Eye's turmoil. The twins squealed and dashed to their father. They laughed and sobbed as they clung to him. Four Eyes bent low, gathered them close, his heart surging with relief.

Chapter 455: POWER IS A LONELY SEAT

"Father! We missed you!" Kim Kim yelled.

Chin Chin pushed his father's face away when he kissed her, "Father! Your beard tickles!" She said, laughing.

Four Eyes' heart warmed. He had missed his daughters as much as he had missed his wife. Affection shone in his eyes, though a whisper of doubt crept in. It was a doubt he often kept hidden. He wondered if he could meet the expectations of fatherhood, especially with the clan's pressures. He turned to his wife. "Were the boys behaving while I was away?" he asked, eyeing Ling Li's protruding, round, pregnant belly.

Ling Li chuckled, knowing there were three little girls inside her womb, but that had to remain her secret for now. "They were all well behaved!"

"Don't worry, Father, if they make Mom suffer, I'll teach them a lesson when they come out!" Kim Kim proudly said.

"Yeah! Me too!" Chin Chin chimed in.

The twins' enthusiasm amused both Ling Li and Four Eyes.

Shi Min stepped forward and hugged his sisters, his grip tighter than usual. A faint twitch betrayed his tension. He turned to Shun, Fatty, and Chatty, nodding respectfully, gaze flickering down to hide his fear. The weight of protecting his clan and loved ones pressed on him. Still, his voice was calm and proud: "You've stood strong. You've proven yourselves." His words carried not just admiration but also his hopes and need for leadership.

Chatty's Return to Old Self

Chatty, finally unleashed, puffed out his chest and recounted his ordeals to Pharsa, his wife. Words spilled forth. His voice soared with pride. "I faced shadows, phantoms, and the 'Eye' itself — and I stood tall!" He gestured theatrically. Pharsa arched an amused eyebrow. Her gaze combined admiration and faint skepticism, anchoring his bravado. Cannonball, the Enfield, newly reunited with him, flattened both his small ears.

El Padre and El Capitan exchanged sly glances. To them, Chatty strutted like a peacock before his mate, feathers fanned wide. Their laughter dispelled the tension.

Elders' Gratification

Watching these reunions, Li Shenwu, Li Tianyuan, and Shinsei felt gratified. The disciples had endured, grown, and returned stronger. Li Shenwu's voice carried, solemn and proud, yet a flicker of unspoken grief seemed to linger in the pause that followed, as if a shadow of personal loss tempered his call for celebration: "Let us return and celebrate. We shall give our fallen disciples proper burials. Remember, there is no success without sacrifice."

The words resonated. Everyone bowed their heads, vowing to honor the fallen and carry their strength forward.

The Triumphant Return

The Li Clan mounted their horses. Servants loaded provisions and prepared carriages for the fallen, whose bodies were arranged with serene respect. The creak of saddles and the cadence of hooves carried a grave weight, slowing as the fallen passed, signaling silent tribute. The procession advanced, fusing mourning with a dignity evident in their unwavering pace.

They rode toward the Li Clan's mansion in the heart of the Hidden Valley.

Cheers erupted. People lined the road, applauding and shouting. Voices boomed like thunder.

Li Shenwu and Li Tianyuan, proud and generous, scattered power stones into the throng.

In Hidden Valley, these stones were rarer than mortal coin. Revered for their spiritual energy and as symbols of blessing and power, power stones were believed to be imbued with ancestral spirits, offering guidance and fortune. People scrambled to snatch them, tallying newfound wealth with wide grins. Children dashed after the procession, eager for more. Laughter echoed through the air.

Other sects and clans also paraded, raising banners to announce their disciples' achievements. Yet none compared to the Li Clan. Their procession blazed with triumph, their banners snapping, their aura unmatched.

The valley is nestled amidst towering mountains. It was steeped in a rich tapestry of history. Legends spoke of warriors and rival clans. Distant peaks, shrouded in mist, stood as silent sentinels over Hidden Valley. The place was revered for its spiritual power. As the procession passed, cheers filled the air. The clan's shared pride and triumph rang in every shout.

A Feast Beneath Flickering Blades

The great hall of the Li Clan mansion blazed with lantern light, its golden glow reflecting off polished jade pillars. Ling Li, seated at the center of the room, felt the coolness of the jade seeping through her robes, grounding her amid the rising murmurs around her. The air was thick with incense and murmurs, the weight of triumph mingling with grief. A smoky draft drifted unexpectedly from the corners of the hall, carrying a faint chill that contrasted with the warmth of celebration. Every member of the Li Clan and extended family within the Hidden Valley was present, yet Ling Li's focus remained on the way the jade shimmered under the flickering lights, a reminder of both beauty and strength.

But beneath the grandeur, envy and jealousy simmered like hidden embers. Ling Li, the matriarch, sat at the center of attention, her calm presence a beacon and a target. As eyes followed her every move, her grip tightened ever so slightly around the cup in her hand as the whispers grew louder. Her gaze met an empty seat briefly, thinking of an ally lost to the shadows of ambition, a painful echo of the past. 'Mother warned me power is a lonely seat,' she thought, the truth of those words settling heavily in her heart.

Whispers floated around, questioning why her daughters and husband shone brighter than their own kin. A hand clenched around a wine cup still spoke of unspoken rivalry, while a dismissive glance towards the table hinted at brewing resentment.

Vicious Inner Thoughts

Among the younger cultivator girls, resentment burned. Their smiles were masks, their hearts venomous.

"Ren thinks she's special because she survived the 'Eye'. Hah. Let her needles drain her life away — then we'll see how long she lasts."

"Lily's carp voice? A trick. She's nothing but a girl who hides behind whispers. I'll prove her weak when the time comes."

"Why do the elders praise them? My cultivation is just as strong. If only I had been chosen, I would have shown them all."

"Ling Li sits there like a queen. Does she think her daughters are untouchable? I'll make sure Ren and Lily learn humility."

Their eyes gleamed with hatred, lips curling as they watched Ren and Lily laugh with the twins.

Chapter 456: THE BANQUET FILLED WITH GRUDGE

Shinsei's Blessing

The hall fell silent as Shinsei, in simple monk's garb, rose to speak. His calm, resonant voice settled over the gathering, "Roots must intertwine, or the wind will take us all," he began, reinforcing the shared strength that unity within the Li Clan demanded.

"Brothers, sisters, disciples of the Li Clan. Tonight we feast, but let us not forget those who fell within the 'Dragon's Eye'. Their sacrifice is not in vain. They are the roots beneath our tree, unseen yet holding us upright.

May their spirits find peace in the celestial realms. May their names be remembered not with sorrow, but with pride. For the 'Eye' consumes the unworthy, yet it has marked us with unity. Guard your hearts, for envy and ambition are shadows that devour faster than blades. Let us honor the fallen by living with resolve."

The hall bowed their heads as the words settled like a solemn veil.

Li Shenwu Opens the Banquet

Li Shenwu rose, his presence commanding. His beard trembled as he stroked it, eyes sharp yet proud. Yet, as he surveyed the hall, the slightest of shivers moved through his fingertips, a subtle twitch that betrayed his unease. A momentary hesitation crossed his face, a fleeting shadow that softened his confident stance. He forced a smile, though it failed to reach his eyes, hinting at an unease he could not entirely mask.

"Tonight, we celebrate. Tonight, we mourn. Raise your cups — for victory, for sacrifice, for the Li Clan."

Wine was poured, and elders on both sides offered toasts. Cups clinked, voices rose, and the banquet began.

Ling Li and Four Eyes

Ling Li, who seldom attended clan gatherings, sat in silence, her gaze sweeping across the hall. She took in the elders, the whispers, and the flickers of envy. Four Eyes observed alongside her, their silence matched.

Ling Li leaned close, her voice soft. "Do you see how the plum trees bloom in winter, hiding the storm beneath their petals?" she whispered, a seemingly casual remark but with a hidden warning for Four Eyes about the facade of politeness among the clan members.

Once in a while, Ling Li leaned close, her voice soft.

"That one, Elder Han. He hides his ambition behind courtesy. Watch him."

Four Eyes nodded, his eyes narrowing. "And the one beside him?"

"Elder Fan. She smiles at me, but her daughters envy ours. Be wary." Ling Li caught a glimpse of Elder Fan, standing nearby, her sleeves carrying a subtle trace of crushed peonies. The scent was a quiet reminder of Fan's relentless ambition, tied to her family's legacy in the valley. The peonies, her mother's favorite, once symbolized her family's thriving influence before her sister's overreaching aspirations had almost blighted their name. Mei was determined not to repeat the past but to rise despite it.

Four Eyes exhaled slowly. "Then I'll keep my shield ready — for you, for them."

Their quiet exchange was a fortress of trust amid the storm of scrutiny.

The Children's Laughter

Meanwhile, Ren, Lily, and the twins enjoyed the food, oblivious to the daggers of envy aimed at them. The twins' laughter rang out, bright and unrestrained, drawing heads across the hall.

"Big Brother! Look, more dumplings!" Kim Kim shouted, her cheeks stuffed.

Chin Chin giggled, waving a chicken leg. "We'll eat more than Uncle Quan Ye!"

Their joy was infectious, deepening the jealousy of onlookers.

Secret Negotiations in the Valley

As the banquet's formalities waned, the weight of hidden consequences hung heavy in the air. The emissaries knew that success promised alliances that could bolster their sects' standing and resources, while failure threatened disgrace and potential ruin. With such high stakes, they slipped into shadowed alcoves and quiet chambers, their silken words shedding courtesy for sharper intent.

Iron Fang Sect: Their emissaries spoke of "mutual defense" and "shared prosperity," but their eyes lingered on Ren. One envoy leaned close to his counterpart, whispering:

"Ren's Golden Needle Sutra is formidable, but the curse gnaws at her lifespan. Exploit it. Offer her false remedies, bind her trust, then strike when her strength falters."

Their strategy was clear—test Ren’s endurance, probe for weakness, and prepare assassins cloaked in diplomacy.

Crimson Lotus Sect: Draped in silks, they praised Lily’s clarity, yet their smiles were knives.

"The Voice of Resonant Truth shields Lily from deception. Lies will not pass her lips. But poison does not lie — it simply kills. Let us weave toxins into gifts, subtle and unseen. If truth cannot be twisted, let it be silenced."

Their plots turned toward subtle sabotage, knowing Lily’s gift made manipulation impossible.

Moonshade Clan: Their mystics spoke in a deliberate cadence, their voices echoing like the phases of the moon.

"Ling Li’s husband wields both the Shield of Loyal Heart and the Silent Ink Dao. His loyalty binds him, his ink erases illusions. We cannot break him head-on. Instead, we wait. His shield drains him. His breath falters. When cracks appear, inevitability will be ours."

Their plan was patience — watching for the toll his dual cultivation demanded.

Reluctant respect tinged the whisper, acknowledging Four Eyes’ prowess as both deterrent and potential asset. Yet even he bore weakness — moments of labored breath, cracks in his aura that hinted at the toll of maintaining such a shield. These vulnerabilities could be seeds of unforeseen alliances, where respect might force hands into uneasy partnership.

The Morning After the Banquet

The dawn broke over the Hidden Valley, pale and misty. Lanterns and wine cups still littered the mansion's courtyards — remnants of the night before. Faint echoes of laughter lingered. Toasts seemed to hang in the air. The grass underfoot was cool and damp, and each step released the earthy smell of fresh rain. Footsteps carried whispers of last night's revelry. Beneath the warmth of celebration, the air had shifted; it was thicker, colder. Tension crackled, unspoken yet heavy.

Inside the clan's inner halls, whispers emerged — bolder now. What was once venom, veiled behind cordial smiles at the banquet, now pooled in hushed, pointed conversations.

"Ren's needles are sharp but drain her life. She won't last. Why praise a technique that kills?" The voice was low, conspiratorial. If Ren falters, they hope to inherit her position, gain the matriarch's favor, and access powerful artifacts and elite training.

"Lily's carp voice is a mere illusion. Truth is brittle. When the world shouts lies, she will fall."

"Ling Li's daughters are paraded like jewels, while ours are ignored. The matriarch favors her bloodline too much."

"Master Chu Yan may have returned with a shield, but even shields crack. Let us see how long his loyalty holds when tested."

Jealousy was no longer hidden. Young cultivators eyed Ren and Lily with open disdain, envy sharpening into rivalry. Elders exchanged wary glances, sensing a storm brewing within their ranks.

Chapter 457: EMISSARIES CAME

Ling Li's Vigilance

Ling Li sat in her private chamber, listening. Her attendants carried murmurs — sharp, persistent. One hand rested on her swollen belly, a comforting reminder. Storms gathered. Her gaze was distant, unfocused. Yet beneath that calm lay a deep, unspoken fear—not just for herself but for her unborn child. She knew envy was a poison, seeping faster than any blade. The thought gnawed at her. 'Could her children rise above the discord that plagued their line?'

Four Eyes entered quietly. His presence steadied her amidst the swirl of worry.

"They whisper louder now," Ling Li said softly.

Four Eyes nodded grimly. "Jealousy is a fire. If left unchecked, it will consume the clan from within."

Ling Li's eyes hardened. "Then we must be ready. Not all threats come from outside."

Arrival of the Emissaries

By midmorning, the Li Mansions' gates stirred. Footsteps, measured and resonant, echoed across stone. Lanterns flickered against shadows as cloaked figures arrived in solemn procession. Banners lowered in

feigned humility, silence widening as they halted, holding the valley's collective breath. Rival sect emissaries had come under the guise of diplomacy.

Iron Fang Sect emissaries moved with rigid discipline, eyes sharp as blades. They spoke of "peaceful exchange," yet their leader's gaze lingered on Ren. A twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed concealed hunger, barely masked by courtesy. Fingers drummed a rhythm against his thigh — restlessness that revealed predatory intent.

Crimson Lotus Sect emissaries draped themselves in silken crimson robes, smiles smooth and practiced. Their words dripped with false courtesy as they openly praised Lily's gift. Yet their narrowed eyes betrayed calculation, not admiration.

Moonshade Clan emissaries moved like shadows, slow and deliberate. They bowed to Four Eyes, voices calm and measured:

"Your shield is formidable. Loyalty binds you. Yet even the moon wanes."

The Li Mansions' courtyards brimmed with greetings — honeyed, ritualistic. Yet beneath every word lurked a test. Every gesture was a blade masked by silk.

The Clan's Unease

Ren and Lily, oblivious to the envy threading through their clan, greeted emissaries with polished courtesy. The twins laughed nearby, their joy vivid against the tension-thick air. Then, a sudden gust toppled one of their toys. It skittered across the courtyard, crashing into silence. The hush fell, casting a shadow over their laughter.

The younger girls of the Li Clan watched, eyes narrowed, envy sharpened by the outsiders' presence.

Shi Min stood close to his sisters, jaw tight, hand resting near his blade. He sensed danger — both from within and without. El Padre and El Capitan, together with Shun, Fatty, and Chatty, exchanged glances, unease flickering in their eyes. Bravado faltered under the weight of the emissaries' presence.

Shi Min scanned the crowd. Alliances shifted, glances cut like knives. He could not merely watch. With a steady breath, he signaled — discreet, precise — to El Padre and El Capitan. Trusted allies, revered for sharp perception. This gesture sealed his intent: step into the turmoil. Protect his family as the storm gathered.

Testing the Clan

The emissaries did not strike openly. Instead, they tested the Li Clan through ritualized exchanges:

Ren was offered rare herbs, their fragrance sweet but laced with subtle toxins. She smiled politely, her needles glowing faintly, and declined with courtesy. Yet the ache in her chest reminded her of the curse's whisper.

Lily was praised with honeyed words, but when asked to judge a ceremonial oath, she pierced through the falsehood instantly. Her voice rang clear, exposing the emissary's deception. The crowd murmured, admiration mingled with unease.

Four Eyes stood silent, his aura pressing against the emissaries. When one attempted a subtle illusion, his Silent Ink Dao erased it with a single stroke of his brush. The emissary bowed, face pale, realizing their trick had been undone.

Shun was approached with offers of alliance, promises of shared fire techniques. He listened, but when his Phoenix Command Sutra flared, the emissaries felt their courage waver, their words faltering under the weight of his flame-born authority.

Ling Li watched from the dais, her gaze sharp. She saw the emissaries' false smiles, the poisoned gifts, the whispered plots. Her husband stood beside her, his Shield of Loyal Heart shimmering faintly, his breath steady but strained. She knew the toll it took, yet his presence was unyielding.

'They test us,' she thought. 'Every word, every gesture is a blade. But blades can be broken.'

The Spark of Conflict

The negotiations had been a dance of veiled words and sharpened smiles. Yet tension, like a drawn bowstring, could not hold forever. Ren felt the weight of her duty pressing against her chest, a somber reminder of what was at stake. Her family's honor hung in the balance, and the faint hope for a future free from conflict flickered delicately in her mind. As she glanced at the emissaries, a private fear gnawed at her, whispering the consequences of failure. Yet she steeled herself, knowing that the strength of her resolve must not waver.

An emissary from the Iron Fang Sect, his patience frayed, stepped forward with feigned courtesy. He presented Ren with a jade vial, claiming it was a rare elixir to ease her burden. But as the stopper was removed, the air thickened with a foreboding presence. The emissary's toxin, a crafty creation designed to exploit the unique vulnerabilities of the Golden Needle Sutra, was so subtle it could unravel her

techniques from within; only a conscious reinforcement of the Sutra's protective layers could guard against its silent attack.

Ren's hand trembled as the ache in her chest flared. The curse whispered, threatening to consume her. The emissary's smile widened, predatory.

The Techniques Unveiled

Before Ren faltered, Lily's Voice of Resonant Truth rang out, sharp and clear:

"This gift is false. Poison cloaked in courtesy."

Her words pierced the deception, the crowd gasping as the emissary's trick was laid bare — a single breath caught, a moment of suspended disbelief, before the truth rippled through them. Shock glinted in their eyes, a tide turning as palpable as the icy wind that suddenly swept the courtyard. It was in that heartbeat — a collective intake of breath — that the crowd's allegiance shifted, drawn inexorably to Lily's unwavering voice and the honor of the Li Clan.

Chapter 458: THE BLADES ARE DRAWN

The emissary snarled, casting aside pretense. His blade flashed, aimed at Ren's heart.

Four Eyes moved instantly. His Shield of Loyal Heart surged, manifesting in the air like a transparent curtain woven from shimmering silk, each strand humming with latent energy. The temperature around them dropped suddenly, sending a fleeting chill across exposed skin. Ren felt a tingle race down her spine as the barrier enveloped her, its presence as palpable as a sudden winter breeze. When the emissary's strike hit, the shield rang with a resonant, bell-like note, the sparks scattering harmlessly.

Four Eyes' brush swept through the air, and with a single stroke of the Silent Ink Dao, the emissary's illusion dissolved, leaving him exposed.

Ren, her needles glowing gold, thrust them forward. The Golden Needle Sutra pulsed, each strike carrying the weight of loyalty. The emissary staggered, his veins burning with the force of her sacrifice.

Shun stepped into the fray, flames erupting around him. The Phoenix Command Sutra blazed, banners of fire unfurling above the courtyard. As the heat surged, Shun felt a momentary flicker of doubt, questioning the weight of his command. Yet, in that instant, he steeled his resolve, recalling the legacy of the leaders who had come before him. His voice carried robust authority, his flames rallying disciples and dispelling fear. The emissaries felt their courage falter, their words silenced by his command.

The Courtyard in Chaos

The rival emissaries recoiled, masks of diplomacy torn away. Crimson Lotus disciples hissed, their silken robes concealing hidden blades. Moonshade mystics whispered curses, shadows coiling at their feet.

Yet the Li Clan stood unyielding.

Lily's voice cut through lies.

Ren's needles struck with sacrifice.

Four Eyes' shield held firm, his ink rewriting fate.

Shun's flames rallied the clan, igniting courage in every heart.

The courtyard erupted in chaos, but the Li Clan's unity blazed brighter than the storm.

Ling Li's Command

Ling Li rose, her aura vast, pressing against every soul present. Her voice thundered, calm yet absolute:

"Our forebears taught us that in unity lies our strength. The Dragon's Eye judged us, and we endured. You test us with poison and deceit. Just as the elements bend in the tempest, now you see the truth - our strength is not yours to break. We stand unbroken, as we always have, as we always will."

The emissaries faltered, their plots exposed, their blades dulled by the clan's power. The valley itself seemed to tremble, spectral dragons circling above, their cries echoing judgment.

Foreshadowing of War

The emissaries withdrew, cloaks swirling, their eyes burning with hatred and calculation. As they retreated, the faint scent of smoldering ash hung in the air, carried by the breeze like the whisper of coming storms. They had tested the Li Clan and failed. Yet their retreat was not a surrender; it was a promise.

Whispers spread: alliances would be reforged, assassins prepared, wars kindled. The Li Clan's triumph had shattered the balance, and the wider world would not let it stand unchallenged.

The emissaries spoke of alliances, trade, and profit. Yet their eyes blazed with intent: assassination, sabotage, manipulation. The Li Clan's triumph in the 'Dragon's Eye' had shattered the balance of power. Rivals would not let it stand.

Ling Li's gaze swept the courtyard. She saw her clan's envy, emissaries' false smiles, and the storm gathering on both fronts.

"The banquet was but a feast beneath flickering blades," she thought. "Now the blades are drawn."

A lantern, dulled by night and cracked from its fall, lay in the courtyard. Its splintered glow threw jagged, restless shadows. It signaled fragility and tension threading through their midst—a turning point as the storm gathered.

Ling Li's gaze lingered on the cracked lantern in the courtyard, its splintered glow casting jagged shadows.

Return to Verdant Bamboo Pavilion

The Verdant Bamboo Pavilion creaked in the wind. Each groan of its timbers warned of secrets buried deep and dangers yet to come. Mist curled around its pillars, cloaking them in a chill that prickled the

skin. The air carried a metallic tang. Bamboo leaves rustled in harmony with the distant wail of a temple bell—a sound like hushed voices conspiring in the dark. A cool breeze slipped through the structure, as if the Pavilion itself exhaled, alive with history and mystery.

After two tense days within the Li Mansion, Ling Li and her group readied themselves methodically before departing for the Pavilion. Li Shenwu and Li Tianyuan mounted their horses and rode alongside the carriage, their faces set and eyes scanning the road ahead for threats, both clearly on high alert. Pavilion disciples followed in precise formation, their movement synchronizing as an automatic display of discipline and unity. Shensei, deliberately choosing to ride last, kept a close eye on their surroundings, providing a quiet but vigilant presence meant to steady the group.

Their purpose was clear: Ren and Lily would open the Hidden Portal and reveal its message. Yet each step to the Pavilion felt like a march toward a precipice. Rumors whispered of two possible outcomes. One spoke of an ancient curse that could plunge the world into chaos, pitting brother against brother. The other promised a bond so powerful it would make the Li Clan indestructible — fortified by blood, loyalty, endless wealth, and strength.

Inside the carriage, Ling Li glanced out at the twins, who fidgeted with impatience before running to mount up with their father and Big Brother Shi Min. Their delighted shouts and laughter rang out as they rode off, performing playful gestures while dodging puddles. Ling Li watched, then nodded at them approvingly before closing her eyes and shifting to rest one hand on her belly, consciously settling herself to seek comfort from the faint heartbeat within.

A vision slipped into her mind. She remembered a moonlit night in the Pavilion, her parents' whispers mixing with the breeze through the bamboo. They spoke of trust and the fragile peace that bound their clan. It was the night she promised to protect her family, vowed never to let shadows dim their laughter.

The carriage rocked, reminding her of life's balance, as delicate as that moonlit promise.

Her thoughts drifted back to the storm at the Li Mansion — the whispers of envy, the emissaries' false smiles that lingered like poison. Threats pressed down on her chest, matching the rhythm of her heartbeat. She released each breath softly, unwilling to disturb the fragile peace.

Chapter 459: RETURN TO BAMBOO PAVILION

Butler Oda entered quietly, bowing low. His voice was hushed, yet urgent.

"Master, should we act against the sects who oppose us?"

Ling Li opened her eyes, her gaze steady, her tone calm yet edged with steel.

"Not yet. My principle is justice, not vengeance. We will wait. The truth reveals itself in time. Those who came to us will surely seek out the Li Elder for collusion. I want to see who betrays and who remains loyal. When the moment comes, we will strike once — swiftly, decisively. The guilty punished, the innocent spared."

Oda cupped his hands in salute, bowing more deeply. As he straightened, his face tightened with determination, though a flicker of worry crossed his features. He lingered briefly until dismissed, then turned and exited quietly, each footstep controlled.

"Understood."

He departed silently, the weight of her words pressing upon him like a mantle.

The Emissaries' Negotiations

As the clan traveled, emissaries indeed met privately with Li Clan elders. Silk robes rustled, candles flickered, and shadows danced across the chamber walls like restless spirits. Hidden blades glinted faintly in the dim light. Their presence was not diplomacy — it was a warning.

The Iron Fang emissary leaned forward, his voice rasping like stone dragged across steel.

"Strike now. Ren's cursed technique drains her. She's weak. End her before she grows."

His eyes gleamed with ruthless hunger. Fingers drummed on the desk. The rhythm was relentless. Each tap was sharp, impatient. Each beat demanded action.

"Delay is weakness. Every day she lives, the Li Clan grows."

Several elders shifted uneasily, their silence betraying fear of immediate bloodshed.

The Crimson Lotus spokesperson wore fine silk, their smile cold and polite, every word dripping venom masked as courtesy.

"Wait. Strike Ling Li at the Family Competition in three months. Her daughters will be exposed, and her husband will be distracted. The attack will be public and humiliating. The Jade Dragon Emblem, symbol of their honor, will become a mark of downfall."

Their voice lowered, serpentine.

"We will weave illusions, poison truths, and let envy destroy her from within."

Several elders glanced sidelong at each other across the table, some nervously adjusting their robes, their hands betraying their hesitation, as they considered the allure of striking under the protection of tradition.

The Moonshade mystic spoke with cadence like the moon's phases, deliberate and inevitable. His words seemed to wax and wane with a lunar rhythm, every phrase a subtle pull of the tide, drawing them closer to their destiny.

"Chu Yan's shield will fail. Wait for the cracks. Then strike."

He slowly raised a polished mirror from his sleeve and angled it so its surface caught the candlelight, offering it as a gesture of goodwill to the elders during their negotiation.

"Take these mirrors. Find his weakness. Let us enter your archives."

His tone was calm, as if betrayal were destiny itself.

Li Clan Elders' Division

The chamber grew tense as the elders shifted in their seats or stiffened their posture. Some gripped their cups with white knuckles, and a few exchanged wary glances, anticipation and suspicion clouding their faces.

Elder Han slammed his cup down, wine spilling across the table. His voice was sharp, ambition burning in his eyes. "Strike now! Ling Li's influence grows too fast. Delay will destroy us." The memory of his brother's betrayal haunted him, driving him toward rashness. He remembered the day he found his brother gone, the family crest left torn in the ashes of his burned home. The wound never healed. The loyalty he once believed in was shattered, leaving suspicion and anger. He forgot that Ling Li had once saved him and his family from death and exile.

Elder Fan lifted her perfumed sleeves with deliberate poise, fingers fanning them out before her as she leaned forward with a razor-thin smile.

"No. The Competition is best. Let her disgrace be public. Let envy sharpen the blade."

Voices rose, and alliances shifted. Some elders pushed for violence now, others for humiliation later. Silence fell, heavy with potential betrayal. For a moment, the echoes of raised voices faded. A few elders remained silent. Their loyalty to Ling Li was unshaken, but their fear was evident. The quiet was brief yet charged, setting the stage for the storm to come.

Ling Li, though absent from the chamber, jolted from her meditation in the carriage when a sudden, chilling draft swept inside. She inhaled sharply as the faint scent of jasmine—the same scent that once signaled a trusted friend's betrayal — drifted in, triggering the vivid memory of that morning's treachery.

Her thoughts whispered:

"They plot in shadows. Some hunger for blood now, others for spectacle later. But all sharpen their blades against me."

Outside, Four Eyes guided his mount alongside the twins, glancing back periodically to check on Ling Li in the carriage. When their eyes met, he set his jaw with quiet determination, adjusting his grip on the reins, and the air around him shimmered faintly, the Shield of Loyal Heart activating as a visible sign of his protective resolve.

"I will shield her. I will not falter."

The twins laughed, oblivious to the storm gathering. Their joy was fragile, a flicker of light against the encroaching dark.

The Bamboo Pavilion loomed ahead, its bamboo pillars swaying in the wind. Every creak warned, every shadow threatened. Still, as the clan advanced, a stray lantern flickered in the distance. It cast a small circle of warm light on the path — a symbol of hope in the darkness. Above, a lone bird began to sing. Its melody cut through the heavy air, a reminder that even in gloom, life persists. The air otherwise hung heavy with betrayal, ambition, and looming conflict.

The Hidden Portal awaited, its promise uncertain. Curse or covenant, ruin or rebirth — the Li Clan would soon discover which fate the bamboo shadows concealed.

Arrival at Verdant Bamboo Pavilion

By the time the group reached the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, twilight had deepened into a velvet night. Lanterns swayed gently in the wind, their golden light spilling across carved bamboo pillars and polished stone floors. As Li Shenwu approached, he felt a profound sense of calm wash over him, as if he had stepped into a sanctuary draped in the quiet beauty of night. Yet beneath the serenity, a flicker of anxiety stirred within him, anticipation mingling with the warmth of the welcome. The Pavilion's staff and disciples greeted them with bows and warm smiles, ushering the weary travellers into the great hall where a sumptuous feast awaited.

The long tables gleamed with lacquered wood. They were set with steaming bowls of jasmine rice, platters of honey-glazed duck, and crystal pitchers of plum wine. Scents of spice and smoke mingled in the air — a warm counterpoint to the tension that had trailed them from the Hidden Valley.

Chapter 460: THE TWINS' MISCHIEF

As everyone settled, Li Shenwu rose, his presence commanding even in the glow of lantern light. His voice carried across the hall, firm yet edged with gravity:

"Tomorrow, the Hidden Portal shall be opened. Its outcome is unknown, whether curse or blessing, bond or ruin. Tonight, eat well, rest deeply, and steel your hearts. The dawn will test us all." He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle in the room. Then, with a flicker of vulnerability in his gaze, he added, "I ask for your strength, trusting in your courage as I trust in my own hope that we will not face ruin."

A hush followed his words, the weight of destiny pressing down on every disciple. Then, slowly, cups were raised, and the feast began.

Laughter flickered here and there, though muted, as chopsticks clicked against porcelain bowls. Some spoke in hushed tones of the portal's legends, others ate in silence, their thoughts heavy with anticipation. In a corner of the hall, two young disciples whispered, their voices barely audible amid the clamour. "Do you think someone will betray us when the portal opens?" one said, eyes darting nervously. The other replied with a hint of defiance, "We must trust in our courage and unity, even if fear threatens to divide us." Shensei sat quietly at the far end, his calm gaze sweeping the hall, as if measuring each soul's readiness for what lay ahead.

When the meal ended, the Pavilion's disciples guided their guests to assigned quarters. The corridors echoed with soft footsteps and the rustle of robes — one by one, the clan members retired, lanterns dimming behind closed doors. Yet beneath the quiet, an unspoken tension lingered — like the Pavilion itself held its breath, waiting for the storm that tomorrow might unleash.

By the Pond – Lily, Ren, Fatty, and Shun

The pond shimmered under the silver glow of the moon, its surface rippling with faint golden hues. Mist curled low, as if the water itself exhaled secrets. Ren and Lily knelt at the edge, their hands hovering just above the surface, hearts pounding with anticipation.

Suddenly, faint glimmers darted beneath the water. The Golden Spirit Carp appeared, its scales glowing like molten gold. Each ripple it made hummed with ancient resonance, vibrating through the air and into their bones. Legends spoke of this carp as the harbinger of the Gate of Fenghuang, the mythical passage where realms intertwined, marking moments of fate with its spectral dance.

The carp circled slowly, then leapt once, splashing water that shimmered unnaturally — forming fleeting symbols in the air. The symbols resembled fragments of dragon script, glowing briefly before fading into mist.

Lily gasped, clutching her chest as a vibration pulsed through her. A shiver ran down her spine, and her breath quickened with awe and dread. A whisper, not in words but in sensation, filled her: "The portal binds or breaks. Sacrifice and truth must walk together."

Ren's needles pulsed faintly in her sleeve, resonating with the carp's glow. She whispered, her voice tight with worry, "It's warning us... or guiding us."

Fatty gripped his snack, muttering, "Why do spirit fish always speak in riddles?"

Shun's jaw clenched as he pressed his palm to the earth, inscribing qi symbols along the pond's edge, intent on capturing the fleeting dragon script before it vanished.

The pond became a stage of mystery — its golden ripples hinting at the portal's dual nature: curse or bond.

The Twins' Mischief – Inside the Bamboo Pavilion

Meanwhile, the twins slipped out barefoot, giggling as they darted through the Pavilion's corridors. Shadows stretched long. The Seven Shah, guardians in silence, spotted them lurking in the dark. They followed closely, ready to protect if needed, but allowed the children their freedom as long as danger stayed away.

The twins' minds crackled with elders' tales. They recalled stories of the bell's primordial song that once summoned the first guardian dragon's spirit — a story repeated until it felt like an inherited memory. The twins' delight was bound to this legend. Their mischief rang through the corridors as they reached for that fabled past — unaware of the gathering portent in their actions.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin had overheard stories of the Pavilion's forbidden bell—an ancient bronze relic said to resonate with the Hidden Portal. Mischief sparked in their eyes.

"Let's ring it and see if the portal wakes up early!"

The twins sneaked past the guards. Up they climbed, scampering onto carved beams, then tiptoed into the forbidden bell chamber. Shadows danced as they tried to reach the ropes, their laughter echoing like tiny thunderclaps.

Mushu, trained under Ling Li, had already sensed the twins' sly nature. Earlier, when he knocked on their door and found it empty, his heart nearly leapt from his chest. He immediately roused Rockie, Reginald, and Goldie. They scrambled from their beds, talismans glowing as they communicated directions.

With a mischievous grin, Chin Chin swung the rope. The forbidden bell tolled once, deep and resonant, shaking the entire Pavilion's walls. Golden motes of qi scattered through the air, startling birds from the rafters. The sound reverberated. A metallic taste filled the air — sharp and unexpected. It felt as if the bell's echo had imbued the very atmosphere with its supernatural essence.

Now, Mushu and the others arrived just in time to see the jaw-dropping sight: the twins not only ringing the forbidden bell but riding it.

Kim Kim clung to the rope, swinging wildly. Chin Chin sat astride the bell, legs dangling. As she shouted, "We're awakening the dragon!" her triumphant cry suddenly wavered.

A hush descended. The air grew thick with anticipation, hinting at an unseen cost poised to unfold.

The forbidden bell's resonance stirred the Pavilion's wards. Dragon script flickered faintly across the walls, as if the Pavilion itself responded to their prank.

Mushu's jaw dropped.

Rockie muttered, "By the ancestors..."

Goldie nearly fainted.

Tension Heightened

Mushu's heart thundered as he realised the twins had triggered something far beyond childish mischief. Silence gripped the room as the air seemed to hold its breath, every disciple frozen in place, listening to the faint echo of the forbidden bell. The Seven Shah, though amused, tightened their guard, knowing the bell's resonance might draw unwanted attention or awaken forces tied to the Hidden Portal.

In her chamber, Ling Li sat in meditation. The bell's vibration rippled through her womb, jolting her awake. Her eyes snapped open, and she whispered into the silence:

"The storm begins sooner than expected."