

PROTEGE 461

Chapter 461: THE FORBIDDEN BELL

The Pavilion Trembles

The forbidden bell reverberated through Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, its resonance rattling beams and lanterns. Dragon script shimmered across the walls, glowing and fading like smoke. The Pavilion groaned, its age-old wards straining against their binds.

Li Shenwu, Li Tianyuan, and the elders burst from their quarters. Their robes were hastily thrown over their shoulders. Their faces were pale with alarm. Disciples scrambled behind them, weapons half-drawn, unsure whether to defend or flee. The air thickened, charged with qi so dense it pressed against their lungs.

The Carp's Warning Realised

At the pond, the Golden Spirit Carp leapt again. Its scales blazed brighter than before. The ripples it cast no longer shimmered with mystery — they pulsed with urgency. The fleeting dragon script it formed was jagged and fractured, as if warning of imbalance.

Lily clutched Ren's arm, her voice trembling as her eyes filled with dread. "It's not a riddle anymore... It's a warning."

Ren's needles throbbed painfully, resonating with the carp's glow. She whispered, face pale, and lips pressed thin in anxiety, "The portal is stirring. It's already reaching for us."

Fatty dropped his snack, forgotten, his eyes wide. "We're not ready for this..."

Shun's jaw tightened as he traced the fading script with his qi, his voice low and grim, brows drawn in grim concentration. "The portal doesn't wait for dawn. It answers to chaos."

Shensei Awakens

Deep within his chamber, Shensei sat cross-legged. His staff rested across his knees. For hours, he had been in meditation, his breath steady and his mind anchored. But as the bell's resonance shook the Pavilion, his eyes snapped open.

A faint glow radiated from his skin, his aura calm yet immense. He whispered to himself, voice carrying like a prayer:

"The storm has begun. The carp speaks truth. Sacrifice and truth must walk together — or all will break."

He rose, staff in hand, and stepped into the trembling corridors. His presence steadied disciples who faltered. His calm gaze cut through panic. Yet even he could not deny the dread: the Hidden Portal's power was accelerating, and destiny was no longer waiting for ceremony.

Chaos Gathering

The elders rushed toward the forbidden bell chamber, their voices clashing.

"We must maintain discipline!" shouted Elder Meiyun, her voice cutting through the rising tension. "Any rash actions could doom us all!" Yet Elder Han countered with urgency, "Delay and indecision will only give the portal more time to unravel! We must act swiftly!" Their arguments echoed through the hall, mirroring the portal's dual nature and the clash of caution and haste.

Mushu and the Seven Shah tightened their guard around the twins, who now looked more frightened than mischievous, realising their prank had awakened something far beyond them.

Ling Li, in her chamber, pressed a hand to her belly as the vibrations rippled through her body. Her eyes narrowed, whispering, "The portal stirs before its time. Tomorrow may already be too late."

The Hidden Portal Stirs

Ling Li, assisted by Four Eyes, moved with deliberate calm as they stepped out of their chamber. Four Eyes kept a close watch, scanning the surroundings vigilantly. The night air was heavy with the metallic tang of charged particles. A strange vibration hummed against their skin. Ling Li's heart, however, betrayed her composed exterior; it pounded swiftly, and her quickened thrum echoed her unspoken anxiety. Each step on the gravel path released a crunch, one that seemed to echo with foreboding.

On the way to the pond, they encountered Shensei. He gripped his staff tightly, his eyes already glowing faintly with awareness. Without words, the three walked together. Their footsteps were steady, as if bracing themselves against the unseen storm.

At the pond, Lily and Ren knelt with Shun and Fatty. The Spirit Golden Carps thrashed restlessly, their golden scales flashing like sparks beneath the moonlight. The water rippled violently, as though the pond itself was trembling in anticipation. According to ancient teachings, these carps were known to reflect the qi imbalances in their environment — signalling disturbances with their agitated movements. Ling Li and Shensei exchanged a glance, both calm, yet their silence carried the weight of recognition. The portal was no longer waiting.

The Forbidden Bell Quiets

At the same time, Li Shenwu and Li Tianyuan, flanked by elders, stormed into the Pavilion's forbidden bell chamber. They raced to prevent the catastrophe that the bell's resonance threatened to unleash upon the clan. Their eyes widened at the sight of the twins clinging to the forbidden relic. Its resonance shook the very foundations of the Pavilion. As Li Shenwu's gaze locked onto them, a fleeting memory surfaced: the day he had held his own children for the first time. He remembered the faint scent of newborn skin, a powdery warmth mingled with innocence and promise. It wasn't just frustration that tightened his jaw — the unspoken fear of witnessing innocence teetering on the brink of profound consequences added to the tension.

With a swift motion, Li Shenwu's spiritual qi surged from his outstretched hands, scooping the twins from the bell. His vivid azure qi shimmered and emitted a flute-like melody, filling the air with a fresh mint aroma — his mark of rank. The twins hovered, their frightened cries echoing above the crowd, before Li Shenwu guided them into Mushu's arms. Mushu shifted to catch them, shielding the twins and pulling them from the crowd, jaw tight with relief and anger.

The twins' laughter vanished, replaced by wide-eyed terror. They clutched Mushu's robes, trembling as they realised the enormity of their mistake. Around them, disciples and elders stood rigid, pale-faced, barely containing their agitation.

Li Shenwu released a final surge of qi to silence the forbidden bell. The resonance faltered, then ceased. The Pavilion groaned as if exhaling. The effort cost Li Shenwu dearly. He spat blood, staggering while Li Tianyuan and several elders rushed to support him. Gasps rippled through the chamber. An ordinary

disciple, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment, fell to his knees in silent prayer. His hands trembled with the weight of the unfolding events. This brief pause gave the scene a sense of gravity, emphasising the enormity of silencing the bell.

Some elders clenched their fists, faces twisted with frustration. They knew the twins were the matriarch's daughters, but patience wore thin. One elder's hand trembled, gripping a worn talisman. Beneath his mutter, 'This recklessness has endangered us all,' lay unspoken clan division.

Chapter 462: THE HIDDEN PORTAL OPENS

The Portal's Premature Manifestation

Li Shenwu, leaning heavily on Li Tianyuan's arm, slowly made his way out of the forbidden chamber, each movement unsteady. Li Tianyuan, supporting him with a firm grip, led the way along the narrow, dim corridor that overlooked the jade courtyard. The crowd followed at a cautious distance, their footsteps echoing like a drumbeat of unease. As they reached the pond, the air thickened further; qi currents swirled violently around them, tugging at their robes.

The water erupted in restless waves. Golden Carps leapt, their scales blazing like molten fire. Dragon script shimmered across the surface, jagged and fractured, bleeding into the Pavilion's walls. These glyphs, like smouldering embers, shared a luminous kinship with unstable, flickering wards. The wards flickered in sync with the dragon script, their intertwined glow hinting at a shared origin. As if the portal's power bled through every crack, it connected scripts and wards in a chaotic dance of light and shadow.

Lily's voice trembled, and her words broke in the middle as she clutched Ren's arm, nails digging into her sleeve. Her eyes darted wildly to the flickering wards. "It's happening now... the portal is forcing itself open. What if my dreams end here, in this chaos? It feels like everything I've feared is crashing down on us right now." Fear thickened her voice to a shaky whisper.

Ren's needles throbbed painfully. Each pulse yanked her back into the raw ache of memories she thought she'd buried. Each sharp, shuddering breath caught in her throat, torn between the shock of pain and the memory of what she'd surrendered to master her craft. Those sacrifices carved wounds she still felt, flaring open in moments like this. Thoughts flashed to nights spent gritting her teeth, struggling for control, and the gut-deep dread that maybe her power had cost her too much. "It's reaching for us. We can't stop it."

Fatty stumbled back, clutching empty air. His snack tumbled from his shaking hands. His face grew ashen, sweat beading at his temple. "We're not ready... this isn't how it was supposed to be," he choked out. The words echoed an old proverb from his grandmother: "Chaos does not wait for dawn." This wisdom, often repeated among the elders, hinted at the clan's sense of disorder and fate.

Shun's jaw tightened, lips forming a thin line. His hands glowed with qi as he traced the fractured script. "The portal answers chaos. It doesn't wait for dawn — it answers now."

Shensei's Warning

Shensei stepped forward, planting himself at the centre of the gathering. His aura radiated calm even as the ground trembled beneath them. He raised his staff high and then struck the earth once, sending a stabilising pulse through the disciples, who felt their feet anchored by the vibration. For a brief moment, the turmoil seemed to fade; the chaotic energy shifted to something more cohesive. As the pulse spread outward, the disciples glanced at one another, awareness dawning that they drew strength from unity. His voice rose over the murmurs, steady yet grave:

"Unity is the only path through chaos."

His words silenced the crowd, though dread lingered in every face.

Mushu tightened his grip on the twins, shifting to shield them from the crowd. The children buried their faces against his chest, silent tears heavy. The Seven Shah formed a loose half-circle between Mushu and the agitated clan members, eyes sharp, ready to intervene if violence erupted.

Ling Li pressed a hand to her belly, steadying herself as a slight chill seeped into her core. Her skin prickled, and she tightened her grip on her robe, acutely aware of the sensation rippling through her being. She shifted her stance, eyes fixed on the trembling pond, attuned to the calamity looming ahead. Yet, beneath this sensation lay a flicker of hope, a persistent ember she could not quite extinguish. Hope that the chaos might yield a new beginning, one she had secretly yearned for even amidst her fears. Her voice was low, but it cut through the chaos:

"The portal stirs before its time. Tomorrow may already be too late."

The Hidden Portal Opens

The night air thickened. It carried the metallic tang of charged qi. Lantern flames bent sideways as currents swirled violently, tugging at robes and rattling bamboo pillars. The pond glowed with fractured dragon script. Each glyph pulsed like a heartbeat. The Spirit Golden Carps thrashed in unison. Their scales blazed so brightly they looked like shards of molten suns. Cold mist from the pond settled on the skin, a chilling counterpoint to the heat radiating from the carps. Each observer felt the charged atmosphere.

A fissure of light split the pond's surface. It rose into the air like a vertical mirror. Its edges shimmered with unstable wards, bleeding shadow and brilliance together. The fissure expanded, forming a gateway of swirling energy — half radiant gold, half consuming void.

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Elders pressed closer, their voices clashing.

Shensei's Warning

Shensei once again stepped forward. His voice rose over the murmurs, steady yet grave. His eyes, shadowed with a weighty regret, glanced briefly at the elders. "The storm has begun," he intoned. A note of past mistakes lingered in the air. "The carp speaks truth. Sacrifice and truth must walk together—or all will break," he added. The final words were tinged with the unspoken threat of what failure might demand.

"The storm has begun. The carp speaks truth. Sacrifice and truth must walk together — or all will break."

The crowd fell silent, though dread lingered in every face.

The Portal's Test

The fissure surged violently.

The golden side reached for Lily's voice, resonating with her truth.

The shadow side lashed at Ren, feeding on her sacrifices, pulling her toward collapse.

Ren cried out as her knees buckled beneath her. Lily's voice rose; she weaved resonance through the chaos, her words forming a shield of sound. With her voice, she countered the fissure's fractured script.

For a heartbeat, the fissure threatened to split the Pavilion apart. The wards flickered, dragon script bleeding into walls, shadows clawing at the disciples.

Only when Ren bleeds her qi into the fissure, and Lily sings the carp's truth in harmony, does the portal stabilise. Ren falters. A bamboo pillar groans and splinters. Lily's quavering voice makes a ward flicker. Each mistake jeopardises the balance. Together, their combined efforts condense the fissure into a radiant, fragile gateway of balanced light and shadow.

Chapter 463: SALVATION OR RUIN?

Ren's needles resonate violently, glowing crimson. Each pulse threatens to tear her apart. Still, she steps forward, knowing her sacrifice may stabilise the portal. Her inner struggle between fear of collapse and duty to her clan becomes the emotional anchor. One thought crystallises — she must redeem herself. Survival and clan honour are essential, but self-redemption fuels her actions. This desire guides every movement as she faces the portal. She is ready to anchor the clan's future.

Lily — her carp voice rises instinctively. She weaves truth into the chaos. Her words form a shield of resonance, countering the portal's fractured script. For a fleeting moment, doubt flickered through her. 'Was she truly ready for this mantle?' The memory of Shensei's teachings and her vow to honour the spirits surged through her, amplifying her resolve. In that instant, she transformed from an apprentice into the essential voice of prophecy. She embodies the "truth" half of the carp's prophecy.

Shun channelled his qi into stabilising glyphs, anchoring the fissure's edges with discipline and precision. He was the bridge between Ren's sacrifice and Lily's truth. Unwavering, Shun whispered, "Balance in the storm," steadying his hands as if guiding an invisible pendulum — his calm focus making him the steadfast fulcrum amid chaos.

Fatty, though terrified, grounds the group with humour and humanity. His voice trembles as he steps forward, declaring: "Chaos doesn't wait for dawn, but neither do we!" The other disciples echo his words, transformed into a rallying cry.

Watching from the edge, Ling Li stands still and composed, while Four Eyes raises his shield high to protect the clan from backlash. Ling Li's hand rests firmly on her belly, symbolising the unborn generation whose fate hangs in the Balance at this moment.

Outcome & Foreshadowing

The portal opened, revealing a realm beyond. Misty mountains loomed under a foggy shroud. Eerie silence reigned, broken only by the distant cry of spectral dragons. They circled in sky-high arcs: graceful, protective — yet ominously predatory. Their dance reflected the portal's dual nature. A path paved with glowing glyphs stretched ahead. Each step resonated with both promise and peril. The breathtaking landscape mirrored the portal's tension. Salvation and danger lived within.

Yet its duality remains unresolved. The clan sees both promise and peril.

Elders whispered, voices hushed with awe and dread: "Is this salvation... or the beginning of ruin?"

Ling Li's final thought: 'The carp was right. Sacrifice and truth must walk together—or all will break.'

Crossing the Threshold

The fissure of light pulsed, jagged and unstable, but irresistible. Mist curled from the gateway, chilling skin like icy fingers. Spectral dragon cries echoed from beyond, vibrating through marrow and spirit.

Li Shenwu, pale and weakened, leaned on Li Tianyuan's arm. His voice, hoarse but resolute, cut through dissent: "We cannot hesitate. The path has opened. We must face what lies beyond."

Disciples exchanged uneasy glances. Some clenched fists, knuckles white; others swallowed hard, fear tightening their throats. The air throbbed with anticipation, as if courage was the portal's toll.

The Realm Beyond

As the first of the clan crossed the threshold, the world beyond unfolded in breathtaking, terrifying clarity.

Fog-shrouded mountains loomed, peaks aglow with pulsing glyphs. The luminous ground resonated with qi, each step testing resolve and spirit.

The air was heavy with ozone and ancient stone. Every breath brought both vitality and dread. Inhaling power and poison at once felt inevitable.

Spectral dragons circled above, translucent and immense. Their glowing eyes judged each disciple, weighing their worth.

Reactions of the Clan

Ren's knees buckled as glyphs pulsed beneath her. She forced herself upright, whispering, "I will not falter."

Lily wavered as dragon cries pierced her, but she steadied, recalling her vow. Her voice rose, weaving resonance into the silence.

Shun's eyes narrowed, tracing the glyphs with precision. "They test us," he muttered, his tone grim. "Every step demands balance."

Fatty flinched as a dragon swooped low, its wings stirring mist. He laughed and joked, "At least they haven't eaten me yet." Nervous chuckles followed, grounding them in humanity.

Ling Li pressed her hand to her belly, watching calmly. Her low voice lingered on the dragons: "The unborn will inherit what we choose tonight."

Four Eyes held his shield, stance unyielding, scanning every shadow and flicker, ready to intercept danger.

Tension Heightened

The glyphs shifted beneath their feet, pulsing chaotically as the path split—one route glowing gold, the other shadowed in void.

Gasps rippled through the clan.

Elder Meiyun whispered, trembling: "Two paths... salvation or ruin."

Elder Han clenched his fists, his voice sharp: "We must choose swiftly, or the portal will consume us!"

The disciples froze, shallow breaths and darting eyes betraying their fear. Dragons circled lower, cries demanding a decision.

Ren felt her needles pulsing violently, tugging her feet toward the shadowed path. Lily's voice echoed beside her as she stepped closer to the golden path, its glow resonating with her. Shun stood motionless between them, feet planted in the glyphs, his arms raised as if to balance both energies. His voice remained steady: "Balance. We cannot choose one without the other."

The Two Paths Revealed

The fissure formed a gateway, its light splitting into two roads stretching into the mist beyond.

The Golden Road glimmered with radiant glyphs pulsing like living fire. Warm air carried scents of lotus and incense. Each glyph hummed with unity, strength, and prosperity. Yet the brilliance flickered — the road was fragile, dependent on truth and discipline.

The Shadowed Road, cloaked in void, bore faint crimson glyphs, jagged and broken. Cold air smelled of blood and ash. Whispers of sacrifice and betrayal echoed, each step demanding pain and feeding on fear. The power, raw and immense, tempted all.

The roads pulsed together, echoing the carp's prophecy of bond or break, sacrifice and truth.

The Clan's Debate

Gasps rippled among disciples as they stared at the roads. The spectral dragons circled lower, their cries demanding a choice.

Elder Meiyun stepped forward, voice tight and trembling. "The golden road is salvation — the path of truth. We must take it or face ruin." She gripped her robe so hard her knuckles blanched, shame roughening her words.

Elder Han countered, ambition burning in his eyes. "No! The shadowed road holds true strength. The golden path will shatter. Only sacrifice secures our clan's future." His fists clenched; his breath misted the void's cold air.

Other Elders stayed silent, entrusting the future to their Masters.

Li Tianyuan raised his voice, steady but strained. "Both paths are perilous. The carp warned us — truth and sacrifice must join. Choosing one alone is folly."

Disciples murmured, some drawn to gold, others tempted by shadow. Fear and desire clashed in their eyes.

Chapter 464: SACRIFICE AND TRUTH MUST WALK TOGETHER

Reactions of the Protagonists

Ren's needles pulsed, pulling her toward the shadow. Sweat beaded as she clenched her jaw. "It calls to me — it feeds on what I've given up. Alone, I will break." Her voice cracked, torn by dread and duty.

Lily's carp voice resonated with gold, weaving truth into its glow. She whispered, "This path answers me. It feels like hope—but hope alone may not suffice." Doubt flickered, then resolve took over.

Shun's glyphs glowed as he traced both paths. "Balance," he muttered with conviction. "We cannot choose one because if Ren anchors sacrifice and Lily anchors truth, then I believe both roads must be walked together." His calm presence, grounded in his determination to unite the two paths, steadied the disciples.

Fatty's voice quivered, scraping the silence. He forced a brittle laugh. "Golden road looks nice, shadow road looks terrifying. So, we'll end up on both." His strained humor cracked the tension, drawing uneasy, reluctant chuckles.

The clan's voices rose in a heated argument.

Some elders demanded the golden road, fearing the shadow's curse.

Others argued for the shadowed road, tempted by its power.

A few disciples dropped to their knees, praying for guidance. Their voices were lost in the clash. The dragons swooped lower, their translucent wings stirring mist. Their cries split — one harmonious, one discordant — echoing the duality of the paths.

Foreshadowing

Ling Li swept the crowd with her gaze, hand pressed to her belly. Her voice cut through the chaos:

"The carp was right. Sacrifice and truth must walk together — or all will break."

Her words silenced the debate. The clan saw the truth: neither path could be abandoned. To survive, they must walk both roads — light and shadow — anchored by Ren's sacrifice, Lily's truth, Shun's discipline, and the clan's unity.

The Split into Two Roads

The clan divided, stepping onto separate paths with pounding hearts. The cool, firm earth reminded them of the choice before them. Footsteps crunched on gravel, echoing in the hushed forest. A gentle breeze rustled the trees, whispering unknown secrets. With every step, the rich scent of moss and damp leaves grounded their resolve.

Lily's group moved onto the golden road, its radiant glyphs pulsing with warmth. Her clear voice resonated, weaving truth into shimmering light. A tremor betrayed her inner conflict — a fleeting clash of pride and doubt that made the light flicker, exposing her vulnerability. Yet her disciples followed, drawn by the prospect of prosperity and unity and by their trust in her leadership.

Ren's group took the shadowed road, its jagged glyphs glowing crimson. Her needles pulsed, each throb threatening to tear her apart. A memory of her family's festival laughter and her mother's sweet dumplings lingered, reminding her of what she risked leaving behind. Her determination anchored those willing to walk the path of sacrifice, despite the toll on her strength.

Between them, Shun traced stabilising glyphs, his qi bridging both roads. His calm focus steadied the imbalance. Fatty trembled but moved between groups, cracking a wry smile. "Chaos doesn't wait for dawn, but neither do we!" His humour became a spark of courage for both sides.

Ling Li stood at the edge, hand on her belly, aura calm yet immense. She was Otako, body and vitality refiner, ascended immortal. Strong beyond compare, she could change the world if she opted to. With Shensei beside her, she remained calm, but her gaze stayed sharp, ready to defend the clan.

The Golden Road's Judgment

As Lily's group began their journey on the golden road, they noticed a faint crack along one of the radiant glyphs. Barely visible, it formed a subtle anomaly in the otherwise flawless path. This quiet

warning planted a seed of unease. It invited anticipation of the road's potential upheaval. The glyphs continued to pulse with warmth. That slight imperfection lingered in their minds.

Suddenly, the golden road trembled. Its glyphs flared angrily, light twisting into jagged shards. The path itself seemed to roar, its brilliance turning harsh, judgmental.

A voice, not spoken but felt, reverberated through every soul:

"Too many walk this road. You are ambitious, seizing wealth and power. Yet you shun the path of sacrifice. As the elders say: 'The river's wealth is earned by those who toil its banks.' Truth without sacrifice is hollow. Unity without pain is fragile. You trod on a path without penance. You are deemed unworthy. As our rites remind us: 'Only the tempered blade can cleave the storm.'"

The radiant glow darkened into blinding flashes. Disciples staggered, clutching their chests as the road's fury pressed on them. The Verdant Bamboo Pavilion trembled, beams groaning, timber screaming. One lantern swayed violently before falling and shattering, its glass scattering like stars across the floor. This collapse captured the impending devastation, making the world feel as if it might cease to exist.

Lily was struck hardest. Her carp voice faltered, throat tightening as golden glyphs lashed at her. She gasped, knees buckling, tears streaming as judgment crushed her spirit. She clawed at the glyphs, trying to grasp their light, but her fingers slipped through, deepening her sense of hopelessness.

"I... I can't breathe... It's rejecting me..." Lily whispered, her voice breaking. Fatty lunged forward and caught her before she collapsed, wrapping his arms protectively around her trembling frame.

Fear rippled through the clan. Elders shouted with cracked voices; some grabbed at their hearts or staggered back with wide, wild eyes. Others were paralysed, lips trembling, faces stark with the raw terror of helpless ambition laid bare. Some disciples whimpered, others wept openly, the communal panic a suffocating wave over ambition now exposed as weakness.

The Twins Intervene

Just as Ling Li prepared to move, her aura flaring like a storm contained, the twins in Mushu's arms struggled.

"Uncle Mushu, put us down!" Kim Kim yelled, her voice sharp with urgency.

Mushu's grip tightened, his voice firm but tinged with worry. "No!" he barked, his gaze flickering between the chaos and the determined twins. His heart pounded, each beat echoing his refusal.

"No!" came his reply again, now a mix of desperation and protectiveness.

"No," Mushu muttered, almost to himself, unwilling to put them into danger.

"No!"

"No!"

"No!"

The words tumbled out, sounding like a mantra. Each refusal was more than a mere protest; it was an unspoken promise to keep them safe.

Three more stern 'no's followed, somehow uniquely resonant, each from Rockie, Reginald, and Goldie.

The twins "...."

Chapter 465 465: ENTERING THE PORTAL

"But Big Sister and Second Sister need our help!" Chi Chin cried, eyes blazing.

"Uncle Mushu! Look!" Kim Kim raised the Twin Dragon Guardian Scroll, its surface glowing. Mushu's eyes widened at its power. He reluctantly set them down. 'They were indeed the Twin Dragon Guardians,' Mushu silently thought as he watched the twins run.

The twins dashed away from Mushu the instant he released them, racing toward the portal with their small hands raised. Elders gasped, horrified, some reaching out in vain to catch the children, fearing another disaster.

But as the twins pressed their fingers together, dragon silhouettes emerged, golden-scaled and radiant. The light was so intense it nearly blinded everyone.

Shi Min's Arrival

From the skies, Shi Min descended, flying on his sword. He had rushed from the Hidden Valley the moment he heard of the twins' mischief. His eyes widened as he saw them releasing the Twin Dragon Guardian. He swooped down, catching the twins just before they collapsed, their bodies limp with exhaustion.

Seeing Lily and Ren suffering, and the twins unconscious, Shi Min unleashed his own dragon and phoenix. They soared majestically, their roars shaking the ground. The twin dragons joined them, their combined resonance forcing the fissure to rearrange. The two paths twisted, merged, and condensed into a single path.

The clan's jaws dropped, awe-struck by the spectacle. Yet Shi Min did not steal the moment — his power steadied the chaos, but the portal's opening still demanded Lily and Ren.

Lily and Ren's Recovery

The merged path pulsed violently, unstable but unified, with mere moments before its fate would be sealed. Lily staggered, her breath shallow, her voice broken. Ren collapsed to one knee, her needles glowing crimson, threatening to consume her. The clan knew there were just seven breaths before the path's collapse, a fleeting heartbeat of time demanding action.

Shi Min's dragons roared, shielding them for a heartbeat. The twins' guardians hovered, their golden scales blazing. That brief reprieve gave Lily and Ren the chance to rise again.

Ren, sweating and trembling, fixed her burning gaze ahead. "I will not let sacrifice be wasted. I will anchor this clan's future." She thrust her needles forward, bleeding qi into the fissure. Each pulse tore at her, but her spirit held. Shun steadied her. Lily lifted her voice, her words weaving golden threads through the air. Light and qi intertwined, forming a tapestry of red and gold, a testament to unity.

Together, their efforts harmonised. Ren's sacrifice stabilised the fissure's foundation, while Lily's truth illuminated its core. The merged path blazed brighter, its fury subsiding into balance.

The Portal Fully Opens

The fissure expanded, its jagged edges smoothing into a radiant gateway. As the mist parted, an unexpected aroma wafted through the air, a curious blend of ozone and ripe peaches, hinting at a realm that defied known expectations. The mountains glowed with glyphs, spectral dragons circled in arcs, and a path paved with luminous script stretched into infinity.

The portal's roar softened into a hum, its duality balanced. The clan stood in awe, their fear replaced by reverence.

Elders whispered, voices hushed: "They did it... Lily and Ren opened the portal."

Ling Li's gaze softened, her hand pressed to her belly. Shensei's calm presence beside her was unshaken. She whispered, almost to herself:

"The carp was right. Sacrifice and truth must walk together—or all will break. Tonight, Ren and Lily walked together."

The Dragons Return

The twins' dragons faded into their bodies, the glow dimming as exhaustion set in. As the scales vanished, a faint crackling sound filled the air. Shi Min's dragon and phoenix circled above, their wings softly whispering, then returned to him, merging into his qi warmly.

Ling Li, Four Eyes, and Shensei approached Shi Min, who was kneeling and channeling qi into the unconscious twins, his face taut with focus as he guided their breath back into rhythm.

Li Shenwu, supported by Li Tianyuan and the elders, stepped forward. A flicker of unease passed over his face, a brief twitch betraying deeper tension beneath his calm demeanor. His voice, hoarse but reverent, broke the silence: "They are very young, but brave."

Shensei's eyes softened with pride. "They always begged me to teach them new tricks whenever I visited. Mischief, yes — but courage too."

Li Shenwu's gaze lingered on Ling Li. "Ling Li, your twins... they are?"

Ling Li's tone was calm, unshaken. "They are gifted as the Twin Dragon Guardians by our ancestors."

The elders nearly held their breath as awe rippled through the crowd. Li Tianyuan chuckled and shook his head. "No wonder they are so mischievous. Power runs deep in them." An elder whispered, "Their ancestors would be proud." Another responded softly, "May they use this gift wisely."

The Twins Awaken

The twins stirred, their eyes fluttering open. Weak but determined, they wrapped their arms around Shi Min's shoulders. "You're safe," he whispered, scooping them up gently. Their heads rested against him as he promised, "I've got you."

Kim Kim's voice was faint, trembling: "Are Big Sister and Second Sister alright?"

Shi Min's reply was firm, meant to soothe: "They will be fine."

Meanwhile, the clan stepped into the portal. Mist curled around their ankles, the air thick with qi. Shun noted the glyphs paving the ground, each step resonating with both promise and peril. "Stay together," he whispered, voice hushed. "We don't know what awaits beyond."

Spectral dragons circled above, their cries loud. The mountains stood tall, peaks shining with glyph-light, shadows hinting at guardians.

Trials Within the Portal

The First Trial One – Burdens of Ambition

Chains of light coiled around ankles, growing heavier with each step. Disciples staggered. Fatty cried, "My legs won't move! Feels like lead!" Some collapsed as their hidden desires — wealth, glory, revenge — were laid bare.

Fatty groaned, his humor faltering. "Feels like I'm dragging the whole Pavilion on my back!" Yet his trembling laugh sparked courage in those near him.

Ren's needles pulsed crimson, tearing at her body. Her thoughts drifted to the day she first held the ancient scrolls, the weight of her ancestors' aspirations settling on her shoulders. She remembered her grandmother's words: "Strength is bound not just in body, but in spirit and love for those who came before and those yet to come." Holding onto this legacy, she whispered, "I will not falter. My sacrifice anchors us all."

Lily's carp voice exposed lies and eased burdens. As she sang, she and Ren shared a look, a silent bond of resolve. This understanding hinted at their teamwork. Together, sacrifice and truth broke the chains.

Chapter 466 466: THE FINAL TRIAL

At the mountain's base inside the portal, spectral dragons descended, their cries splitting the air. Each dragon's eyes glowed with judgment, testing the clan's unity. Someone muttered, "We must stand together." Another voice replied, "Do not break ranks."

One dragon roared at Ren, its shadowed breath lashing her needles. Yet before the roar echoed, a sudden hush enveloped the air, the world siphoning color until only dull shadows remained. In that breathless moment, a void whispered, amplifying the chaos that followed as Ren staggered, blood at her lips. But she stood firm. "I will not let sacrifice consume me. I yield for the clan, not for ruin."

Another dragon circled Lily, its golden scales blinding. Her voice faltered, doubt gnawing at her. Yet she remembered Shensei's teachings, her vow to honor the spirits. Her carp voice rose, clear and unwavering: "Truth must guide us."

The disciples cowered, some shielding their faces, others whispering prayers. Fatty shouted, voice trembling but defiant: "We've come this far! Dragons or not, we won't turn back!" His words rallied them.

The dragons bowed only when Ren's sacrifice and Lily's Truth resonated together, their combined light forcing the guardians to retreat.

The Final Trial – The Mirror of Souls

At the mountain's peak, a mirror of water rose from the ground, its surface rippling with spectral light. Each clan member saw their reflection twisted, ambition magnified, fears exposed.

Disciples wept as their reflections mocked them, showing greed and fear. Their pain echoed, revealing the futures they feared. One saw endless hunger for power, another saw themselves held back by doubt.

Elders clenched their fists, faces pale as their hidden doubts surfaced. One spoke, voice wavering, "If we falter now, our legacy unravels." Another nodded, eyes wary.

Ren's reflection showed her needles piercing her own body, each sacrifice consuming her. She trembled, whispering, "Is this all I am? A vessel for pain?" The haunting image of her future self, alone and burdened, lingered as a seed within her qi.

Lily's reflection sneered, her voice twisted into lies. She gasped, "Am I false? Is my Truth hollow?" Her mirrored self, silent and voiceless, haunted her. Such specters lingered, threatening to return in unguarded moments.

The mirror cracked when Ren thrust her needles forward, refusing to be defined by sacrifice. "My pain does not own me," she declared. Her qi surged, altering her cultivation technique, needles glowing crimson, then radiant gold. The portal recognized her loyalty, and she no longer had to bleed for each needle she yielded. Yet the transformation came with a cost: a faint tremor lingered in her hands, a subtle reminder of the power's burden, requiring her to focus more deeply each time she called upon the needles.

Lily stepped forward, her carp voice rising without the whisper's guidance. She sang Truth into the mirror, exposing lies and falsehoods. The reflection shattered, leaving only clarity. From that moment, she could recognize falsehood from Truth at any time.

The Portal's Recognition

The trials dissolved into mist. The gateway expanded, radiant and balanced. Glyphs blazed above as dragons roared. The clan responded: some cheered, others stood in awe, the elders nodded in approval, their gazes lingering on Ren and Lily — their unity forged through trial.

Ren, trembling but unbroken, whispered: "My sacrifice is no longer pain. It is a strength."

Lily, her eyes clear, added: "Truth will guide us. Always."

Ling Li's gaze softened, her hand pressed to her belly. Shensei's calm presence beside her was unshaken. She whispered:

"The carp was right. Sacrifice and Truth must walk together, or all will break. Tonight, they walked together, just as the twins once mischievously embraced their roles with fearless curiosity. In their journey, innocence has grown into wisdom, and the circle of our legacy strengthens."

The Portal Realm Unveiled

As the fissure widened, the clan stepped into a world both alien and sacred. The ground beneath their feet crunched softly like gravel, anchoring them to this extraordinary reality. The air was thick with qi, shimmering like liquid light. Each breath filled their lungs with vitality, yet left a metallic tang on their tongues. Mist curled in ribbons across the ground, glowing with shifting glyphs that rearranged themselves as if alive.

The landscape stretched vast and surreal:

Mountains rose jagged and impossibly tall. Their peaks were crowned with radiant glyphs that pulsed like beating hearts.

Forests of crystalline bamboo swayed in silence. Each stalk hummed with resonance, its leaves shedding sparks of qi that floated like fireflies.

Rivers flowed with liquid light. Currents of gold and silver wove together, whispering in voices that carried fragments of forgotten prophecy.

The skies were alive with spectral dragons. Their translucent wings stirred the heavens, and their cries echoed like thunder — both protective and predatory. Each time a dragon cried out, clan members hesitated, glancing at one another in silent assessment. With every step, some tightened their grip on spears, others whispered encouragement to wavering companions. In these moments, the clan faced a pivotal choice: to silence the doubts festering in their hearts, digging in with steeled resolve, or to let those doubts become fears that could shatter their unity. This decision would map their course on this treacherous journey, determining whether they would emerge as conquerors of the unknown or be consumed by it.

Everywhere, the realm seemed to breathe. Its qi currents shifted like tides, testing the clan's resolve.

Strange Qi Phenomena

The deeper they walked, the more the environment revealed its trials. Echoing Qi Currents: Winds carried whispers to each disciple. Mei Ling hesitated when she heard her late father's voice chiding her, 'Remember why you fight, child.'

Jin shivered. The mocking laughter of a long-forgotten enemy echoed in his ears. Each current pressed against their hearts, demanding honesty.

Shifting Glyphs: Beneath their feet, the ground rearranged into patterns that mirrored their emotions. When icy doubt threaded through them, glyphs fractured and splintered. But as warm courage surged, the glyphs glowed in unbroken light.

Living Mist: The mist thickened at times, forming shapes — dragons, phoenixes, even ancestral figures. The clan was tested: would they bow in reverence or falter in fear?

Qi Storms: Sudden bursts of energy lashed across the sky. Lightning made of pure qi struck the ground, each bolt leaving behind fragments of script. These fragments swirled in the air, glowing with mysterious riddles. Crackling with anticipation, the air hinted at a deeper meaning yet to be unveiled.

Chapter 467 467: HIDDEN PORTAL: THE PROMISE

The Realm's Promise

At the heart of the realm, the Clan reached a vast plateau led by Mei Ling. Her connection to this place felt profound, as if she were the key to its mysteries. Glyphs blazed across the stone, forming a circle that pulsed with both shadow and light. Spectral dragons descended and folded their wings. Their eyes fixed on Mei Ling with judgment, as if acknowledging her pivotal role. A voice filled the air — not spoken, but resonating through every soul.

"The chosen have opened the way. Their sacrifice and truth are honored. Yet this covenant is not for them alone — it is for the Li Clan."

As Mei Ling stood at the center, the glyphs surged upward and wove into a radiant tapestry across the sky. The qi currents softened; they were no longer oppressive but nurturing. The rivers of light calmed as their whispers turned to songs of blessing.

Glowing gold, Ren's needles no longer demanded sacrifice. The realm, altered by her loyalty, had changed her cultivation. Now, each strike she yielded carried strength without pain.

Lily's carp voice resonated with clarity. She needed no whispers to discern truth from lies. Attuned to the essence of honesty, her spirit was ever watchful.

But beyond these personal gifts, the Hidden Portal's Promise extended to the Clan itself:

Strength and Power: The Li Clan would enjoy a lifetime of strength as long as they remained united. Their qi would flow as one, and their lineage would be fortified against decay. Yet beneath this promise, a shadow lingered — anxiety flickering in their hearts. The temptation of solitary gain — where ambition might clash with unity — loomed, stirring unease. This test awaited in the realm's deeper shadows, hinting at a future choice that could unravel all they had vowed to protect.

Wealth without Greed: Vast abundance awaited—rivers of prosperity flowing endlessly, but only if greed did not consume their hearts.

Protection through Loyalty: Those true to their vow as Li Clan members would be shielded by the portal's guardians — spectral dragons bound to their legacy.

The dragons lowered their heads to the ground, their cries merging into a chorus of reverence. The bamboo forests shimmered as they shed sparks of qi that drifted down and settled on every disciple like blessings. Elders straightened, feeling their bones lighten. Disciples clenched their fists, spirits surging. Even the youngest gazed upward, sensing the weight of destiny pressing upon them.

Li Shenwu whispered, awe coloring his voice, 'This is not merely a passage. It is a covenant — a promise to our Clan for generations.' He paused, feeling responsibility settle upon him, awe transforming into resolve. 'We must anchor this promise in our hearts. Every step forward now will forge our legacy.'

Ling Li's gaze softened, her hand pressed to her belly, as she stepped closer to Shensei, who offered a reassuring nod. She murmured, directing her words to the group: "The carp was right. Sacrifice and truth opened the way, but unity will preserve it. Tonight, the Li Clan was promised a future."

The Clan's Reaction to the Covenant

As the portal's voice faded, the plateau fell silent. Its promise lingered like a sacred echo. Transfixed, the Clan stood — hearts pounding — as each absorbed the weight of what was bestowed.

Elders exchanged glances, heavy with awe.

Elder Meiyun's stern features softened, her eyes glistening as she whispered, "A vow that binds us beyond blood. Unity is no longer a choice — it is survival."

Elder Han pressed a hand to his chest, his voice low but resolute: "Strength without greed, protection through loyalty... this is the covenant our ancestors dreamed of."

Li Shenwu, pale yet steady, bowed his head. "We are judged worthy. Let us never forget the conditions of this gift."

The disciples exchanged glances, their hands folded in prayer as they whispered to each other in hushed, trembling excitement. While some fell to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the glowing glyphs, others murmured prayers of gratitude. Clasp hands, others shared hopeful glances. They whispered about the promise of power and prosperity. A few younger disciples wept, overwhelmed by being chosen. Tears shone in the portal's light.

The Twins, draped over Shi Min's arms and still weak, stirred; one's hand tightened in his sleeve while the other opened their eyes at the sound of the elders.

Kim Kim's small voice broke the hush: "So... the clan will always be safe?"

Chi Chin, eyes wide with wonder, added, "As long as we stay true." Their innocence carried the covenant's essence more clearly than any speech.

Shi Min tightened his hold on their arms, his expression solemn. "Yes. But safety is earned, not given. Remember that."

Ling Li stood tall, aura calm yet commanding. She looked across the Clan, her voice steady:

"The portal has spoken. Strength, wealth, protection—these are not gifts to squander. They are promises bound to our unity. Break that unity, and the blessings will turn to ash."

Shensei rested his staff on the stone, gaze sweeping the assembly. "Tonight, you witnessed truth and sacrifice open the way. Tomorrow, prove yourselves worthy."

In the bamboo forests, shimmering sparks of qi drifted down like falling stars. The spectral dragons circled once more; their cries grew softer, almost resembling a hymn. Rivers of light flowed calmly, transforming their whispers into songs of blessing that wrapped around the Clan like a mantle.

Every heart carried the same realization. The covenant was not merely a gift — it was a responsibility.

Celebration and Renewal

The covenant's echo had barely faded when Li Shenwu, his gaze sharp and attentive, observed the Li Clan assemble in the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion courtyard. He carefully watched each member's movement as the lanterns swayed in the evening breeze, their flames flickering like restless spirits, reflecting his troubled thoughts. As Shi Min scanned the bamboo forests, he noticed shimmering energy, sparks of qi drifting down like falling stars. This qi illuminated both the Clan's serene celebration and the subtle tension Shi Min sensed beneath it.

Drums thundered, disciples sang, and elders raised cups of wine in solemn gratitude. A surge of relief and awe rippled through the crowd, yet each cheer trembled with an undercurrent of anxiety. Amidst joyful clamor, a sharp, discordant zither note sliced through the night — a sound that made spines stiffen, and throats clench, its stray echo curling unease around every heart, as restless as the lanterns' shadows.

Chapter 468: THE FORBIDDEN BELL RANG AGAIN

The elders led a clearly defined ritual of thanksgiving: they assembled offerings at the glyph circle and then knelt, murmuring prayers to the spectral dragons, each action deliberate and ceremonial.

Li Shenwu stood amidst the chaos, his perceptive gaze taking in the activity around him. Broken stones from the forbidden bell's ringing still littered the courtyard, a stark reminder of the earlier turmoil. Disciples, trembling from awe, moved quickly. Fatty grunted as he hauled a fallen pillar upright, sweat streaking his brow, while nearby Chatty coaxed animals — cranes, monkeys, and foxes drawn by the qi — to help carry debris. Jack, with his Swift Gale Reflex, darted between workers, faster than the eye could follow. Through Shi Min's eyes, each action felt purposeful, a coordinated dance restoring balance to the Pavilion before others could blink.

Nicu and Ailun took positions beside Shun, eyes vigilant and bodies tense. Nicu invoked his Guardian's Ember, casting a visible protective glow around Shun, while Ailun summoned the Iron Oath Sentinel, its power pulsing in time with his steady breathing. These acts served as silent reminders of their unwavering support: the bearer of the Phoenix Command Sutra would never face threats alone. As Nicu watched for danger, he reflected on his vow to his grandfather to defend the Clan's core; Ailun stood grounded, feeling the weight of his father's legacy and his own resolve to fulfill his duty. Their mental fortitude translated directly into a heightened readiness to shield Shun from harm.

Weak from recent strain, the twins were gently carried by Shi Min and Shun, their laughter punctuating the otherwise solemn atmosphere. When Shi Min set them down, he and Shun supervised as the twins chased each other across the courtyard, their giggles ringing out like bells. Each lighthearted moment was shadowed by the faint vibration of the earlier bell, an auditory cue that reminded everyone — including the watching adults — of the continuing danger posed by its resonance, which had threatened both the Pavilion and the Clan by awakening unknown forces.

Private Reprimand

When the celebration quieted, Ling Li and Four Eyes summoned the twins into a secluded chamber of the Pavilion. The air inside was heavy, shadows stretching long across the bamboo floor.

No matter how Four Eyes spoiled his twins, he knelt before them, his jaw tight, his eyes steady, explaining that their ringing of the forbidden bell nearly tore the Clan apart. His aura shimmered faintly, the Shield of Loyal Heart pressing outward like a silent weight. "You must understand," he said, "as our ancestors always remind us: 'The dragon's whisper can summon storms.' Your actions have awakened forces unseen, almost plunging us into chaos."

"Do you understand?" His voice was low, with each word hitting like iron. "The bell you rang was forbidden. It sounded as if it had almost shattered the Pavilion. Every shield I raise is for you, but even my shield cannot withstand recklessness."

Kim Kim's lips trembled, her eyes brimming with guilt as she pressed her fists to her chest. Chi Chin's wide eyes filled with tears; his shoulders shook, and her breath caught, a plaintive whimper escaping before she could speak.

"We didn't mean to hurt anyone... we only wanted to hear the bell sing."

Ling Li stepped forward, her movement measured and deliberate. She placed a steady hand on each twin's shoulder, her gaze both soft and unwavering. While she spoke, Ling Li's fingers tightened slightly on their shoulders, balancing comfort with discipline. A slight pause in her breathing betrayed the inner conflict she felt, torn between her affection for the twins and her responsibility to enforce the Clan's rules.

"Your laughter is precious, but joy must never come at the cost of our Clan's safety. Mischief may seem harmless, but its ripples can destroy everything we protect. You must learn the difference between joy and recklessness."

Her words, gentle yet edged with warning, pressed on the twins. Kim Kim's shoulders sagged, her expression crumpling, while Chin Chin's chin quivered and his gaze dropped. Their innocence bowed under the heavy realization of what they'd done, both struggling to hold back tears.

Four Eyes released a slow breath, the tension easing from his face. Carefully, he knelt and reached out, gently wiping a tear from Chi Chin's cheek, the gesture meant to reassure and comfort the twins after the gravity of his earlier words.

"You are our future. But the future must be guarded, not gambled. Promise me — you will never touch anything that you are not familiar with, like the forbidden bell, just because you are curious or want to play."

Kim Kim whispered, her voice fragile but resolute:

"We promise."

Chin Chin, tears glistening on her cheeks, nodded shakily, her hands clasped tightly to stop their trembling.

As the twins left, the cracked bell remained in the Forbidden Pavilion, its surface shimmering faintly in the moonlight. A faint, almost inaudible hum seemed to emanate from it, a subtle reminder of its unresolved power. Disciples whispered that its resonance had awakened more than chaos, suggesting it had stirred ancient forces still watching from the shadows.

Shensei, leaning on his staff, watched the twins depart. His eyes glimmered with quiet wisdom, his voice a murmur:

"Children's mischief often reveals truths adults fear. The bell may yet sing again."

Ling Li's gaze lingered on the bell, her hand pressed to her belly. The covenant had promised strength, wealth, and protection — but the bell's fractured glow whispered of trials yet to come.

The Clan celebrated, rebuilt, and laughed, but beneath the joy lay tension. Every heart knew: the storm was not over. The covenant was a promise, but promises demanded vigilance.

The Bell's Second Song

Night fell heavily over the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion. Mist coiled through the valley, wrapping the bamboo in ghostly veils. The cracked bell, silent since the twins' mischief, began to tremble. Its fractured surface shimmered faintly, and then, without warning, it rang. The sound was not merely a chime but a bone-splintering crack of ice breaking underfoot, sending a shiver of foreboding through the bamboo forest.

The sound was not a clear chime but a jagged resonance, a cry torn between harmony and chaos. It reverberated through the valley, shaking the stones and stirring the qi currents. Disciples jolted awake, elders stiffened, and spectral dragons lifted their heads, their cries echoing in alarm.

Ling Li's eyes snapped open. She gasped, clutching her belly, as icy dread spiked through her veins. "The bell sings again... but this time, it calls something darker."

Chapter 469: THE BELL'S RESONANCE

Spies in the Shadows

The resonance carried beyond the valley, reaching ears that should never have heard it. Cloaked figures moved through the night — rival sect spies drawn like moths to flame. Each faction crept with its own signature presence. Iron Fang spies advanced low. The metallic tang of their sharpened blades filled the air, their eyes fixed on the Pavilion. Crimson Lotus infiltrators slithered through the mist, their robes whispering like serpents and leaving a faint floral fragrance. Vials of poison hid in their sleeves. Moonshade mystics moved silently, mirrors strapped to their backs as they chanted a cryptic mantra to expose cracks in the Shield of Loyal Heart. The groups converged on the valley, footsteps muffled,

breaths shallow. The bell's resonance had become a beacon, and they meant to seize its power or destroy those who guarded it.

The Clan's Vigil

Four Eyes felt the tremor first. His Shield of Loyal Heart flared instinctively, wrapping the Pavilion in a protective aura. He gripped his brush, ink shimmering faintly, ready to strike with the Silent Ink Dao.

Shun rose beside him, flames igniting around him. The Phoenix Command Sutra blazed, banners of fire unfurling above the courtyard. His voice carried authority, rallying disciples from their beds. "To arms! The covenant must be defended!" As energies swirled around them, Ren's needles glowed gold, her Golden Needle Sutra pulsing with loyalty's strength at the courtyard's edge, her eyes keen and ready to strike.

Meanwhile, Lily projected her voice, her call slicing through the night and exposing hidden whispers. She directly disrupted the incoming illusions with her Voice of Resonant Truth. As this happened, Nicu and Ailun flanked Shun closely, channeling their qi with unwavering focus. Nicu maintained a visible protective flame around Shun, and Ailun's power reinforced their formation. Together, their coordinated movements created an instinctive, living bulwark, warding off threats to the clan's leader.

The Twins in Peril

The twins woke with a start as the bell's resonance hit them. Kim Kim whimpered and instinctively grabbed Shi Min's sleeve, her body tense with fear and memories of the bell's first enchanting sound. Chi Chin, alert and frightened, scanned the room for danger, recalling how he and Kim Kim had once been captivated by the bell's melody. Now they both recognized, through their anxious gestures and wide eyes, the seriousness of the situation and the consequences of their own mischief.

Shi Min tightened his protective hold on the twins, setting his jaw in a determined line. Speaking quietly but firmly to them, he said, "Stay close. I will not let them touch you."

But the spies had seen the twins — their mischief had awakened the bell, and now they were its living key. Shadows moved closer, blades glinting, intent clear: seize the children, break the covenant.

The Clash in the Valley

The first strike came swiftly. Iron Fang blades slashed through the mist, but Four Eyes' shield held firm, sparks scattering harmlessly. His brush swept, and the Silent Ink Dao erased their illusions, leaving them exposed.

Crimson Lotus infiltrators hurled vials of poison, but Lily's voice shattered their lies, revealing the toxins before they could spread. Ren's needles struck, golden light piercing the night, binding enemies with loyalty's weight.

Shun's flames roared, banners of fire rallying disciples. The fiery aura exuded authority and command, driving a wall of flame forward to stave off the advancing threat. Fatty's Stoneheart Resilience allowed him to stand firmly as blows landed against him, his body unwavering like an age-old granite monolith. Chatty, with his Beastbond Communion, called on the wild spirit of the forest, summoning cranes and foxes that nimbly distracted and harried the spies, their sudden appearance causing chaos in the enemy ranks.

Meanwhile, Jack moved like a gust of wind, his Swift Gale Reflex letting him strike with precision and vanish before the spies could respond, each attack like a whisper in the storm.

The courtyard became a battlefield — steel against flame, poison against truth, shadows against loyalty.

Ling Li's Command

Ling Li stepped into the fray, her aura vast, pressing against every soul. Her voice carried like thunder wrapped in silk:

"The covenant is ours. The bell may sing, but its song belongs to the Li Clan. You will not take it. You will not take them."

Her words struck like a blade, and even the spies faltered, their courage wavering under her command.

Foreshadowing of War

The hidden spies retreated, their plots exposed, their blades dulled by the clan's unity. Yet their eyes burned with hatred.

The infiltrators staggered backward, crimson blood blooming across their torn garments as backslashes found flesh. Blood sprayed from their lips in violent coughs, their bodies convulsing with each desperate gasp. They turned to flee — but escape? Such a concept held no meaning in the lexicon of the Seven Shah. Before the infiltrators could comprehend their fate, before understanding could even flicker in their widening eyes, death claimed them. They collapsed as broken puppets with severed strings, their vacant stares frozen in eternal confusion, never knowing what invisible force had stolen their final breath. Not a single soul returned to their sects.

As they vanished into the night, leaving the Pavilion in a quiet of ephemera, a lone ember from the shattered bell flickered weakly. It drifted down, mirroring the lanterns that had begun the evening. The bell's resonance had revealed too much — it was a weapon, a promise, and a curse.

As silence returned, the cracked bell shimmered faintly, its fractured glow casting jagged shadows across the Pavilion. Shensei murmured, his staff tapping the stone:

"The bell does not sing without reason. Tonight, it called enemies. Tomorrow, it may call something far greater."

Ling Li's gaze lingered on the twins, her heart heavy. The covenant had promised strength, wealth, and protection — but the bell whispered of trials yet to come.

The Aftermath of the Bell's Resonance

The night's battle left the valley heavy with silence. The cracked bell loomed in the Pavilion, its fractured surface shimmering faintly under moonlight. Disciples whispered of its power — some trembling with fear, others gazing with awe. Spectral dragons circled once more. Their cries were softer now, as if waiting to see what choice the clan would make.

Ling Li stood tall, determined to protect her clan despite the fear twisting inside her. Four Eyes remained close, sensing the weight of her resolve and the risk upon them all. The twins clung to Shi Min, their faces pale, their laughter gone, guilt and dread mingling in their eyes.

The elders gathered in the council chamber. The air was thick with incense and tension. Candles flickered. Shadows stretched long across the bamboo walls. Ling Li sent Li Shenwu to rest, as he was still injured, and Li Tianyuan assisted him.

Chapter 470: THE BELL WILL DECIDE

The Debate Begins

Elder Han slammed his palm against the table, his voice sharp as steel. The sound echoed through the council chamber, rattling the lacquered screens and scattering dust motes in the air, each tiny particle dancing in the golden rays of light. "Destroy it! The bell is cursed. It calls enemies; it weakens our defenses. Every ring is a threat. Break it now, before it breaks us." The memory of a past calamity, when the bell's toll had once led invaders to their gates, haunted him still. His insistence was driven by fear and the scars of that centuries-ago defeat. This incident was one reason the bell remained sealed in the Forbidden Pavilion before the twins broke in.

His eyes flashed with fear and ambition. His jaw clenched.

Elder Fan lifted perfumed sleeves, her smile thin and calculating.

Fan's eyes flickered with an almost imperceptible gleam as she spoke. "No. Seal it. The bell's dangerous, yes, but its power is wasted if destroyed. If bound, we control its strength," she said, her voice carrying the faint, lingering scent of plum blossoms from a time past when the bell's tones intertwined with a festival's jubilation. This aroma tugged at her memory like a ribbon pulling her toward a forgotten yearning, an urge to reclaim that intoxicating sway over destiny itself.

Her words dripped with cunning. Her gaze lingered on Ling Li, veiled with challenge.

Elder Meiyun, stern but softened by the covenant, spoke quietly.

"Embrace it. The bell is destiny, not doom. The twins woke it, the covenant answers. Destroying it denies our path."

But what are the unspoken costs of embracing it? Meiyun hesitated, her voice barely above a whisper as if weighed by another thought left unspoken. "To embrace the bell," she continued slowly, "requires courage to face the unknown, prudence to make wise choices amid uncertainty, and solidarity to bind us together even as it divides." Her eyes, glistening with a mix of awe and fear, hinted at the sacrifices that might linger behind her wordless pause.

Reactions and Rising Tension

The chamber erupted in murmurs. Tension rippled through the air as voices collided, fierce and volatile, surging and then receding like the tide against jagged rocks.

Some elders nodded to Elder Han, faces ashen, gripped by fear that their home — and lives — hung in the balance.

Others leaned toward Elder Fan, tempted by the promise of power.

A few bowed to Elder Meiyun, hearts stirred by unity and destiny.

Disciples outside whispered anxiously, hearts pounding with fear for their future. Some prayed for the bell's destruction, terrified it would bring ruin; others dreamed fearfully of the power it might bring. The twins, overhearing fragments, clutched Shi Min tighter, their hearts heavy with guilt and dread for what they had awakened.

In that moment, a promise sparked within one of the twins: 'We must find a way to prove that the bell chose us for a reason.' A thought that narrowed in focus as if sharpening their destiny from a distant possibility to a tangible certainty. It gave them a sense of agency, transforming dread into a duty to seek the truth hidden in the bell's toll.

Shi Min's jaw tightened. His hand hovered near his blade. "They blame the children. It's not their fault. The bell chose them."

Ling Li's Vigilance

Ling Li's gaze swept the chamber. Her voice remained calm, yet edged with steel.

"The bell is neither a curse nor a gift; it is a test. Imagine standing before a three-bladed path: destroy it and cut through the future that calls us; seal it and find ourselves bound in darkness, living in the shadow of our fears; embrace it and let the sharp edges of ambition carve away at our unity. The choice is not simple."

Four Eyes stepped forward; his brush glowed faintly.

"Whatever we choose, I will shield the clan. But remember — the bell's song is not chance. It calls to us for a reason. Destiny cannot be broken by force."

His words weighed on the elders, leaving them silent.

Foreshadowing of Division

The debate lasted through the night. No decision came. The bell stayed in the Forbidden Pavilion, its fractured glow casting jagged shadows. As the elders deliberated, the bell emitted a soft hum, an almost inaudible crack, overlooked by all but a keen observer. This subtle cleft seemed to whisper of a hidden choice, a shadow of intent that lingered in the room. The scent of cold incense floated through the air, mingling with the crisp chill of night, reminding the elders and all present that dawn was distant. The scrape of sandals on stone punctuated the heavy silence, each step a reminder that time was slipping away. Some elders whispered of destruction. Others spoke of sealing. A few wanted to embrace the bell. Alliances shifted, suspicion sharpened. The covenant had promised unity, but the bell threatened to unravel it.

Finally, Shensei opened his eyes and murmured, "The bell will decide. Its song isn't done yet." His voice was soft, but everyone heard it.

Ling Li closed her eyes, feeling the crushing responsibility on her shoulders. Her hand pressed to her belly, as she silently wished for guidance, fearing for her family, her clan, and the fragile life within. The floorboard beneath her creaked softly, mirroring the strain in her heart, and the faint flutter from within seemed to echo her uncertainty. The covenant's promise was a burden now, as the next choice could shape all their fates.

Shi Min's Constellation Reading

In the weeks following the bell's resonance, Shi Min trained relentlessly under Li Shenwu. Night after night, he stood beneath the bamboo canopy, eyes fixed on the stars. Shenwu's voice guided him:

"The heavens are maps, Shi Min. Read them, and you will see not only fate but the cracks where destiny may falter."

Shi Min's brow furrowed, sweat beading as he traced celestial lines with his qi. Slowly, the constellations revealed themselves — patterns of dragons, phoenixes, and serpents shimmering in the night sky. His hands moved with precision, weaving starlight into diagrams.

At last, Shenwu nodded, pride flickering in his stern gaze.

"You have perfected it. The stars will answer you now. Guard your clan with this gift."

Shi Min exhaled, his chest tight with resolve. He was no longer just a brother — he was the clan's watcher, the only son among sisters, destined to shield them all.