

PROTEGE 481

Chapter 481 481: WHO WANTS TO STEAL YOUR THUNDER?

From inside the bathroom, muffled sounds began to filter through the door — groans and moans that made Mushu's stomach clench with concern. His jaw tightened, muscles jumping beneath the skin. His heart ached with a strange, indefinable pain, but he could not understand why or what it meant.

Sisu was jacking himself under the cold shower. The image of Mushu just couldn't get out of his mind, and his dick wouldn't calm down.

Outside, Mushu sat in silence, hands clasped together, knuckles white. "..."

He was truly, utterly speechless and helpless — two states he had not experienced in over decades.

He opened his laptop, typing furiously as he searched the web for symptoms: flushed face, rapid heartbeat, avoidance, tears. He read each result, his brows knitting tighter, both his fists and jaws clenched.

Finally, he tore his eyes from the screen and looked at the closed bathroom door again. The sounds had returned — sharper now, more desperate, building in intensity — and Mushu felt his chest constrict with helpless concern.

"..."

Mushu exhaled a long, shuddering breath, his broad shoulders sagging with the weight of his confusion. His voice, when he finally spoke to the empty room, was low and resigned.

Mushu decided then, with the grim determination of a soldier accepting an impossible mission, that he would find ways to help his little brother — whatever was wrong, whatever burden he was carrying. But he did not know where to start, had no map for this unfamiliar terrain. 'Let's take it a day at a time,' he thought, closing the laptop with quiet resolve. 'One day at a time. I'll figure this out. I have to.'

The next morning, as Ling Li awoke, a flood of warmth enveloped her, a soothing reminder of the cherished closeness from the night before. She rose late, untroubled by the hour, knowing her body craved respite after the intense, intimate time she had shared with Four Eyes.

Ling Li flushed as memories of the previous night returned. Shaking her head, she hurried out of bed to wash up, determined to start her day anew.

Once ready, she made her way to the nursery to check on her little ones, her footsteps light with anticipation as she transitioned from her own morning to the rhythm of family life.

Ling Li peeked into the nursery, the gentle scent of baby powder drifting through the air. She saw the triplets nestled in their cribs, their soft snores a harmonious lullaby in the quiet room. Although she couldn't produce enough milk for all three — leading to a mix of breastfeeding and formula — she felt at ease, comforted by the knowledge they wouldn't go hungry.

Ling Li's brows knit as she paused at the nursery doorway. Her voice low, tinged with worry, she asked, "And the twins? Where have they run off to now?" She bit her lip, hoping her twins hadn't felt invisible in the family's daily storm.

"I sent them to the study hall for their lessons."

Feeling hungry, Ling Li thanked Pharsa and left to have breakfast, ready for whatever the day brought.

At the end of the staircase, Mushu was already waiting for her, ready to brief her on the household's activities.

As she descended, Ling Li asked, "Are they all gone for the training?"

"Yes, Madam. However, Young Master Shi Min is waiting for you at the dining hall," Mushu replied. Ling Li paused briefly at the entrance, her senses alert to the familiar murmur of morning activity. Anticipation mingled with curiosity as she smoothed her dress and stepped inside. Shi Min's teasing rang out clearly.

Shi Min's voice rang out as soon as Ling Li entered. "Finally, you're up! Mom! Paps woke at the crack of dawn and made you soup — even shooed everyone else away! Said you needed it after, ahem, last night!"

Ling Li pointed at her son, hands on her waist, voice sharp. "Shi Min! You little rascal! Not afraid I'll scrub your mouth clean with soap, are you?"

Shi Min laughed out loud. He added, "Mom, I haven't heard you say that for a long time! I remember when you caught Ren and me running through the garden with muddy shoes, and you threatened to

wash our mouths out with soap every time we giggled about it. Ren and I spent the afternoon plotting how to make it up to you. We ended up giving you that crooked drawing of the family, remember?"

Butler James came out of the kitchen carrying a steaming bowl of soup. He announced, "Madam, Master Chu Yan said to serve you this nourishing soup once you come down. Madam, drink it while it's hot."

Ling Li "...."

Shi Min tried his best not to laugh out loud again, but couldn't hide the grin on his face as his mother reacted.

Rolling her eyes at her son's antics, Ling Li sat down, ready to enjoy her breakfast amidst the morning's lively atmosphere.

Shi Min grinned widely, eager to share. "Mom, you know Pap's bathed the triplets every single morning? I caught him at it today — I couldn't believe he's done it since they were born! I thought about trying, but with my clumsy hands, who knows which sibling I'd drop first? He's a pro!"

Ling Li was drinking her soup, but stopped midway. She never imagined Four Eyes would go to such lengths for their daughters. Gratitude surged, mingling with surprise at his quiet dedication. She knew he woke early to cultivate, but she hadn't realized he was also the one bathing the triplets, just as he had for the twins before.

"Ling Li nodded as she continued with her soup. "Your Paps also did the same for the twins," she said. "Mom, I wonder if I will be a good father like Paps," Shi Min blurted out, even though he was startled by the question.

"Ling Li replied flatly, "Well, first, find a woman to marry."

Shi Min "..."

Shi Min instantly fired back, face mischievous. "Hey Mushu, Rockie — aren't you two still single? If I marry first, is that breaking ancient protocol? I will be called unfilial, too! You'd better hurry up, or I'm going to steal your thunder as the family trailblazer!"

Mushu and Rockie, who were trying to be invisible on the side "..."

'Why were we dragged into their conversation?

Who wants to steal your thunder?'

Chapter 482 482: IT'S MY FAULT?

Butler James returned with a steaming bowl from the kitchen and placed it in front of Ling Li. He said, "Madam, Master Chu Yan also prepared this fresh fish soup. He said to tell you to finish it to help you generate more milk."

Ling Li stared at the bowl, glancing briefly at her family before picking up her spoon.

"..."

'Am I going to drink soup all morning?' Ling Li silently thought, but did not want to waste her husband's effort and good intentions, so she obediently finished everything.

After placing her spoon down with a tightened grip, Ling Li furrowed her brow slightly and asked, "Did you meet with Fen Zhang last night?" Her voice carried an unexpected edge, hinting at a concern she was yet to voice.

Shi Min replied, "Yes, and he gave me the names whom we can count on and those we need to take care of," but there was a pause, a flicker of hesitation. Ling Li noticed it, her eyes narrowing slightly as she sensed something was left unsaid. It was as if Shi Min held back one crucial detail, a name that could tip the balance of their plan. Shi Min added, "I realigned with Pharsa, and she has dispatched people to trail and investigate deeper into these people."

Ling Li said, "That's good to hear. After the family competition, we will focus on the election. By the way, Mushu, how is Sisu?"

Mushu replied, "Madam, thank you for your concern. He seemed to be grieving badly."

Both Shi Min and Ling Li raised their brows. 'Did Mushu misunderstand Sisu? There was no sign of grief on Sisu's face during their interaction; all they could see was his eyes twinkle when his gaze landed on Mushu.'

"Why don't you take Sisu out today? I will be home for the rest of the day, so you may take a leave," Ling Li suggested. "Maybe you two can explore the market and try the new puzzle stall that's been the talk of the town. I've heard only those with patience and a keen eye can solve the enigma there." She added.

Mushu respectfully replied with a bow, "Thank you, Madam, I'll heed your suggestion."

Ling Li asked, "Shi Min, what is your plan for today?"

"I have four video conferences today. Wushing has sent documents I need to sign and some proposals to check," Shi Min said, trying not to dwell on the quiet shadow of the upcoming election over every task. Outside the study, the election deadlines loomed. His resolve to juggle everything grew ever more palpable; time seemed to slip through their fingers. He added, "I'll be in the study," knowing every moment counted as they neared a critical juncture.

Ling Li said, "I guess both of us will be in the study for the rest of the day."

The Twins in the Library

Shi Min had already gone ahead to the study, while Ling Li lingered over her tea. Butler James approached with his usual calm demeanor.

"Madam, all the gifts the triplets received have been sorted in the second hall. Would you like to check them out?"

Ling Li nodded, setting her cup down.

"Yes, I'd love to. I almost forgot. Also, aren't the twins finished by now?"

Butler James bowed slightly.

"They finished lessons, and the teachers left an hour ago. The twins are still in the study hall, working on something."

Ling Li rose, "I see. Let me check on them."

Ling Li left her seat and headed toward the study hall. Butler James, Mushu, and Rockie gathered behind her, following.

"Mushu, you can go. Take Sisu out for a walk. Butler James and Rockie are enough."

Rockie with an encouraging smile.

"Go, Chief. Take care of Sisu first."

Mushu bowed respectfully.

"Then I shall take my leave. Thank you, Madam."

The Empty Study Hall

When Ling Li entered the twins' study hall, the room was empty. Books lay neatly stacked, but no sign of the girls.

Ling Li's brows furrowed.

"Where could those two little mischiefs have gone this time? Hm... what are they up to again?"

She paused, recalling their enthusiasm the night before about the reproductive system they had read. A suspicion formed. She turned sharply.

"The library."

Caught in the Act

The doors creaked open. Light glowed through tall windows over two small heads bent over a book.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin were so engrossed that they didn't notice the footsteps behind them. Their tiny fingers flipped pages at lightning speed, eyes scanning multiple lines at once with uncanny comprehension.

Ling Li raised a hand, signaling Butler James and Rockie to stay silent. She approached quietly, her steps measured, until she caught sight of the title.

Her lips parted, her eyes narrowing.

"...."

Her less-than-three-year-old genius twins were devouring 'Gray's Anatomy'. On the table beside them lay three discarded volumes: 'Netter's Atlas of Human Anatomy', 'Grant's Atlas of Anatomy', and 'Human Anatomy & Physiology'. This was their fourth book — and judging by the pace, they were nearly finished. On their right were five more books stacked.

'No wonder my husband is worried about them.' Ling Li silently thought, shaking her head, sighing. 'If their father sees this, won't he be so scared to death by these two brats?'

Ling Li's hand went to her waist. She coughed deliberately.

"Cough cough."

The twins' heads snapped up simultaneously, eyes wide like thieves caught mid-heist. They scrambled to their feet, standing straight.

"Mom!

Mom!" The twins said in unison.

Ling Li's gaze was sharp but amused.

"What are you two doing?"

Chin Chin stammered, her cheeks flushing.

"Ah... we... we..."

Kim Kim, always the composed one, stepped forward.

"Mom, didn't you say you would teach us needle techniques, both medical and weaponry? I told Chin Chin, maybe we should start being more familiar with parts of the body."

Ling Li's lips pressed into a thin line.

"..."

Ling Li thought, 'So now it's my fault? I taught them acupuncture, but do they really need to read advanced medical books?'

Finally, she smiled slyly.

"Since you're at it, let me suggest a few more books on needle technique."

Ling Li strode to a shelf, pulling down eight heavy hardbound volumes. With a thud, she placed them in front of the twins.

Chapter 483 483: THE GIFTS

The Twins' Reactions

The twins stared at the pile.

"..."

Chin Chin's heart sank. Deep inside, she wanted to scream: 'No more books! It's Kim Kim who wants to read, not me!' But she couldn't betray her sister.

Kim Kim's eyes lit up.

"Mom! Thank you! We will definitely read and learn well!"

Chin Chin nodded, hiding her reluctance. She only stayed because Kim Kim promised her chocolates.

Ling Li bit back laughter, her eyes twinkling at their contrasting reactions.

The Break

Ling Li straightened, her tone firm but kind.

"Alright, take a break. Come with me to check your little sisters' gifts."

Chin Chin bolted forward, relief flooding her face.

"Yes! Coming!" she shouted, running after her mother.

Kim Kim sighed, shoulders slumping.

"..."

With resignation, she followed, her mind already planning which book to tackle first.

As they left the library, Butler James and Rockie exchanged amused glances. Ling Li walked ahead, her daughters trailing behind — one eager, one reluctant.

Her heart swelled with pride and worry. "Genius children... fragile triplets... the heavens truly test us in every way." She murmured.

The library doors closed behind them, leaving the pile of books waiting for the twins' inevitable return.

The Second Hall – Gifts for the Triplets

Ling Li walked with Kim Kim and Chin Chin down the polished corridor, Butler James and Rockie following behind. The doors to the second hall opened, revealing a spacious, brightly lit room. Instead of

ancient ceremonial displays, the hall was arranged like a modern exhibition: tables lined with neatly wrapped boxes, sleek gift bags, and velvet cases, each tagged with the sender's name.

The twins gasped, their sneakers squeaking against the marble floor.

"Mom! Look at all these!" Kim Kim exclaimed, eyes wide. Despite her mature demeanor, she's still a child.

"Are they all for our three little sisters?" Chin Chin asked, bouncing on her toes.

Ling Li smiled, her voice warm but steady.

"Yes. Every gift carries a blessing, a wish for their future. Some are practical, some symbolic."

The Gifts and Reactions

Educational Tablets – Sent by allies from the Hidden Valley, preloaded with cultivation manuals and martial philosophy texts.

Kim Kim immediately tapped the screen, her eyes sparkling.

"Mom, they can start learning even before they talk!

Ling Li chuckled. "Let's wait until they can at least hold the tablet without chewing on it."

Customized Training Gears – Tiny martial arts uniforms in pastel colors, embroidered with the Li Clan insignia.

Chin Chin picked one up and held it against her chest.

"They'll look like little warriors!"

Rockie grinned. "Start them young, and they'll surpass us all."

Blessing Scrolls – Elegant scrolls from the elders of the Hidden Valley and the Li Clan, written in calligraphy but mounted in sleek acrylic frames for modern display.

Butler James carefully unrolled one and another, reading aloud:

"May their qi flow like rivers, unbroken and eternal."

"May fortune bloom like spring."

The twins tilted their heads.

"Mom, why do grown-ups always write so many words instead of giving chocolates?" Chin Chin muttered.

Ling Li laughed, covering her mouth.

Smart Cribs with Qi Sensors – A gift from El Padre, designed to monitor the babies' breathing and qi fluctuations.

Kim Kim leaned over the sleek design, fascinated.

"Mom, it even glows when their qi changes!"

Ling Li nodded thoughtfully. "Technology and cultivation — this is the world we live in now."

'And only El Padre would think of these kinds of things.' Ling Li added in her thoughts with a chuckle.

A Basket of Red Eggs and Modern Sweets – Traditional blessing updated with chocolates, cupcakes, and candies.

The twins immediately reached for them.

"Mom, can we eat these? Just one?"

Ling Li raised a brow. "Sure, just one for now. And share the rest tonight after dinner."

Chin Chin pouted, whispering to Kim Kim, "We should've hidden them before Mom saw."

Kim Kim "...."

"If you read more with me, I'll secretly place two more in your pocket," Kim Kim whispered.

Chin Chin nodded with her twinkling eyes.

Ling Li, not far from them, pretended not to hear. 'It seems Kim Kim could only bribed her sister to read and study with her. Hm, nevermind, let them be for now,' she thought.

Three golden rattles shaped like a phoenix – The twins squealed, shaking them until the sound echoed.

"This is perfect for Brother Shun's fire sutra!" Kim Kim said proudly.

Ling Li chuckled. "Perhaps one day, one of your little sisters will wield fire too."

Three carved wooden horses – Rockie lifted it, the craftsmanship exquisite.

"This symbolizes strength and endurance. A warrior's gift."

Kim Kim hopped onto it, pretending to ride. Chin Chin followed suit.

"Look, Mom! We are charging into battle!"

Ling Li shook her head, half amused, half exasperated.

Three jade bracelets carved with lotus petals – Chin Chin slipped them onto her wrist, admiring them.

"Mom, it's so pretty! Can I keep one?"

Ling Li shook her head, amused. "It belongs to Ruixiang. But one day, she may share it with you. But you have your own jade bracelets, which I was going to give you when you grew up. I'm afraid you would break them and hurt your wrist."

"Ah! Then, Mom, can I see it later?" Chin Chin said as she placed the bracelets back on their carved boxes.

"Sure," Ling Li said with assurance.

As the twins explored, Ling Li stood back, her gaze softening. Each gift was more than an object — it was a promise, a thread woven into the triplets' destiny. The scrolls carried the weight of tradition, bassinets reflected modern innovation, and the sweets reminded her of the innocence of childhood, along with a lot of jewelry and clothing they could use from infancy to adulthood.

Her daughters' laughter rang through the hall, innocent and pure. For a moment, Ling Li allowed herself to breathe, to feel pride and joy.

"The heavens test us with genius and fragility, but they also bless us with love. May these gifts remind my daughters of the world's faith in them."

Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for joining me on this journey! If you've enjoyed the story so far, please don't forget to vote, recommend, and leave your comments — your thoughts mean the world to me and help shape the chapters ahead.

Your generous gifts and support are a powerful source of inspiration, fueling my passion to write even more thrilling, heartfelt, and unforgettable scenes for you. Every gesture, big or small, reminds me why I love telling this story.

Let's keep building this world together.

With gratitude,

Sirius M

Chapter 484 484: IT'S YOU I'VE ALWAYS LOVED

The Outing Begins

By mid-morning, Mushu knocked gently. His voice, as always, was calm. Steady.

"Sisu, get ready. Let's go out. You've been grieving too much. A change of scenery will help."

Sisu opened the door, face composed, eyes stormy. He nodded quickly, forcing a smile.

"Yes, Big Brother."

Mushu lingered a moment, sensing heaviness but mistaking it for sorrow for their father. He placed a reassuring hand on Sisu's shoulder.

"We'll shop a little, then dine somewhere nice. You need to relax."

Sisu's heart skipped at the touch, chest tightening. He lowered his gaze, whispering softly,

"Thank you, Big Brother."

Shopping in the City

Shanghai's streets bustled. Lanterns swayed, merchants called; roasted chestnuts mixed with perfume. Mushu walked tall, drawing glances. Sisu followed, eyes fixed on Mushu's back, fighting his emotions. Mushu showed Sisu the busy market, then led him to one of the Li's exclusive members-only malls in the city's heart.

It was Sisu's first time to set foot in such a grand place.

Mushu stopped at a clothing shop.

"You need proper attire. You can't keep wearing travel-worn clothes. Try these."

He handed Sisu a finely tailored suit, dark blue with silver cufflinks from the display.

Sisu hesitated, his trembling fingers lingering on Mushu's as he accepted it. The contact sent heat racing to his cheeks, leaving him breathless.

Inside the fitting room, Sisu stared at his reflection, clutching the suit.

Sisu stared into the mirror, heart pounding, breath shallow. 'How can I stand beside him without tearing myself apart? Father, why did you send me back to him?'

When he stepped out, Mushu nodded approvingly.

"It suits you. You look stronger and brighter in it."

Sisu's lips parted. No words came. He only lowered his gaze, hiding the turmoil in his eyes.

Mushu bought him more clothes, shoes, accessories, and snacks.

Dining Together

By noon, Mushu led Sisu into a fine dining restaurant. The air was rich with the aroma of braised duck and jasmine tea. A private room had been prepared, quiet and elegant.

Mushu gestured for Sisu to sit.

"Order whatever you like. Today is for you."

Sisu's hands trembled as he picked up the menu. His eyes darted to Mushu, who sat across from him. Relaxed, vigilant. His presence filled the room.

He gripped the menu, knuckles white, heart hammering: 'He doesn't know... he can't know. If he ever finds out, what will he think of me? Will he despise me? Will he leave me again?'

The waiter arrived, and Mushu ordered confidently:

"Xiao Long Bao, Red-Braised Pork belly, Braised duck, steamed fish, and lotus soup. And tea."

Sisu nodded silently, his voice too weak to add anything.

The Silent Battle

Dishes arrived; Mushu ate calmly, urging Sisu to try more.

"Eat. You've lost weight. Father would scold me if I let you starve."

Sisu forced each bite down, the food tasting like ash. His heart hammered at every sight of Mushu and the sound of his voice. He yearned to speak his truth, but the words choked him, trapped by fear.

Mushu noticed his silence, mistaking it for grief.

"You miss Father, don't you? He was a good man. He wanted us to stay united. That's why he sent you to me."

Sisu's chopsticks froze mid-air. His vision blurred as tears welled fiercely, and he ducked behind his cup, trying to hide the ache.

"Yes... I miss him."

Inside, Sisu's mind was screaming in silence.

'And you, Big Brother. I miss you. It's you I've always loved.'

Mushu's Helplessness

After the meal, Mushu leaned back, studying Sisu's face, brows furrowed.

"You're still restless. Tomorrow, I'll take you to the temple. Maybe prayer will ease your heart."

Sisu's lips trembled, chest aching. He wanted to cry out, but forced a smile.

"Thank you, Big Brother. You're always thoughtful."

Mushu nodded, satisfied with the answer, though unease lingered. He had mastered blades and war, but his brother's silence remained unsolved.

As they left the restaurant, the city lights flickered against the evening sky. Mushu walked ahead, his stride steady, his mind already planning tomorrow's outing.

Sisu followed, heart heavy, emotions a storm he dared not reveal. His eyes lingered on Mushu's back, a silent plea echoing.

'Father, why did you send me back to him? How long can I endure this?'

Night swallowed their figures, one walking certain, the other in silence.

Sisu's Emotional Thoughts

When they returned home that night, Mushu informed Sisu that they had to share the room for a few more nights. Sisu's heart dropped.

'I thought I'd finally escape this torment... I was ready for my own space, to breathe freely again. But now I have to sleep beside him. How can I control myself? Every night — his glance, his breath — feels like torture. Father, why send me back? Is this a test? Or a punishment?'

Sisu forced a smile, his voice trembling.

"I understand, brother. I'll go wash up first."

He rushed into the bathroom, clutching his chest, his face burning.

The Three Nights of Torment

For the next three nights, the same pattern repeated.

Night One: Sisu lay stiffly on the bed, wrapped tightly in his blanket, pretending to sleep. His cheeks glowed red, and his breathing was uneven. Every time Mushu shifted, Sisu's heart raced. He bit his lip until it bled, whispering, "Calm down."

Night Two: Sisu excused himself to the bathroom longer than usual, splashing cold water on his face, gripping the sink until his knuckles turned white. He stared at his reflection, whispering, "Don't let him see. Don't let him know." When he returned, his hair damp, Mushu frowned at his flushed cheeks.

"Are you sick again?" Mushu pressed a hand to Sisu's forehead.

Sisu jerked back, stammering, "No, Big Brother, I'm fine!"

Night Three: Sisu turned his back to Mushu, clutching his pillow. His body trembled, his mind filled with forbidden images. His breaths came shallow, face buried in the pillow. Mushu, lying awake, watched silently, despair gnawing at him.

Mushu rubbed his temple, his stoic mask cracking.

'I've mastered blades, guns, and war. But I cannot understand my own brother. Why is he always flushed? Why does he avoid me? Why does he tremble every time I touch him? I think... I may need to consult Madam for advice.'

Chapter 485 485: MUSHUS IS HELPLESS

The Next Morning – Seeking Advice

The following morning, Mushu walked with heavy steps to Ling Li's study. The air was crisp, sunlight streaming through the tall windows. He knocked once, then entered.

Ling Li sat at her desk, reviewing documents. Shi Min was beside her, scrolling through files on his tablet. Both looked up as Mushu entered.

"Madam," Mushu said, bowing respectfully. "I... need advice."

Ling Li raised a brow, setting her pen down.

"Advice? From you? That's rare."

Shi Min smirked.

"If the stoic Brother Mushu is asking for advice, it must be serious."

Mushu's jaw clenched. He hesitated, then spoke.

"It's about Sisu. He's... different. Every night, he looks flushed, restless. He avoids me, trembles when I touch him. I thought he was grieving Father, but... it feels like something else. I don't understand him. And I cannot solve what I cannot understand."

Ling Li and Shi Min's Subtle Hints

Ling Li exchanged a glance with Shi Min. Both already knew the truth — that Sisu was gay, and his secret feelings for Mushu were the source of his torment.

Ling Li leaned back, her voice calm but layered with meaning.

"Mushu, sometimes what you see on the surface is not the whole truth. Not all restlessness comes from grief. Some hearts tremble for reasons they cannot say aloud."

Shi Min added, his tone teasing but sharp.

"Brother Mushu, you're strong in battle but blind in matters of the heart. Haven't you noticed how Sisu looks at you? His eyes don't shine with grief — they shine with something else."

Mushu's brows furrowed, his stoic mask cracking further.

"Something else?"

Ling Li's gaze softened.

"Yes. Some people carry feelings they cannot confess. Feelings that make them flushed, restless, and even desperate to hide. You must consider that possibility."

Shi Min leaned forward, smirking.

"Brother Mushu, Sisu isn't sick. He isn't grieving. He's... different. And maybe, just maybe, his heart beats fast because of you."

Mushu's Helplessness

Mushu froze, his mind blank. His stoic composure faltered. He clenched his fists, his voice low.

"???"

"Because of me?... That cannot be. I... I don't understand."

Ling Li sighed, her eyes filled with compassion.

"You don't need to understand right away. Just be gentle. Give him space to find his own way."

Shi Min chuckled, shaking his head.

"For once, Brother, you look lost. Truly lost."

Mushu stood in silence, his heart heavy. He had faced countless battles, but this — his brother's hidden love — was a battlefield he had no weapons for.

'I can crush armies. I can survive pain. But how do I face this?'

Mushu's Resolve

That night, Mushu returned to his room. Ling Li's words echoed: "Some hearts tremble for reasons they cannot say aloud." Shi Min's teasing smirk lingered; her voice taunted him: "His eyes don't shine with grief — they shine with something else."

Mushu's hand trembles as he closes the door.

For the first time in years, Mushu felt uncertain. He had faced assassins, rival clans, and deadly missions—all with calm. But now, with his younger brother, he felt lost.

"What am I supposed to do? I cannot fight feelings with fists. I cannot cut emotions with blades. I don't even know what he truly feels, or what I should do if I do find out."

"..."

Gentle Attempts

Determined, Mushu softened his approach.

At dinner, he pulled out Sisu's chair before sitting down.

"Eat more. You've lost weight," Mushu said, his tone gentler than usual.

Sisu's chopsticks froze mid-air, his cheeks flushing. He nodded quickly and whispered, "Thank you, Big Brother."

During training, Mushu slowed his pace. He corrected Sisu's stance with light touches instead of firm grips.

"Relax your shoulders. Breathe with your core."

Each brush of his hand sent Sisu's heart racing. He bit his lip, pulse pounding as he struggled to steady his breath, hiding the heat rising in his face.

At night, Mushu kept his distance, lying stiffly on one side to give Sisu space.

"You can rest easy. I won't disturb you."

Sisu turned his back, clutching his pillow tighter, knuckles whitening. His breath hitched as he whispered, voice trembling, "It's not distance I fear — it's closeness I crave."

Sisu's Silent Battle

Sisu's restraint strained with every moment; he barely recognized his own tear-prickling eyes.

He lingered in the bathroom, splashing cold water on his face. He whispered to himself, reminding his reflection, "Don't let him see. Don't betray yourself."

He avoided Mushu's gaze at meals, staring at his plate, afraid his eyes would reveal too much.

At night, Sisu wrapped himself tightly in blankets, trembling so violently his teeth chattered, his chest aching with a longing he dared not confess.

Every gentle act from Mushu — every kindness, every softened word — only deepened his torment. Yet he could not escape it.

'Why is he being so kind now? Does he know how I feel? No... he can't know. If he ever found out, he'd despise me. Why did Father send me back here, knowing I'd suffer? How much longer can I keep up this act?'

Mushu's Helplessness

Mushu watched, jaw clenched, tension settling into his shoulders. With every gesture, Sisu seemed even more unsettled, and guilt gnawed at Mushu's resolve.

One night, as Sisu fled to the bathroom, Mushu sat on the bed, rubbing his temple.

'I tried to be softer. I tried to ease him. But the more I do, the more he trembles. Ling Li and Shi Min hinted at something. But what is it really?'

His stoic mask cracked; his hands trembled, breath hitching as his eyes clouded with helplessness. For the first time, Mushu — the man who had mastered war — felt utterly defeated.

Mushu's Silent Observation

The next morning, Mushu woke up with a new resolve as he recalled Ling Li's words, which echoed in his mind: "Some hearts tremble for reasons they cannot say aloud." Shi Min's teasing smirk haunted him: "His eyes don't shine with grief — they shine with something else."

For the first time, Mushu decided not to dismiss their hints. Instead, he would watch carefully.

Sisu sat on the bed, pretending to scroll through his phone. His posture was stiff, his cheeks faintly flushed. Mushu noticed his brother's trembling fingers and his avoidance of direct eye contact.

Mushu's confusion deepened, emotion swirling in his chest. "He's not grieving. This is something else. But what?" Mushu thought, his chest tightening as he tried to name the feeling.

Chapter 486: THAT WASN'T GRIEF. THAT WAS LONGING

The Lingering Gaze

Later that night, Mushu deliberately sat at the desk, pretending to check emails, while keeping Sisu in his peripheral vision.

While Sisu lay on the bed, blanket clutched to his chest. He turned his head. His eyes flicked toward Mushu. At first, it was subtle — a glance, quickly withdrawn. But as Mushu remained motionless, Sisu's stare lingered.

His gaze followed Mushu's shoulders, noting the muscles tensing with each keystroke, even as his steady composure remained. Sisu's lips parted, breath unsteady.

Mushu suddenly looked up. Their eyes met.

Sisu froze, face burning. He jerked his gaze away and fumbled with his blanket, pretending to adjust it. His movements were clumsy, betraying panic.

At that moment, surprise jolted Mushu's resolve. His heart skipped a beat, a jarring realization emerging just beneath his calm.

'That wasn't grief. That wasn't sorrow. That was... longing.'

Mushu's Realization

At breakfast, Mushu noticed Sisu's eyes flick toward him with each word, his cheeks flushed when their hands brushed as they passed dishes.

During training, Mushu corrected Sisu's stance with a light touch. Sisu stiffened, breath caught, eyes darting away.

Mushu's stoic mask cracked. Ling Li's words and Shi Min's smirk returned.

'Could it be true? Does his heart... beat for me?' Mushu felt tightness in his heart.

That night, Mushu lay awake, staring at the ceiling as Sisu's soft breathing filled the room. Mushu's mind was restless.

'I've faced armies without fear, endured wounds without flinching. But this truth terrifies me. If he truly feels this way, what am I supposed to do? I cannot return what I do not feel. Yet I cannot hurt him. He is my brother. He is family. Now he is a puzzle I cannot solve.'

Mushu turned his head slightly. Sisu was curled beneath his blanket, face half-hidden. Yet Mushu saw it again — the subtle flush on Sisu's cheeks. He noticed how Sisu's gaze lingered when he thought Mushu wasn't watching.

Mushu closed his eyes, awareness blooming into helpless sorrow. The full weight of Sisu's hidden feelings settled heavily on his chest.

"Ling Li and Shi Min were right. His heart trembles because of me. And I... I am helpless."

Mushu's Breaking Point

The following evening, after hours of restless pacing, Mushu could no longer contain the storm inside him. He had seen Sisu's lingering gaze, felt his trembling presence, and remembered Ling Li and Shi Min's hints. His stoic mask was cracking.

He left the quiet hallway behind and walked slowly to Ling Li's study. The door creaked open, revealing Ling Li seated at her desk, her aura calm yet commanding. The faint glow of her qi shimmered around her, a reminder of her strength.

Mushu bowed deeply, urgency in his voice.

"Madam... I need to speak with you. Alone."

Ling Li looked up, sensing the weight in his tone. She gestured for him to sit and sent Butler James out.

"Speak, Mushu. What troubles you?"

The Confession

Mushu sat stiffly, his fists clenched on his knees. His voice trembled, a rare crack in his usual composure.

"I tried to observe Sisu, as you advised. And I saw it. His eyes... they linger on me. His heart trembles not from grief, but from something else. Something I cannot name, but I fear I already know."

Mushu met Ling Li's eyes, confusion flickering beneath his sharp gaze.

"Madam... what should I do if his heart truly beats for me?"

Ling Li's Wisdom

Ling Li's expression softened as she leaned back, eyes full of compassion.

"Mushu, you have mastered war, but this is not a battlefield you can conquer with strength. If his heart beats for you, it is not something you can fight. It is something you must handle with care."

She paused, voice steady.

"Do not shame him. Do not break him. His feelings are his burden, and perhaps his gift. You cannot return what you do not feel, but you can give him respect, kindness, and protection. That is what he needs most."

Mushu's jaw clenched, voice low.

"But Madam... I feel helpless. I cannot return his feelings. Yet I cannot hurt him either. He is my brother. He is family. And now... he is a puzzle I cannot solve."

Ling Li reached across the desk, her hand resting lightly on his arm.

"You do not need to solve him, Mushu. You only need to stand beside him. Let him find his own path. If his heart beats for you, then let it beat. Do not crush it. Do not run from it. Be the brother he needs."

Mushu bowed his head, his stoic mask shattered. For the first time, he felt truly vulnerable.

"I can fight armies. I can endure wounds. But how do I face this? How do I face him?"

Ling Li's voice remained calm, resolute.

"Face him with compassion. That is all the heavens ask of you."

The study fell silent, the weight of unspoken truths pressing down. Mushu rose slowly, his heart heavy, his mind clouded. He had faced countless battles, but this — his brother's hidden love — was a war he could not win, only endure.

Mushu's New Approach

The next evening, Mushu entered their shared room with a quiet determination. Ling Li's words echoed in his mind: "Face him with compassion. That is all the heavens ask of you."

Instead of keeping his usual distance, Mushu softened his presence. He placed a bottle of water on Sisu's nightstand, neatly adjusted the blanket, and spoke in a calm tone.

"You've been restless these past nights. If you need anything, please let me know. I'll take care of it."

Sisu blinked, startled. His heart leapt at the unexpected tenderness. His cheeks flushed, and he quickly looked away.

"Ah... thank you, Big Brother."

Protective Gestures

At breakfast, Mushu pulled out Sisu's chair, placed food on his plate, and then served himself.

"Eat more. You need strength."

Sisu's chopsticks trembled. His chest tightened. 'He's... caring for me. Could it mean...?'

During training, Mushu slowed his pace, shielding Sisu from more brutal sparring blows.

"Don't push yourself. I'll cover you."

Sisu's breath caught, his eyes shimmering. 'He's protecting me... like more than a brother would.'

At night, Mushu deliberately sat closer and spoke softly.

"You don't have to hide under the blanket. I'll keep watch. Sleep peacefully."

Sisu's heart raced, his body trembling under the weight of unspoken desire. 'He remembers... he cares... does he feel it too?'

Chapter 487: THE MISUNDERSTANDING

Sisu's Misinterpretation

Every act of compassion became fuel for Sisu's hidden hope.

When Mushu brushed dust off his shoulder, Sisu's pulse surged.

When Mushu placed a hand lightly on his back during training, Sisu's breath faltered.

When Mushu lingered at the door to ensure he was safe, Sisu's chest burned with longing.

'He's different now. Gentler. Protective. Could it be... he feels the same? Father, is this the sign I've been waiting for?'

Mushu's Unending Helplessness

But Mushu, watching Sisu's flushed cheeks and trembling hands, grew more unsettled. His protective gestures seemed to make things worse.

One night, as Sisu turned away, clutching his pillow tightly, Mushu sat on the edge of the bed, his voice low.

"I don't know what troubles you, but I'll stand beside you. Always."

Sisu's eyes widened, his heart pounding. He bit his lip, whispering silently into the darkness:

'Always... he said always. Does that mean...?'

Mushu lay awake, staring at the ceiling, despair gnawing at him.

'Ling Li told me to be compassionate. But the more I try, the more restless he becomes. If his heart truly beats for me... then my kindness is only feeding his torment. What am I supposed to do?'

The Night of Breaking Silence

The room was thick with silence. Mushu sat at the desk, scrolling through reports, his posture radiating quiet authority. Sisu lay curled on the bed, clutching his pillow as his heart hammered in his chest — each beat more desperate than the hush between them.

Mushu had changed — gentler, protective. Each gesture, each kind word, wore down Sisu's defenses. Emotions mounted, ready to spill over.

He turned, eyes lingering on Mushu's back, watching muscles shift beneath his shirt. His lips parted, breath uneven.

'He's so kind now... so close. Does he know how I feel? Can he sense the hope and fear within me? If I don't say how I feel now, I'll drown in this silence.'

The Confession

Sisu sat up suddenly, the blanket sliding off. His voice trembled, cheeks flushed.

"Big Brother... I... I need to tell you something."

Mushu Mushu looked up. His sharp eyes met Sisu's. For a moment, the air thickened, charged with unspoken truth. His hands clenched, chest heaving. Words clawed at his throat, desperate to escape.

"I... I—"

The Interruption

Before the confession could break free, Mushu rose abruptly, cutting across the moment. He placed his phone down and spoke in his usual calm, practical tone.

"You should rest. Tomorrow will be a long day. I'll keep watch."

Sisu froze, heart plunging into dread. The words withered on his tongue, smothered by suffocating silence. His eyes burned, body quaking with raw frustration and aching longing.

'He interrupted me... he doesn't want to hear it. Or maybe... he already knows. Father, why is this so cruel?'

Mushu tucked the blanket around him, his gentle hand blind to the wild torment raging in Sisu's soul.

"Sleep. I'll be here."

Sisu lay back, face buried in the pillow, hot tears stinging his eyes. His heart pounded with all he couldn't voice: 'I love you.'

Mushu sat at the desk. His stoic mask barely contained a storm of anguish. Ling Li's words echoed: "Do not shame him. Do not break him."

But as Mushu glanced at Sisu's trembling form, his chest tightened.

'My kindness only feeds his torment. And I am helpless.'

The night stretched on, heavy with aching silence, the confession throbbing between us—unspoken, yet sharper, more agonizing than any words.

Ling Li's Quiet Test

The study was filled with the soft rustle of papers and the faint hum of the air conditioner. Ling Li sat at her desk, reviewing documents for the upcoming Family Competition. Shi Min stood nearby, arms crossed, his sharp eyes scanning reports on his tablet.

Mushu entered, bowing respectfully. Though his presence remained steady, Ling Li sensed the storm beneath his stoic mask: a tight jaw, averted eyes, and clenched hands. She had noticed the tension between him and Sisu — the flushed cheeks, restless silences, and Sisu's lingering gaze betraying longing and apprehension.

Ling Li set her pen down, her voice calm but deliberate.

"Mushu, before we leave for Hidden Valley, I want you to spend more time with Sisu. Take him out, train with him, talk with him. He needs you."

Mushu's brows furrowed, uncertainty and worry flashing across his face.

"Madam... I already watch over him. He is restless, but I cannot ease him. Why ask me to do more?"

Ling Li's gaze sharpened, a blend of concern and understanding visible, though her tone remained gentle.

He trusts you most. If his heart shakes, only you can steady it. Consider this a test of compassion.

Shi Min's Interjection

Shi Min smirked, leaning against the window.

"Brother Mushu, we're about to face the Family Competition, but this may be the hardest battle for you. Spending time alone with Sisu will force you to see what you've been avoiding. You can't run from it forever."

Mushu's jaw tightened, his fists clenching at his sides as frustration and helplessness tightened his posture.

"I... don't know what to do. If his heart truly beats for me, then my presence only feeds his torment. Yet Madam asks me to stay closer."

Ling Li's eyes softened with empathy, but her words carried weight and determination.

"Yes. Only by facing the storm can you learn to endure it. Protect him, Mushu. Not from enemies, but from himself."

The Assignment

Ling Li closed the folder in front of her, signaling the conversation's end.

"Tomorrow, take him out. No training, no missions. Just time together. Let him feel safe with you. Two days from now, we leave for Hidden Valley. If you cannot steady him before then, the competition will expose his weakness — and yours."

Mushu bowed, his voice low and trembling with hidden sorrow and inner struggle.

"I will obey, Madam."

Mushu's Inner Turmoil

As Mushu left the study, his mind churned with doubt, longing, and dread, emotions flickering across his face as he wrestled with Ling Li's request.

'Madam wants me near Sisu, but every moment with Sisu is a battlefield. His eyes plead for what I cannot give. If I reach out, he reads hope in every touch; if I pull away, I hurt him more. There is no right step — only more questions, more betrayal. How do I protect both our hearts without losing myself?'

Shi Min watched him go, shaking his head with a faint smile.

"Even the strongest warrior can be undone by the heart. Let's see how Mushu survives this battle."

Ling Li exhaled softly, her eyes lingering on the door with quiet worry and hope for Mushu's growth.

'He must learn compassion, even if it breaks him.'

Chapter 488: TRAINING BEFORE THE FAMILY COMPETITION

The Outing – Mushu and Sisu

The next morning, Mushu kept his promise to Ling Li. He found Sisu waiting by the door, his posture stiff, his eyes betraying nervous anticipation.

"Come," Mushu said simply. "We'll spend the day outside."

They walked through the city, Mushu's presence steady but softened by small gestures — holding doors, slowing his pace, even buying Sisu his favorite drink without asking.

Sisu's heart raced with every act.

'He's so attentive now... so gentle. Does he know? Is this his way of telling me he feels the same?'

At lunch, Mushu ordered Sisu's favorite dish.

"Eat. You need strength for the days ahead."

Sisu's lips parted, his chest tightening.

"Big Brother... I... I need to tell you something."

But before he could speak, Mushu's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, his expression hardening.

"We'll continue later. I need to take this call."

Sisu froze, his confession swallowed once again. His heart ached, his mind screaming.

"Always interrupted... always denied. Father, how long must I endure this torment?"

The Training Ground – Otako's Inspection

That same afternoon, Ling Li cloaked herself in the identity of Otako, her alter identity. Her aura masked, but her presence unmistakably commanding. With only two days left before the Family Competition, every heartbeat in the training hall carried urgency.

The vast field thundered with the clash of qi and steel. The air was thick with sweat, determination, and the sharp tang of spiritual energy. Each trainee fought not only against their own limits but against the weight of expectation.

The Trainees in Formation

Four Eyes stood at the front, his brow furrowed in concentration. His 'Shield of the Loyal Heart' shimmered faintly around him, a protective aura that pulsed with loyalty and defiance. At the same time, his 'Silent Ink Dao' flowed like liquid shadow, his brush strokes invisible yet leaving trails of spiritual resonance. His jaw clenched as he forced the two techniques to harmonize, sweat dripping down his temple.

"Hold it steady!" barked one of the Shah of Dusk. Four Eyes gritted his teeth, his shield flickering before stabilizing, his eyes burning with stubborn resolve.

Ren, her fingers bandaged from repeated strain, refused to falter. Each flick of her hand sent golden threads of qi darting forward — 'the Golden Needle Sutra.' Her face twisted in pain, but her eyes blazed with defiance.

"Pain is nothing," she whispered to herself, forcing another needle into formation. The Shah overseeing her gave a curt nod, impressed by her refusal to yield.

Lily moved with grace, her hair whipping in the wind she conjured. Her elemental attribute surged, guided by the 'Voice of Resonance Truth'. Each strike carried a whisper of harmony, yet her expression was tense, her lips pressed tight as she struggled to maintain control.

"Your wind scatters too easily!" shouted Shah of Wind. Lily bit her lip, adjusted her stance, and forced the gale into a sharp, focused blade.

Shun burned with intensity, his fire element roaring as he practiced the 'Phoenix Command Sutra'. Flames licked at his arms, his qi blazing so hot that the floor beneath him shimmered. His eyes glowed with fierce determination, but his breathing grew ragged.

"Control it, don't let it control you!" thundered Shah of Fire. Shun roared back, forcing the flames into a disciplined arc, his sweat sizzling as it hit the heat.

Fatty stood firm, his body trembling under the weight of the 'Stone Heart Resilience'. His qi hardened around him like rock, his face red with strain. His fists clenched, veins bulging, as he absorbed blow after blow from his sparring partner.

"Again!" demanded Shah of Earth. Fatty's teeth ground together, but he nodded, his resilience growing with each strike.

Chatty, his eyes locked on his Enfield beast, whispered commands through the 'Beast Bond Communication'. His voice carried urgency, his bond tested as the Enfield snarled and lunged in perfect synchronization. His face was pale, his lips trembling, but his eyes shone with trust.

"Stronger connection!" urged Shah of Echo. Chatty exhaled sharply, his voice steadying, and the Enfield's movements sharpened into deadly precision.

Nicu, flames dancing at his fingertips, struggled to master the Guardian's Ember. His fire attribute surged wildly, threatening to consume him. His face twisted in frustration, his jaw tight as he forced the ember into a protective shield.

"Your fire must guard, not destroy!" Shah of Fire barked. Nicu's eyes narrowed, his ember flaring brighter as he forced it into a disciplined barrier.

Ailun, sword in hand, embodied the 'Iron Oath Sentinel'. His blade gleamed, his strikes precise, but his expression was grim, sweat dripping from his chin. Each swing carried the weight of his oath, his eyes burning with silent determination.

"Your oath is your strength!" shouted Shah of Steel. Ailun's grip tightened, his blade slicing through the air with renewed conviction.

The Seven Shahs loomed over the trainees, their voices like thunder. Every mistake was punished with merciless repetition, every success met with harsher drills. The trainees' bodies trembled, their qi strained, but none dared falter under the Shahs' gaze.

The hall became a crucible — pain, sweat, and discipline, forging raw talent into steel.

The Experts Among Them

Goldie, Reginald, and Leeroy — already Core Formation Realm cultivators — trained alongside the younger disciples. Their strikes carried weight, their qi flows disciplined, but even they struggled under the Shahs' relentless pace. Compared to Mushu's Nascent Soul Realm, their aura lacked depth, yet their determination was undeniable.

Ling Li's sharp eyes caught every flaw: Goldie's footwork slipping under pressure, Reginald's qi faltering mid-sequence, Leeroy's timing lagging against Rockie's heavy strikes.

Several more expert groups were also present, training to the fullest.

Rockie had joined the training today, his strikes fierce, his aura pressing hard against Leeroy. The clash of their qi reverberated across the field, shaking the air itself. Leeroy gritted his teeth, sweat pouring down his face as he struggled to adapt. Rockie's eyes gleamed with challenge, his grin sharp.

"Don't fall behind, Leeroy!" Rockie taunted, his fist blazing with qi.

Leeroy snarled, his blade flashing as he countered, sparks flying as steel met aura. The younger trainees paused for a heartbeat, their eyes wide at the ferocity of the duel, before their Shans barked them back into focus.

Chapter 489: BACK TO HIDDEN VALLEY

Otako's Presence

Ling Li, as Otako, moved silently among them. Her presence was cloaked, but her aura pressed down like a storm. Every trainee straightened when she passed, their hearts pounding under her unseen weight.

She paused beside Four Eyes, watching his cultivation sequence. His shield flickered, his ink dao wavered. His jaw clenched, his eyes desperate.

Otako's voice was quiet, but it cut sharper than any blade.

"Your heart is loyal, but loyalty without discipline is weakness. Steady it."

Four Eyes swallowed hard, his body trembling, but his shield stabilized, and his ink dao flowed more smoothly. His eyes burned with renewed fire.

The hall roared with qi, sweat, and determination. Every disciple was pushed to the edge, every expert tested, every oath weighed.

Ling Li, hidden as Otako, watched silently.

"Two days remain. If they falter now, they will falter before the Hidden Valley. No weakness can be shown. No heart can break. The Family Competition will decide not only their strength, but the future of the Li Clan."

The same intense training could also be seen at the Li Mansion, the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion, and the rest of the Hidden Valley, as well as the Family of Cultivators, Clan, and Sects.

As she observed, Ling Li's mind weighed heavily. The Family Competition was not just a test of skill — it was a test of unity, discipline, and resilience. The clan's future depended on these trainees and the experts who stood beside them.

Her gaze lingered on Rockie, then shifted to Goldie, Reginald, and Leeroy.

"They must be ready. No weakness can be shown before the Hidden Valley. And Mushu... he must steady Sisu before then, or the storm in his heart will break him."

That evening, Mushu returned with Sisu, his mind torn between Ling Li's command and his brother's restless silence. Sisu walked beside him, his eyes shimmering with unspoken words.

The training ground still echoed in Ling Li's mind, the disciples' sweat and determination a reminder of what was at stake.

Two days remained before the Family Competition. Two days for Mushu to confront the storm in his brother's heart. Two days for the Li Clan to sharpen its blades and steady its qi.

The heavens watched, silent and merciless.

Five Days Before the Family Competition

Five days before the Family Competition, Ling Li and her family, together with the disciples chosen to represent the Li Clan, finally set off for the Hidden Valley. As they embarked on their journey, the clan banner snapped sharply in the wind, like a warning of the dangers that awaited. The Hidden Valley promised more than just a test of strength; it was a place where histories clashed, and ambitions were as keen as the morning air.

Sisu stayed with the triplets. Mushu especially arranged this with Ling Li because he was afraid Sisu, with his gentle demeanor, would be bullied in the valley. Mr. and Mrs. Xu and Ling Li's parents came to take care of the little ones.

Every step closer to the Valley meant stepping into history, into the crucible where clans proved their worth. The ground beneath their feet was uneven, covered in ancient gravel, each crunch echoing with the sound of past battles. The air was thick with the scent of wildflowers and distant incense, a subtle reminder of the spiritual significance this journey held for many. With every step, the Hidden Valley seemed to come alive, whispering stories of old alliances and rivalries into the ears of those who ventured forward.

Arrival at the Hidden Valley

When they arrived, the Valley was alive with energy. The streets bustled with cultivators and family members from every corner of the land. Disciples from rival sects walked proudly in their uniforms, their eyes sharp with ambition. At one of the stalls, a merchant caught everyone's attention, a wizened old man with tales as enticing as the wares he displayed. His voice rose above the din as he beckoned to a pair of young disciples, showcasing a pair of beautifully crafted swords. Elders exchanged greetings nearby, their voices carrying both warmth and veiled rivalry.

Spectators filled the streets, eager to witness the battles that would soon unfold. Stalls overflowed with food and cultivation tools, merchants shouting to attract customers. Restaurants spilled with laughter and chatter, eager to profit from the influx of visitors.

As Ling Li and her entourage entered, the crowd stirred. Cheers rose from the people — respectful, admiring. The Li Clan, one of the oldest families in the Valley, was known not only for its strength but for its generosity. Their arrival was not just noticed — it was celebrated.

Freedom Before the Storm

The competition details will be revealed only three days before the event. This shroud of secrecy hovered like a dark cloud over the Valley, fueling countless rumors. Whispers of past competitions echoed in every corner, with tales of a mysterious trial that had once demanded the courage of even the bravest cultivators. Many secretly feared its return, wondering if they were truly prepared for the test that awaited.

For Ren and Lily, this was a rare chance. Though they had always been part of the clan, Ling Li had kept them away from the Valley in the past, fearing they would be targeted since they were not martial cultivators. But now, with their cultivation awakened and strengthened through the 'Eye', they had earned the right to walk proudly among their peers. Yet, as they approached the Valley, a flicker of doubt crept into their minds.

'Were they truly ready? Could they really stand among the seasoned cultivators, something that once seemed distant and unattainable?' The thought stirred within them, a hint of uncertainty that they quickly tucked away, determined to prove themselves worthy. Aside from the time they participated during the opening of the 'Eye', this was only their second time in the Valley. Their eyes sparkled with curiosity, eager to explore what had once been forbidden.

"Mom, can Lily and I explore the Valley?" Ren asked, excitement dancing in her eyes. "Last time, we never got to see it properly."

Ling Li's gaze softened. She knew how much this meant to them.

"Of course. Take Reginald and Leeroy with you," Ling Li said, her tone firm yet gentle.

"Thanks, Mom!" Ren beamed. Lily's laughter bubbled beside her.

"Me too, Mom! I want to go!" Kim Kim called out, eyes shining.

"I want to come!" Chin Chin echoed, bouncing at Kim Kim's side.

Ling Li chuckled, shaking her head.

"I'll take you out later with your Dad."

The twins pouted in unison, their excitement dimming. "Oh..." Kim Kim sighed, tugging Chin Chin back toward the backyard where they had been playing earlier.

Chapter 490: REN AND LILY GOT BULLIED

"I'll go with you," Shun said to Ren, his tone steady, already imagining the Valley's streets as another training ground.

"Let me join you, too," Fatty chimed in, his grin wide and his enthusiasm unshaken, walking toward Lily as he held her hand.

Soon, more voices joined. Goldie, Ailun, and Nicu stepped forward, each eager to explore and test themselves in the Valley's atmosphere.

The group grew as more disciples enthusiastically joined Ren and Lily. Laughter echoed as their numbers swelled, everyone eager to explore. What began as a stroll became a lively excursion, driven by curiosity and the impending Family Competition.

Ling Li watched them go, her heart both proud and cautious. The Hidden Valley was beautiful, but it was also dangerous. Rival clans lurked in every corner, their eyes sharp, their ambitions ruthless. As the group turned a corner, Ling Li caught a glimpse of an all-too-familiar emblem perched atop a rooftop — a hawk poised for flight. It was the symbol of the rival Hyun Clan, subtle yet menacing against the sunset, a silent reminder of the ever-present tensions awaiting beneath the surface.

'Let them enjoy these two days,' Ling Li thought. 'Soon, the Valley will no longer be a place of laughter, but of trials. It will become a crucible, ready to test their mettle and determination. And every one of them must be ready.'

Ling Li, with a subtle, almost unseen move, gave the Seven Shah an order to follow the group.

The cheers of the crowd still echoed in the streets, but beneath the celebration lay tension — the quiet hum of rivalries waiting to ignite.

The Boutique Encounter

Ren and Lily stepped through the ornate threshold of an exclusive women's boutique. Their senses were immediately enveloped by the heady perfume of aged sandalwood incense, which curled lazily from

bronze censers. The interior gleamed with opulence — mahogany shelves displayed delicate ornaments carved from luminous moonstone, silken scarves dyed in gradients of sunset hues, and jade accessories that hummed with faint spiritual energy. Crystalline lanterns cast a warm golden glow across the polished marble floor. Intricate patterns of phoenixes and peonies were inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

The men who had accompanied them — Reginald with his stern military bearing, the boisterous Leeroy, contemplative Shun, rotund Fatty, golden-haired Goldie, quiet Ailun, and sharp-eyed Nicu — remained clustered outside like sentinels. They exchanged awkward glances and shuffled their feet. Each was acutely aware that entering a women's boutique could mark them as hopelessly uncultured or suspiciously forward. None dared risk either reputation.

Ren's eyes sparkled with the delight of a connoisseur. Her slender fingers lifted a jade pendant from its velvet cushion. The stone was the color of spring leaves after rain; its surface was polished to mirror-smoothness. It emanated a gentle warmth that pulsed in rhythm with her own spiritual energy. Faint runic inscriptions, nearly invisible to the untrained eye, spiraled across its surface — protective wards woven by a master craftsman.

Lily, meanwhile, gravitated toward a display of hair accessories. Her keen eye caught on a hairpin that seemed deceptively simple at first glance. Carved from black jade and etched with patterns of blooming night orchids, the piece held a deadly secret. Concealed within its elegant design was a razor-sharp edge — the metal forged from meteoric iron and capable of slicing through spiritual barriers. She tested its weight discreetly. It was perfectly balanced for both adornment and assassination.

When they approached the lacquered counter inlaid with mother-of-pearl lotus blossoms, the attendant—a middle-aged woman with her hair swept into an elaborate bun secured by silver pins — smiled politely. Her expression carried the practiced patience of one accustomed to dealing with ignorant newcomers. She shook her head with gentle regret, her jade bangles chiming softly.

"I'm terribly sorry, young ladies. You must be new to the Hidden Valley," she said, her voice carrying the melodic accent of the Valley's native inhabitants. "Mortal coinage holds no value within these sacred walls. Here, we trade only in the currency of cultivation — spirit stones pulsing with qi, crystallized

Bloodstones drawn from ancient battlefields, Immortal Jade — the ancients called it Essene Jade — or Beast cores still warm with primal energy. Even our most modest transactions require gold or silver. The Valley's spiritual density will not accommodate lesser currencies."

Ren and Lily exchanged a glance, their eyes meeting in a moment of shared surprise. A faint flush crept across Ren's porcelain cheeks — not from shame, but from the sudden realization of how vast the chasm between their old world and this new one truly was. Lily's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. Her pride bristled at being caught unprepared, though her expression remained carefully neutral.

"We understand," Ren politely replied.

The Jealous Remarks

The boutique was crowded with women from different sects. Their robes bore the emblems of prestigious cultivation families — the Silver Crane Sect's flowing white silk, the Crimson Phoenix Pavilion's flame-embroidered crimson, and the Jade Serpent Clan's emerald brocade. Many eyed Ren and Lily, since their entrance, their gazes sharp with the venom that beautiful women reserve for rivals. Thinly veiled envy flickered across painted faces and narrowed eyes. Whispers rose like poisoned daggers, each word calculated to wound.

"Hah, look at them — newcomers who don't even know how to pay properly."

"So ignorant. Did they crawl out of some backwater village?"

"Pretty faces, but no brains. They think jade pendants and hairpins can be bought with dollars?"

Ren straightened her back, her spine becoming a rod of steel wrapped in silk. She had weathered far worse storms than petty jealousy — betrayals that would have shattered lesser souls. These barbed words were mosquito bites compared to wounds she'd endured. Refusing to let the insults pierce her composure, she lifted her chin with regal bearing. Her voice, when she spoke, was calm as a mountain lake, carrying clearly through the boutique's suddenly hushed atmosphere:

"Reginald, come inside."

The Escalation

As Reginald entered, his broad shoulders filled the doorway. Leeroy and the others filed in with varying degrees of discomfort. The jealous women's sneers grew louder and more vicious. Their voices took on the shrill quality of those who sense their advantage slipping, desperation sharpening their cruelty.

"Oh, so they need men to pay for them? How pathetic."

"Can't even stand on their own feet. Always hiding behind men."

"What kind of cultivators are they if they can't even afford a trinket?"

Lily's hand tightened around her newly chosen hair accessory, her knuckles whitening as she gripped the hidden weapon. Her eyes flashed with barely contained fury. The amber flecks in her irises seemed to ignite with dangerous light. Violent scenarios played out in her imagination — each insult catalogued,

each sneering face memorized for future retribution. Ren's hand settled on her arm like a calming talisman, warm and steady, urging restraint. Not here. Not now. The unspoken message passed between them through that single touch.