

## PROTEGE 491

### Chapter 491: WHO DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO BE A WHITE LOTUS?

#### Shi Min's Arrival

Back at the sprawling Li Mansion, Shi Min had been reviewing reports regarding the training of the Li Clan Disciples in his private study when a servant brought word that his sister had ventured into the Valley's marketplace. A flicker of concern crossed Shi Min's usually impassive features. His sisters were still unfamiliar with the Hidden Valley's complex social hierarchies and unspoken rules, and how vicious people in the Valley could be; anyone could be weaponized by those seeking to curry favor or eliminate competition.

Without hesitation, he set aside the ancient tome. Its pages still glowed faintly with residual spiritual energy. Shi Min told Ling Li he was going to find his sisters and strode purposefully from the mansion. Four Eyes and Jack fell into step behind him like shadows, their expressions alert, hands resting casually near concealed weapons.

When Shi Min entered the boutique, the very air seemed to crystallize. Tension charged the room. The atmosphere shifted instantly, as though a predator had entered a room full of prey. The women who had been mocking Ren and Lily froze mid-whisper, their expressions transforming with almost comedic speed into eager smiles that didn't quite reach their calculating eyes.

Who didn't know Shi Min in the Hidden Valley? He was the most coveted bachelor among the younger generation — a man whose name was whispered in equal parts admiration and longing. Renowned for cultivation talent that eclipsed even the most gifted prodigies, he was blessed with the ancient and powerful Li Clan bloodline. He possessed a cold, untouchable demeanor that only made him more desirable. He moved through the world like a figure from legend. A master sculptor could have carved his face. Sharp cheekbones, eyes dark as midnight, he revealed nothing. An aura of absolute control made even seasoned cultivators instinctively straighten in his presence.

The women rushed to speak, each trying to catch his attention.

"Brother Shi Min, you're come." One stepped forward to meet Shi Min with a shy demeanor.

"Young Master Shi Min, these girls are ignorant. They don't even know how to pay properly."

"Yes, we're only trying to teach them."

"They embarrassed themselves in front of everyone."

"Brother Shi Min, they even called this man to pay for them," the lady who first spoke earlier said, with a hint of mockery in her voice.

"Honestly, they should stick to embroidery instead of cultivation." She added.

Shi Min listened with a face carved from marble, his expression betraying nothing — not agreement, not disagreement, not even acknowledgment of their existence beyond the purely physical fact of their voices reaching his ears. His silence was a living thing, unnerving and oppressive, filling the boutique like gathering storm clouds. He did not interrupt, did not nod, did not offer even the smallest gesture of encouragement. His gaze remained unreadable, dark eyes moving from speaker to speaker with the clinical detachment of someone observing insects under a microscope.

The women, mistaking Shi Min's silence for consideration, grew bolder in their denunciations, each competing to prove themselves the most perceptive critic of Ren and Lily's supposed failings.

### The Face-Slapping Moment

When the women finally fell silent, their venom temporarily exhausted, Shi Min moved. He walked past them as though they were furniture — not even worthy of acknowledgment, let alone response. His steps were steady and measured, each footfall deliberate, his robes whispering against the marble floor with a sound like distant thunder. The crowd parted instinctively, creating a path as though compelled by an invisible force.

He stopped before Ren and Lily, his presence a wall of protection between them and the hostile crowd. When he spoke, his voice was calm, almost gentle, but carried a weight that silenced the room more effectively than any shout. He held the authority of someone used to obedience and confidence that need not announce itself.

"Are these the only items you wish to buy?" Shi Min asked Ren and Lily.

Ren lifted her chin high, her pride not merely unshaken but reinforced, tempered like steel in fire by the very insults meant to diminish her. Her eyes met her brother's with perfect understanding. She would not be cowed, would not apologize for existing, and would not reduce herself to soothe the fragile egos of those who mistook cruelty for superiority.

"Yes. There isn't anything else that catches our eye."

But Lily, look at the ladies mocking them with a sly look and holding Shi Min's arm, acting coquettish.

"But, Brother, they said we are ignorant and don't have money to pay. Everyone was mocking us for relying on men to buy these trinkets." Lily said, wiping nonexistent tears. 'Who doesn't know how to act like a white lotus?' Lily silently thought with a snort.

Shi Min held his laughter. 'I didn't know my sister could be this cute.'

However, Fatty and Shun bust out laughing. Even the stoic Four Eyes had a smirk.

"You!"

"How dare you touch Brother Shi Min!"

"Who are you to call Young Master Shi Min' Brother'?"

"You did call this Young Master to pay for you!"

"Yes, we are not wrong!"

All the women reprimanded Lily one by one.

"He's my brother, and I'm holding his arm. What can you do about it?!" Lily replied with her chin held high.

Shi Min patted Lily's head, and without another word, without ceremony or explanation, Shi Min reached into his sleeve with fluid grace and withdrew an object that made the very air seem to hold its breath. He placed a Chaos Stone on the counter with a soft click that echoed like thunder in the stunned silence.

"Is this enough?" He asked.

The attendant gasped audibly, her professional composure shattering like fine porcelain. Her hands trembled so violently that her jade bangles clattered together in a discordant symphony. The women around them paled as though all blood had drained from their bodies in a single instant, their carefully painted faces going ashen. Jaws dropped in perfect synchronization, creating a tableau of shock so complete it would have been comical under different circumstances.

#### About the Chaos Stone

The Chaos Stone was no ordinary currency — it existed in a realm beyond mere monetary value, transcending the concept of payment entirely. It was a legendary treasure, rarer than Immortal Jade, more precious than phoenix tears, forged from condensed fragments of primordial chaos itself in the universe's first moments of creation. Each stone contained immeasurable energy — the raw stuff of creation and destruction, swirling in perfect balance — power capable of fueling multiple major breakthroughs in cultivation, forging artifacts of world-shaking power, or even healing injuries that defied conventional medicine. Ancient texts spoke of Chaos Stones in reverent whispers, describing them as fragments of the void before existence, crystallized potential waiting to be unleashed.

Chapter 492: DOES YOUR FACE HURT?

To use a Chaos Stone for mere trinkets was not merely extravagant — it was unheard of, unprecedented, a gesture so audacious it bordered on the insane. It was like using a divine relic to buy bread, burning a priceless painting for warmth, or trading a dragon's pearl for a handful of rice. Its value was so astronomically high that even sect leaders and clan heads treated each stone as a treasure to be hoarded in the deepest vaults, guarded by formations and protected by blood oaths. Wars had been fought over single Chaos Stones. Entire families had been annihilated for possessing them. And here, in a modest boutique, Shi Min had produced one with the casual indifference of someone paying for tea.

### The Shock and Face-Slapping Dialogues

The moment Shi Min placed the Chaos Stone on the counter, the boutique fell into a stunned silence so complete that even breathing seemed to cease. Time itself appeared to hesitate, caught in the gravity of what had just occurred. The stone pulsed faintly with an inner light that seemed to exist in colors beyond the typical spectrum, its surface swirling with fragments of primordial energy — like a miniature storm of creation and destruction contained within a crystal sphere no larger than a child's fist. Tiny lightning bolts of pure chaos energy flickered across its surface, and those with spiritual sensitivity could feel its power pressing against their consciousness like the weight of an ocean.

The attendant's hands trembled violently as she reached for it, her fingers hovering above the stone as though afraid it might burn her — or worse, that she might prove unworthy even to touch such a treasure. Her voice broke as she stammered, her carefully cultivated professional demeanor crumbling entirely. She bowed so deeply her forehead nearly touched the counter, her elaborate hairstyle coming partially undone from the force of her obeisance.

"Young Master Shi Min... this... this is far too much. A Chaos Stone could buy not only this boutique, but half the street!"

Whispers erupted among the women, their faces pale.

"A Chaos Stone... here?!"

"That's a treasure sect leaders hoard for breakthroughs!"

"He used it... for them?"

"Who are they?"

The Jealous Women's Desperation

One woman, her face twisted with envy, tried to salvage her pride.

"He's wasting such a treasure on ignorant girls. Surely, Young Master, you'd rather spend it on someone worthy."

Another chimed in, her voice dripping with false sweetness.

"Yes, Brother, why not on us? We would know how to honor such a gift."

One lady was so indignant that she could only stamp her feet.

Their words were desperate, their smiles brittle.

### Shi Min's Cold Rebuke

Shi Min's gaze swept over them, cold and sharp. His voice was calm, but it cut like a blade.

"True ignorance," he said, each word falling like a blade, "is speaking without knowing one's place. Ignorance is presuming to judge those whose worth you cannot begin to comprehend. These girls are under my protection — under the Li Clan's protection. If a Chaos Stone is wasted, it is wasted on the air required to hear your words, not on treasures given to those I value."

The women flinched as though physically struck, their faces contorting into masks of humiliation — all pretense of beauty stripped away by the ugliness of their exposed malice and crushed pride. Shame and fury warred in their expressions, but beneath both emotions lay fear. They had overstepped catastrophically, had insulted those under the Li Clan's protection, and the consequences could be severe. None dared speak again, their earlier boldness evaporating like morning mist under a merciless sun.

Then Shi Min turned to the lady nearest to him, "As for you, I have seven sisters, and I don't think you are one of them, so please don't call me brother. I don't deserve it."

The lady's face flushed from embarrassment. She opened her mouth to rebuke, but upon seeing Shi Min's stern demeanor, she swallowed her words. She ran out of the shop crying.

## Ren and Lily's Pride

Ren lifted her chin, her eyes gleaming with pride that burned brighter than any spiritual flame. She had not asked for this protection, had not hidden behind her brother's power, but she would not insult him by refusing it either. This was family — this was what it meant to belong to the Li Clan.

"Yeah. There isn't anything else that catches our eye."

Lily adjusted her newly acquired hair accessory with deliberate slowness, sliding it into her dark hair with practiced ease. Her lips curled into a faint smile that held no warmth — only the cold satisfaction of victory and the promise of remembered slights. The hidden weapon's edge caught the boutique's lantern light for just a moment, a deliberate flash that served as a silent reminder to all watching: she was no helpless girl requiring rescue, merely a blade that had chosen, for now, to remain sheathed.

Lily turned to the ladies watching them, silently asking, 'Does your face hurt?'

## The Crowd's Reaction

Outside, Reginald, Leeroy, and the others who had witnessed the exchange through the boutique's open door exchanged astonished glances, their expressions ranging from shock to disbelief to dawning understanding. Even they, who had accompanied the Li Clan and witnessed numerous displays of wealth and power, had never seen anyone — let alone Shi Min, who was known for his calculated precision in all things — casually spend a Chaos Stone on what amounted to decorative trinkets.

Four Eyes whispered to Jack, his voice hushed.

"Do you realize what that stone is worth? I heard a single shard could fuel a cultivator's breakthrough. Entire sects would kill for it."

Jack nodded, his eyes wide.

"And he used it... for a pendant and a hairpin."

The attendant felt the Chaos Stone in her trembling palm, like a burning coal, its energy seeping into her meridians, making her entire arm tingle with power she was unprepared to channel. The store manager, who had been reviewing inventory in his private office when he heard the commotion — the sudden silence that spoke louder than any shout — came running. His robes billowed behind him as he rushed through the curtained doorway, his face flushed with concern and the beginnings of anger at whatever had disrupted the harmony of his establishment.

But when he saw Shi Min standing before the counter, and the Chaos Stone gleaming in his attendant's shaking hand, the manager's legs nearly gave out beneath him. He almost knelt on the spot, his cultivated dignity warring with the instinctive urge to prostrate himself before such overwhelming wealth and power.

Chapter 493: SMELLS GREEN TEA FROM MILES AWAY

"Young Master Shi Min," the shop manager gasped, nerves tightening his voice. "Please, there is absolutely no need to pay. It would be my profound honor — my privilege — to gift these humble trinkets to your esteemed sisters. Take it as my welcoming gift." His hands shook as he lifted the Chaos Stone from his attendant's palm and returned it to Shi Min, bowing his head, sweat trickling from his brow down his back into his robes. Every motion was deliberate, as if he feared mishandling a relic worth more than his fortunes.

Shi Min fixed the manager with a calm, steady gaze. "How can this be?" he replied, his tone firm despite his gentle words. "Business is business, and the Li Clan does not accept charity or cultivate debts over trifles. How about this?" He paused, eyes narrowing slightly in consideration. "Send your finest treasures to Li Mansion tonight. Let it be a fair exchange — my Chaos Stone's value for goods that actually merit such payment."

"Yes, yes, I understand completely, Young Master Shi Min!" The manager's bows became shallow and rapid, his head dipping so often he appeared to vibrate. "I will personally select and prepare our finest treasures and send them before nightfall. I appreciate your generosity, your understanding, your—" His words tangled into a grateful stammer as Shi Min turned, leaving the manager behind, dazed by unexpected fortune.

Shi Min turned smartly, Ren and Lily moving in perfect synchrony beside him, their presence poised and proud. The boutique's air thickened with shock. The mocking women stood rooted, faces drained of color, postures rigid and statuesque — their arrogance erased. Some dropped their gaze, hands clenched. Others tracked the Li Clan's departure, envy and dread etched in every line of their faces.

Whispers followed Shi Min out into the street:

"The Li Clan... they're untouchable."

"Shi Min... he's not just powerful, he's ruthless in his loyalty."

"Those girls... who are they to deserve such protection?"

Ren and Lily walked beside Shi Min, their steps steady and unhurried, their heads held high, their pride not merely intact but forged stronger in the crucible of this confrontation. The jade pendant now resting against Ren's collarbone and the hair accessory gleaming in Lily's dark hair were no longer mere trinkets, no longer simple purchases. They had been transformed into symbols — of their place within the Li Clan, of the protection that surrounded them like an invisible fortress, of the price their family would pay to defend their honor. Each piece had been bought with a Chaos Stone's worth of statement, and everyone who saw them would know it.

### Shi Min's Invitation

After leaving the boutique, Shi Min turned to the group and said, "Paps, let me take you and everyone for a good meal." He invited Four Eyes and the rest to join him.

They departed from the bustling street and soon arrived at the most prestigious restaurant in the Valley, where the manager ran out to welcome them.

"Young Master Shi Min, let me show you to your private room." The manager led the way, clearly nervous.

The restaurant is a three-storey building, with a vast garden and an artificial lake at the back where the private rooms are. The more prestigious the VIP is, the more private and luxurious the room is.

Led by the manager, Shi Min strode toward a two-storey house that stood on an island in the lake, swans gliding past its garden. Ren and Lily lingered a moment on the bridge, gazing at the blossoms before following Shi Min up the steps. The ground floor was set for entertaining guests, while the upper floor provided a lavish private retreat. All motion exuded the confidence their status commanded.

"Ah, if the twins were here, they would love this place!" Ren exclaimed.

"More as they will turn the place upside down," Four Eyes said with helplessness in his voice. His twins are too mischievous, giving him a headache.

Everyone laughed at his remark.

"They are still young and will outgrow it," Goldie said. "I saw Young Master Shi Min grow up and..."

"Ehem,... Let's order." Shi Min cut Goldie off, afraid to lose face if Goldie spilled all his naughty past. Everyone laughed at him.

"Alright, serve us all your specialty dishes and some wine." Shi Min addressed the manager, who personally waited on them.

"Right away, Young Master."

When the manager left, Lily asked, "Brother, what are their specialty foods?"

"Just wait, you'll be surprised, and you will definitely love them." Shi Min replied, giving Lily's head a gentle tap.

"Shi Min, why did you not tell those women that Ren and Lily are your sisters?" Fatty asked.

Everyone turned to Shi Min; they too wanted to know.

Shi Min's eyes narrowed slightly as he answered. "If I reveal that they are my sisters, they will be targeted more—not only by this pretentious woman but by rival sects." He tapped the table for emphasis, voice even but unyielding.

"Ah, those women, you can smell green tea a mile away," Jack declared.

"Ha ha ha ha," Everyone in the room laughed.

"But I never thought Young Miss Lily could scold their white lotus image by acting like one," Leeroy said.  
"I always picture her as pure and innocent."

"Heh!" Lily snorted.

However, Fatty slapped Leeroy's shoulder, "Are you saying my girlfriend is not pure and innocent?!"

"Ha ha ha ha!" Everyone laughed when Leeroy changed sit, away from Fatty.

## The Sumptuous Meal

'Food is here," the manager announced, and several waiters followed him in with the food.

"Ah, that smells so good," Ren remarked.

"Magaer, tell everyone what these are," Shi Min said.

"Of course, my pleasure: This is...

Heavenly Meridian Soup, A broth simmered for seven days with thousand-year ginseng, is designed to clear meridians and instantly recover qi.

Iron-Skin Pork Belly, Meat from a "Stone-skinned Boar," slow-roasted until the skin acts as armor, increasing physical defense for hours.

Void-Step Noodle Bowl, Noodles crafted from cloud-wheat that make the consumer feel weightless, increasing speed and agility.

Goblin Hand-Grenade Shot, A distilled, glittering alcoholic beverage made from rare mushrooms, offering a surge of frantic energy.

And these are our top-selling house specialties,

Dragon-Heart Risotto, Made from lesser dragon-kin, this dish provides immense, intense, fire-elemental energy to the body.

Phoenix-Feather Tea Smoked Chicken offers immense healing properties and temporary resistance to fire.

Thunder-Eagle Sashimi, Raw, rare meat that imparts electric speed and quickens reaction times.

Glacial Turtle Stew, A cooling soup made from a frozen-lake beast, is perfect for calming qi deviation or reducing body heat." The manager proudly announced.

"Oooh...."

"Ahhh..."

Everyone was in awe.

"Alright, eat up," Shi Min said.

#### Chapter 494: THE VALLEY IS ALIVE WITH SCHEMES

Meanwhile, as Shi Min and his companions enjoyed their meal, the Valley's streets buzzed with rumors before they had even reached the next corner. Whispers spread like wildfire through the marketplace, each retelling more embellished than the last — a Chaos Stone spent on trinkets, the Young Master's cold rebuke, the humiliation of the jealous women. Servants rushed to inform their masters, cultivators paused their training to discuss the implications, and merchants recalculated their strategies for approaching the Li Clan.

But beneath the noise, beneath the speculation and gossip and political maneuvering, one truth rang clear as a temple bell, resonating through the Hidden Valley's complex web of power and prestige: the Li Clan had arrived, and they would not be underestimated, would not be dismissed, would not tolerate disrespect to their own. The balance of power had shifted, and everyone — from the lowest servant to the highest sect elder — would need to adjust accordingly.

#### Rumors in the Valley

The day after Shi Min's dramatic display at the boutique, whispers of the Chaos Stone spread like wildfire through the Hidden Valley. Merchants repeated the tale with awe at the Li Clan's boldness, disciples gossiped with envy at Shi Min's privilege, and rival clans seethed with jealousy, each seeing the act as flaunting their clan's superiority.

"Shi Min used a Chaos Stone... for a pendant and a hairpin."

"The Li Clan flaunts wealth and power as if the heavens themselves favor them."

"If they can spend Chaos Stones so casually, what treasures do they hide?"

The story became a spark, igniting both admiration and unrest throughout the Valley.

### The Practice Fort

Meanwhile, at the Li Clan mansion within the Valley, Ling Li inspected the inner and outer disciples at the practice fort. The courtyard rang with the clash of blades and the hum of qi.

Inner disciples trained in advanced formations, their movements sharp and disciplined.

Outer disciples drilled tirelessly, sweat pouring as they repeated basic techniques until their bodies trembled.

Ling Li walked among them, her gaze sharp, her aura pressing down like a storm. Every disciple straightened under their presence.

"Your strikes must carry conviction," she told one group. "In the competition, hesitation is defeat."

She paused beside Nicu, whose fire attribute flared too wildly.

"Control it. Fire without discipline consumes its master."

Besides Ailun, she corrected his sword stance, knowing his desire to honor his oath despite struggling with technique.

"Your oath is your strength. Let it guide your blade."

The disciples bowed deeply, their respect mingled with fear. Ling Li's inspections were merciless, but her guidance was precise.

#### The Rival Sects' Plot

While Ling Li honed her disciples, in a shadowed chamber elsewhere in the Valley, emissaries from rival sects met with certain Li Clan elders whose loyalty had long been questionable, each driven by the hope of weakening Li Clan dominance for their sect's gain.

The air was thick with incense, masking the stench of betrayal.

Silk robes rustled, candles flickered, and shadows danced across the chamber walls like restless spirits. Hidden blades glinted faintly in the dim light. Their presence was not diplomacy — it was a warning.

The Iron Fang emissary rasped:

"The Li Clan grows arrogant. Chaos Stones, flaunted in public... Ling Li's influence spreads too far. If she triumphs in this competition, she will be untouchable."

The Moonshade mystic, voice waxing and waning like lunar tides, whispered:

"We cannot allow her to rise further. The Family Competition must expose her weakness."

The Crimson Lotus spokesperson, smiling coldly:

"We will tamper with the trial formations. A subtle shift in the spiritual arrays will drain Li Clan disciples' qi faster than they realize. They will falter, and the Valley will see her failure."

Elder Han from the Li Clan, his face lined with greed and resentment at Ling Li's influence, nodded and smirked, eager to reclaim power within the clan.

"And when her disciples collapse, the blame will fall on her leadership. The clan will turn against her."

Calm Before The Storm

Back at the mansion, Ling Li stood on the balcony overlooking the practice fort. The disciples' shouts echoed below, their determination fierce, which fueled her sense of responsibility to protect them. Yet her instincts whispered of danger, reminding her that her leadership could soon be tested once again.

She once again caught sight of the Hyun Clan's hawk emblem fluttering on a distant rooftop, its shadow long against the sunset.

"They are watching. They are waiting. The Valley is alive with schemes. I must be ready."

Her eyes narrowed, her resolve hardening. Ling Li understood the Family Competition was no longer just a test of skill—it was a battlefield of intrigue that would challenge not only her abilities but also her leadership and reputation, forged by both training halls and whispered conspiracies.

The Li Clan disciples trained with sweat and fire, unaware of the storm gathering around them. Rival sect emissaries whispered in shadows, elders plotted in secret, and the Valley buzzed with rumors of Chaos Stones and arrogance.

Ling Li's heart was heavy but unyielding.

"Let them conspire. Let them scheme. When the crucible ignites, the Li Clan will endure."

The Valley's streets glowed with lanterns, but beneath the light, shadows deepened. The Family Competition loomed, promising not only trials of strength but revelations of loyalty, betrayal, and destiny.

## The Next Day's Training: Subtle Irregularities

The morning sun pierced the Valley's mist. It cast angular shadows across the Li Clan's practice fort. Disciples assembled in crisp formation as their voices echoed in unison. They launched into drills. Qi shimmered faintly, threads of energy weaving between them like elusive currents.

Ling Li stood at the edge of the courtyard, her eyes scanning each movement with intensity, her silent aura making the air feel heavier around the disciples. At first, everything appeared orderly — blades clashing, fire roaring, shields shimmering. But as she continued to watch, picking up on the smallest hesitations and missteps, her instincts stirred.

Four Eyes' Shield of the Loyal Heart flickered, its rhythm uneven. The effect was unnatural. His Silent Ink Dao strokes bled faintly into the air, as if something unseen was tugging at his qi.

Ren's Golden Needle Sutra faltered. Her needles wavered; their golden glow dimmed. Her energy drained rapidly, making her wince.

Lily's wind resonance bristled with distortion; her gusts jolted erratically, refusing to synchronize.

Shun's Phoenix Command Sutra burned too hot. His flames consumed more qi than required. His face tightened, sweat pouring down his brow.

Fatty's Stone Heart Resilience cracked under pressure. His aura trembled. It was as if his foundation had been tampered with.

Chatty's bond with his Enfield beast faltered. The creature snarled in confusion. Its movements turned sluggish, as though its link had been disrupted.

Nicu's Guardian's Ember sputtered. His fire shield thinned, unnaturally.

Ailun's Iron Oath Sentinel strikes slowed. His blade felt heavy. His qi leaked into the ground beneath him.

Ling Li's eyes narrowed as she watched a moment longer, noticing how techniques faltered in ways discipline could not explain. She saw hands falter and energy flicker at odd moments. These were not mistakes of discipline. These were fractures in the flow itself.

Chapter 495: NO SHADOS WILL REMAIN HIDDEN

Ling Li's Suspicion

Ling Li raised her hand, halting the drills. The courtyard fell silent; disciples breathed hard, confusion clear on their faces.

"Your qi is draining too quickly," she said, her voice calm but edged with steel. "This is not natural fatigue. Something is interfering with your formations."

"Mother, I thought it was just me. Earlier, I could already sense something odd in this place," Lily said.

The disciples exchanged uneasy glances.

Reginald stepped forward, his Core Formation aura steady but troubled.

"Madam, I felt it too. My strikes consumed twice as much energy as they should have. It's as if the formations themselves are... poisoned."

Leeroy nodded grimly.

"I thought it was my own weakness, but the flow is wrong. It's being siphoned."

The Hidden Hand: Ling Li's Command

Ling Li closed her eyes briefly, slowing her breath. She spread her senses outward, her presence searching along each spiritual line beneath the practice ground. Faint threads of distortion pulsed in the arrays — subtle, almost imperceptible warps that resisted her touch. Someone had tampered with the spiritual lines that guided the disciples' training.

Her jaw clenched.

"The emissaries' whispers... the elders' hesitation. Sabotage has already begun."

Her voice rang out, sharp and commanding.

"Disciples, break formation. Train individually until further notice. Don't channel qi through shared arrays."

The Shans enforced her order, voices thundering as they separated the trainees.

Ling Li turned to Mushu and Butler Oda.

"Inspect the array lines beneath the courtyard. Look for fractures, hidden seals, or foreign inscriptions. Report back immediately."

Her eyes flicked toward Shi Min, who had arrived silently to observe.

"Watch the elders. If any move suspiciously, I want to know."

Shi Min's expression was unreadable, but his nod was firm.

As the disciples resumed individual drills, Ling Li stood at the center of the courtyard, her aura heavy. The Valley's air seemed thicker, the shadows longer.

"They have already begun their strike. If they can poison our training, they will poison the competition itself. I must root out the traitors before the crucible ignites."

Blades clashed. Qi hummed, filling the fort once more. Yet beneath it all lingered a quiet dread—the sense that unseen hands were already pulling at the threads of destiny.

### Investigation Begins

The courtyard was quiet after Ling Li's command. Group formations halted. Disciples trained individually. Their qi flowed steadier, but the unease lingered. Mushu and Butler Oda stepped forward, expressions grim.

"Madam," Mushu said, his voice low but resolute, "I'll inspect the array lines myself. If someone has tampered with them, I'll find it."

Butler Oda nodded, "I'll assist. My sensitivity to inscriptions may catch what others miss."

Ling Li's gaze lingered on them both, her eyes narrowing.

"Go. Leave no stone unturned. If sabotage has entered our walls, I must know."

### Hidden Sigils Unearthed

Mushu and Butler Oda knelt at the edge of the courtyard, pressing their palms deliberately against the ground. They let their qi seep downward, attuning themselves until faint patterns of energy shimmered. The spiritual lines etched beneath the fort began to reveal themselves—trails of light not visible to the naked eye.

At first, the inscriptions seemed normal: lines of protection, channels of energy. Mushu traced deeper. His eyes hardened.

"Here," he muttered, brushing away gravel. A faint sigil glowed, hidden beneath layers of dust. Its shape was jagged, unnatural, pulsing with a foreign rhythm.

Butler Oda leaned closer.

"This isn't ours. It's a siphoning mark. Whoever planted this designed it to drain qi from anyone channeling through the formation."

They uncovered dozens. Sigils were etched into corners, hidden beneath stones, carved faintly into training posts. Each pulsed with the same alien resonance. They were designed to weaken the disciples stealthily.

Mushu's jaw tightened.

"This is sabotage. And it wasn't done solely by outsiders. To plant these inside the mansion, someone had help."

When Mushu and Butler Oda reported back, Ling Li's expression darkened. The disciples gathered, their faces pale as they realized the depth of betrayal.

"Sigils from rival sect emissaries," Ling Li said, her voice sharp as steel. "But they could not have entered our fort without guidance. This means traitors among our own elders."

The words hung heavy in the air. Some disciples gasped, others clenched their fists.

The Shahs exchanged grim looks.

Reinforcing the Mansion

Ling Li wasted no time. She summoned her husband, whose Shield of the Loyal Heart was already renowned for its resilience.

"Chu Yan," she said, "your shield will anchor the mansion's defenses. I will weave a protective array around it. Together, we will seal every breach."

Four Eyes nodded, his voice steady. "I will assist, as always."

Ling Li raised her hands. Her qi flowed like a storm as she traced new inscriptions across the courtyard walls. Energy wove into the mansion's foundations. Four Eyes stood at the center, his shield expanding, glowing with loyalty and defiance.

The protective array shimmered to life, a dome of light enveloping the mansion. The foreign sigils hissed and burned away, their siphoning marks dissolving under the combined force of Ling Li's array and Four Eyes' shield.

## The Betrayal

As the light settled, Ling Li's eyes narrowed.

"The emissaries have struck. And my own elders have betrayed me. The Family Competition will test not just strength, but loyalty and treachery."

Mushu stood beside her, his aura steady, his voice low.

"Madam, when the time comes, I will root out the traitors myself."

Ling Li's gaze hardened, her resolve unyielding.

"No shadow will remain hidden. The Li Clan will endure."

The disciples resumed their training within the new protective array, qi flowing freely again. Yet the memory of sabotage clung to the edges — a silent warning that enemies lurked not only beyond the Valley but within the Li Clan.

The Valley's lanterns burned as night deepened, but beneath their light, shadows whispered of betrayal. The Family Competition approached — promising not just trials of might, but revelations that could sunder the clan.

### The Opening Dinner

That same evening, the Hidden Valley transformed into a constellation of amber and gold. Countless paper lanterns swayed from ancient cypress branches. Their warm glow painted the mist-laden air. The Family Competition's ceremonial welcome feast commenced within the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Echoes — a grand hall whose vaulted ceiling seemed to stretch into infinity. It was carved from black jade and inlaid with veins of luminous spirit stone.

### Chapter 496: THE ENEMY IS AMONG US

Emissaries draped in ceremonial robes of their respective sects, clan patriarchs bearing ancestral weapons at their hips, and disciples whose cultivation auras flickered like barely-contained flames — all converged beneath this sacred roof. Silk banners the size of waterfalls descended from the towering rafters. Each was meticulously embroidered with the heraldic emblems of the Hidden Valley's most powerful clans.

Upon the elevated dais at the hall's northern end, Otako — or rather, the ever-loyal Butler Oda concealed beneath the legendary Samurai mask of wrought silver and obsidian — presided over the assembly with an authority that seemed to emanate from the very stones beneath his feet. His posture was immaculate, his hands resting upon the pommel of a ceremonial blade that had never tasted blood yet commanded more respect than a thousand battle-worn swords.

The mask itself was a masterwork of deception. Its angular features suggested both wisdom and merciless judgment. The empty eye-slits reflected candlelight, making it impossible to discern the soul behind them. None among the gathered could suspect that the true Otako — Ling Li herself — could not manifest openly this night. Her absence was concealed by this most trusted servant's flawless performance.

Celestial wine — aged for three centuries in spirit-sealed jade vessels — flowed like liquid moonlight into cups of carved crystal. Servants glided between tables, bearing trays of gold and lacquered wood. They presented dishes that defied mortal comprehension: phoenix marrow soup that shimmered with restorative qi, dragon-scale fish whose flesh dissolved on the tongue like morning mist. These spirit fruits glowed with inner light and granted temporary clarity of mind. Polite laughter rippled through the hall like wind through bamboo. Yet beneath its melodious surface lurked the razor-sharp undertones of ancestral rivalry and political maneuvering.

Elders clasped forearms in a traditional greeting. Their smiles were warm, but their words were barbed with double meanings and thinly veiled threats. In shadowed alcoves and behind decorative screens, emissaries leaned close to whisper schemes and forge temporary alliances. Meanwhile, the younger generation circled like predators. Disciples would soon face each other in the Family Competition's brutal trials. Their eyes were calculating strengths, cataloging weaknesses, measuring meridian depth, and qi density with senses honed by years of cultivation.

The Li Clan's entrance into the hall had drawn a complex symphony of reactions. Admiration and envy intertwined like lovers and enemies locked in eternal dance. Their procession was magnificent. Disciples clad in jade-green silk robes embroidered with silver thread, each radiating cultivation auras that spoke of resources and training beyond the reach of lesser clans. Their reputation for magnanimous generosity was clear. The distribution of spirit stones to struggling sects, the opening of alchemical libraries to

worthy scholars, the sponsorship of orphaned cultivators — all were acknowledged with raised cups and resounding cheers that echoed from the jade ceiling.

Yet beneath this veneer of celebration, jealous murmurs proliferated like poison in still water. How had the Li Clan amassed such wealth? What secrets did they guard behind their fortress walls? Why did Otako favor them so conspicuously? These questions festered in the hearts of rival patriarchs, unspoken but palpable as killing intent.

### The Secret Council

When the feast finally concluded — after the last toast had been drunk, the final political pleasantries exchanged, and the guests dispersed like shadows fleeing dawn — Ling Li slipped away from the lingering crowd, her steps light and purposeful. Accustomed to moving unseen, she passed through hidden corridors known only to the Li bloodline, her fingers occasionally brushing the cool stone, reaffirming her route carved into the mountain centuries ago. She entered the innermost sanctum of the Li Clan fortress — a chamber protected by seven layers of concealment arrays and blood-bound wards that would incinerate any unauthorized intruder — and there, she summoned her most secret council, those she relied on to shape the fate of the clan.

Gathered in a circle around a low table of ancient ironwood — its surface marked with the scars of countless strategy sessions and illuminated by a single spirit-oil lantern whose flame burned without flickering, steady as truth itself — were:

Mushu, his aura steady, his eyes sharp with vigilance.

Shi Min, silent and unreadable, his presence commanding.

Four Eyes, his shield shimmering faintly, loyalty etched into his every breath.

Butler Oda, who had not yet removed the weighty Otako mask — its silver surface now seeming to merge with his own features after hours of perfect impersonation — his voice emerging from behind that facade, calm as a mountain spring yet firm as imperial decree, carrying the dual authority of servant and sovereign.

Otako's presence surprised both Shi Min and Four Eyes.

The Seven Shahs, each seated with disciplined posture, their expressions grim.

The air was heavy, the silence charged. Ling Li looked each council member in the eye, her posture straight as she addressed them. She placed both hands on the table, anchoring her authority before she spoke, her voice low but resolute.

Ling Li didn't involve anyone from the Li Mansion, afraid it would alert the enemy.

"The enemy moves in shadows already cast. Corruption sigils — ancient and malevolent — were discovered embedded within our disciples' practice arrays, designed to fracture their meridians during cultivation and cripple them before the trials even begin. This level of access, this intimate knowledge of our defenses..." Ling Li paused, letting the implication settle like poison. "This means traitors walk among our own elders, those we have broken bread with, those who have sworn oaths upon their cultivation. If their conspiracy succeeds, the Family Competition will not be a crucible testing our clan's strength — it will be the stage upon which the Li bloodline is extinguished, our legacy erased, our name becoming nothing more than a cautionary tale whispered in the dark."

## The Plan to Expose the Traitors

Mushu leaned forward, his fists clenched.

"Madam, give me leave. I will root them out myself. No traitor will escape."

Ling Li shook her head firmly, her eyes downcast.

"No. If we strike now, the enemies will scatter like shadows. We must expose them publicly during the Family Competition. Only then will the Hidden Valley see their betrayal," she countered.

Four Eyes raised his hand, his shield glowing faintly.

"My shield can anchor the protective arrays. If they tamper again, I will feel it. We can trace the interference back to its source," Four Eyes offered, his shield faintly glowing. Ling Li held Four Eyes' hand, showing her appreciation for her husband's support.

### Chapter 497: THE COMPETITION

Shi Min's voice was calm, but his words carried weight.

"Let them think they are hidden. During the trials, when their sabotage weakens our disciples, I will confront them before all. Their shame will be undeniable," Shi Min declared, his tone calm but forceful.

Otako, his mask gleaming in the lantern light, added:

"Ling, the emissaries believe they are bargaining with me. Let them. Their arrogance will reveal their hand," Otako - Butler Oda promised, mask gleaming.

The Seven Shahs spoke in unison, their voices steady.

"We will guard the disciples. If sabotage strikes, we will shield them until the traitors are revealed," the Seven Shahs pledged in unison, voices steady.

Ling Li's Resolve

Ling Li's eyes burned with determination.

"Then it is decided. We will not merely defend — we will expose. The Family Competition will be their stage of humiliation. The Valley will see their treachery, and the Li Clan will endure," Ling Li pronounced, her eyes burning with determination.

Ling Li placed her palm flat upon the ironwood table, closing her eyes in concentration. Her qi — vast and profound, like an ocean compressed into human form — surged outward in visible waves of jade-green light. The energy spilled over each member of the council, weaving around them and forming a shimmering covenant, a spiritual unity deeper than words or vows.

The lantern flame flickered wildly as if caught in a tempest, shadows dancing and writhing across their faces like living things, yet not one person in that circle wavered. Their auras rose in response, intertwining with hers, creating a mandala of power that blazed in the darkness — a silent declaration that whatever storm approached, they would face it as one.

Outside, the Valley buzzed with celebration. No one was aware of the storm brewing within the Li Clan mansion. Rival sect emissaries whispered in shadows, elders plotted betrayal, and disciples prepared for trials.

But within the secret council, Ling Li's circle stood united. The Family Competition would not only test strength — it would reveal loyalty, betrayal, and destiny.

"Let them conspire," Ling Li thought. 'When the crucible ignites, the Valley will know who stands with honor—and who falls in disgrace,' she resolved.

"Great Grandpa and his disciples from the Verdant Bamboo Pavilion will arrive tomorrow. I asked El Padre and El Capitan to meet with them halfway. We will discuss these matters with Great Grandpa Li Tianyuan." Ling Li said.

The Li Clan stood on the precipice of oblivion, as the looming threat of annihilation shadowed their legacy.

The next day, Ling Li gathered all the participants for the Family Competition among the Li Clan. Her fingers brushed the cool parchment as she drew the scroll from her spatial ring, its familiar weight grounding her. As the lantern light flickered over the ancient seals, they seemed to whisper secrets only

she could hear. The faintly acrid scent of burning wax mingled with the cool sweetness of old parchment, creating a sensory tapestry uniquely hers. She unfurled the scroll upon the ironwood table. In that instant, the air seemed to constrict around her, laden with the unyielding presence of centuries of blood and legacy.

Her voice was calm, but every syllable carried authority.

"Let's look at what the competition details are this year."

Everyone in the room watched, eyes sharp, breath held. Mushu's jaw tightened. His knuckles whitened against the table's edge. Shi Min's gaze was unreadable, but a slight narrowing of the eyes revealed anticipation. Four Eyes' shield flickered at his side, resonating with the room's tension. Even Butler Oda, masked by the Otako, inclined his head. The obsidian surface reflected lantern flame, cold and ominous.

The Seven Shahs rose from their seats, their robes whispering against the stone floor, each step deliberate, their expressions grim yet eager.

Beginners Category

As Ling Li read aloud the components, the disciples exchanged glances.

The Alchemist's Path: Mushu's lips pressed into a thin line.

"Transformation through ritual... it will test not just skill, but the soul itself."

Elemental Harmony Challenge: Nicu's eyes flared with fire.

"If it's a flame, I'll burn with the Valley's will."

Legacy Ritual: Fatty's usually jovial face grew solemn.

"Passing down lineage... this is more than performance. It is memory made flesh."

Shadow & Light Duel: Shun's fists clenched, his aura flickering.

"Chaos to harmony... it mirrors the struggle within us all."

The Seven Shahs murmured among themselves, their voices low but charged. Each category was more than spectacle; it was a crucible of spirit, designed to strip away pretense and reveal the marrow of a clan's identity. In this dance of shadow and legacy, there lay a poignant echo of Taoist philosophy, where the trials sought to balance the harmonies of light and shadow, ambition and restraint. As Ling Li's words hung in the air, the principle of Wu Wei, of effortless action and natural balance, underscored their resolve to embrace the trials not just with skill but with the equilibrium of spirit.

Energy, Emotion & Resonance

Ling Li's voice carried across the chamber as she continued.

Qi Resonance Performance: Four Eyes bowed his head slightly, his shield glowing faintly.

"I will anchor the resonance. If our breath falters, I will steady it."

Emotional Kata: Lily's eyes shimmered with determination.

"Grief, joy, rage, serenity... emotions are not weakness. They are weapons when wielded with truth."

Pulse & Rhythm Challenge: Chatty grinned, his bond with his Enfield beast sparking.

"Let the drums thunder. We will move as one heartbeat, one clan."

The disciples voiced agreement, their spirits rising. Yet, a flicker of anxiety crossed their faces—eyes darted, hands clenched unconsciously, pulses quickened. Skill alone would not suffice; vulnerability would be displayed before all of the Valley.

The Main Events – The Devouring Rite

When Ling Li's voice shifted to the Main Events, the chamber's atmosphere thickened. A hush fell over the assembly as an unexpected proclamation sent a ripple of shock through the crowd. Before the well-known horrors of the Devouring Rite, a new trial was revealed, one never before mentioned in the clan's long history.

"The Trial of Echoes," Ling Li announced softly, causing a murmur that rolled through the chamber.

"A test where the whispers of ancestors and promises of future generations meet in a crucible of time." The words themselves seemed to bleed into the air, heavy with dread and promise. The Trial of Echoes sparked a wave of uncertainty, heightening tension and making the impending Devouring Rite feel all the more ominous.