

PROTEGE 126

Chapter 126: RETRIEVING CAMP PHOENIX: THE GAME HAS JUST BEGUN

The convoy of cars screeched to a halt in front of the main office, dust swirling in the air. All eyes were fixed on the vehicles, waiting for Boris to emerge. Tension crackled in the atmosphere like a live wire.

A bodyguard swiftly opened the door of the lead car, and a middle-aged man stepped out. His presence exuded an air of authority and confidence.

“That’s him!” El Padre growled. Before anyone could blink, he was beside Boris, yanking him up with a speed that left everyone stunned.

Boris’s bodyguards were caught completely off guard. Within seconds, they found themselves surrounded by Ling Li’s forces, unable to make a move with Boris in El Padre’s iron grip.

“One wrong move, and he dies!” El Padre warned, his voice a menacing growl that brooked no argument.

“Dane, disarm them,” Shi Min instructed, his voice calm but commanding.

Dane moved swiftly, relieving the bodyguards of their weapons with practiced efficiency. With Boris firmly in his grasp, El Padre led him towards Ling Li, the man’s eyes darting around with a mix of shock and fear.

“It’s good to meet you finally, Boris,” Ling Li said as soon as Boris was pushed into the room, her tone deceptively polite.

Boris was stunned. His eyes widened in disbelief as he took in the scene—Ling Li standing confidently before him, Dr. Gao beside her, and the young Doctor who seemed completely unrecognizable in his current state.

“Don’t worry about them; come here and talk,” Ling Li invited, her voice dripping with a blend of charm and menace.

El Padre shoved Boris into a chair facing Ling Li. The sound of the chair scraping against the floor echoed ominously in the room. Boris knew of Ling Li's formidable reputation, but seeing her in action was a different story. He had underestimated her reach and power.

"Who are you working with?" Ling Li asked, her gaze piercing through Boris.

Boris clamped his mouth shut, refusing to answer. The silence stretched, heavy and oppressive.

"You could willingly talk to me, or I can turn you into a puppet just like them," Ling Li said, pointing to Dr. Gao and the young Doctor, who stood beside her, their faces blank and lifeless.

Boris's eyes flickered to the two men, realizing with a jolt that they were under some form of hypnosis. 'They were hypnotized! Fuck!' he thought, panic beginning to seep into his veins. He met Ling Li's gaze once more.

"I work on my own," Boris lied, his voice barely steady.

"Are you taking me for a fool? Those thousand soldiers who came when the alarm sounded were service people; you cannot give a direct order. You are not Chinese, and it will be difficult for you without support," Ling Li pointed out, her tone laced with irritation.

"What do you mean thousands of soldiers?" Boris asked. Though he knew about it, he wanted to understand the extent of the disaster. 'How could all the soldiers be defeated?' he wondered.

"I know what you are thinking. You want to know what happened to the soldiers; too bad. They were all killed by Otako in two strikes," Ling Li replied, chuckling softly. The casual mention of such a devastating event sent chills down Boris's spine.

"So, tell me. Who are you working with?" Ling Li pressed on.

Boris remained defiant, refusing to speak. His silence was met with Ling Li's growing impatience.

"I don't want anyone wasting my time," Ling Li said, her voice hardening. She was about to signal her men when Boris finally spoke.

"Wait," Boris said hesitantly. He realized there was no escape. His only hope now lay in stalling and hoping for a rescue. "It's Fen Zhang."

Ling Li looked at Mushu, their understanding immediate. "How did you know him?"

"Fen Zhang was introduced to me by a fellow armament merchant," Boris explained, his voice strained.

"And then?" Ling Li's eyebrows arched expectantly.

"Fen Zhang asked if I would be interested in investing in an experiment. That is when they were still in the middle of creating the android chimp," Boris admitted, each word feeling like a confession of defeat.

"Where is the chimp now?" Ling Li's voice was sharp, probing.

"They are testing it in a military camp," Boris replied, his gaze flickering with fear.

Ling Li leaned back in her chair, her eyes narrowing as she observed Boris. The tension in the room was palpable, like a coiled spring ready to snap. The dim light cast long shadows, adding to the gravity of the situation.

Boris' heart pounded in his chest, and he knew he was trapped. Ling Li's gaze never wavered, her eyes cold and unforgiving, as she watched him squirm under her scrutiny. The game had just begun, and Boris was already losing.

"How did you end up choosing my camp?" Ling Li asked, her voice cold and precise.

Boris shifted uncomfortably in his seat, avoiding her piercing gaze. "It was Feng's idea," he admitted, his voice a mix of desperation and resignation.

“He proposed using this camp because it has the most advanced tech we could use to make human androids. He said he has people already working here who could manipulate everything.”

Ling Li’s expression hardened. “Is that the reason for my ambush?” she demanded, her voice icy and unforgiving.

“Yes,” Boris confessed, his voice barely a whisper.

Ling Li leaned forward, her eyes burning with intensity. “Who is Feng working with?” she asked, her questions relentless and sharp as a blade.

Boris’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “He won’t tell me. He always says, ‘The less I know, the safer I will be,’” he muttered, his voice filled with frustration and fear.

Ling Li’s eyes narrowed further. “What about you? Who are you working for?” she inquired, her voice dripping with suspicion.

“I am an independent weapon merchant. I don’t work for anyone,” Boris insisted, though his voice lacked conviction, and a faint tremor betrayed his nerves.

“Really?” Ling Li’s tone was skeptical and challenging. “Who are your contacts in Pakistan and India?”

Boris swallowed hard, his fear evident. “I... I am the middleman for their firearm supplies from Feng. They somehow found out I was financing Feng’s experiment. They offered me a big sum of money to leak information to them,” he confessed, his voice trembling with fear.

Chapter 127: RETRIVING CAMP PHOENIX: END OF BORIS

Ling Li’s lips curled into a small, humorless smile. “You are doing this behind Feng’s back,” she observed, a small chuckle escaping her lips. The sound was chilling, a harbinger of retribution.

Boris nodded, his defeat evident in his posture. Ling Li's chuckle echoed in the room, a sound that carried both amusement and a promise of retribution.

"You would do anything for money, right, Boris? You are aware that you are playing with fire," Ling Li said, her laughter cold and mocking.

Boris's face paled, and his hands trembled. "I... I didn't have a choice. This is what I do for a living," he stammered, his voice barely audible.

Ling Li leaned in closer, her eyes boring into his. "Boris, what would happen if Feng finds out you are selling his experiment to others?" she asked, her voice soft but deadly, like a venomous whisper.

Boris's eyes widened in fear, and his voice cracked.

Boris knew this; if Feng found out what he was doing, he would be destroyed. 'No, Feng Chang would kill him.' Boris could only shake his head as he silently thought about his impending doom.

"Why don't we find out?" Ling Li said, her voice cold and calculating as she pointed her finger at Dr. Gao. The room fell silent, tension thickening the air. Dr. Gao nodded after a few seconds, understanding her command.

With Mushu standing beside him holding the phone, Dr. Gao dialed Feng Zhang's number. Boris watched in horror, the color draining from his face. He couldn't believe what he was witnessing.

"Hello, Mr. Zhang. This is Dr. Gao. I have very vital information to report to you. It is about Mr. Boris. He has been sending all our experiment information to India and Pakistan. Yes, Boris is currently here in the office.

Dr. Chun sent out the information for him," Dr. Gao explained, his voice steady and professional.

Dr. Chun was the name of the young doctor.

"I understand, Mr. Zhang. We will keep him here until your arrival." Dr. Gao ended the call, turning to face Ling Li.

"He said he has some important matters and will come here immediately," Dr. Gao informed Ling Li.

"Let's wait and see what happens next," Ling Li said, her eyes never leaving Boris. "Hand me over the microchip in your hand."

Boris' eyes nearly popped out of his head when he heard the word microchip. He couldn't believe that Ling Li had discovered it. He should never have trusted Feng's words and underestimated Ling Li.

"Mushu, help Boris with the microchip," Ling Li ordered with a smirk.

Without delay, Mushu strode forward, took out his Swiss knife, and cut into Boris' arm with practiced precision, retrieving the microchip and handing it to Ling Li.

"Give it to me," Shi Min demanded.

Just as Mushu passed the microchip to Shi Min, Boris' phone began to ring. Mushu took the phone and put it on speaker mode.

"Master! Master! Our base is being attacked!" a man yelled on the other end.

"What?!" Boris screamed, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"They are firing at everyone and burning everything! I barely escaped!" the man on the phone panted, his voice shaky with fear.

"Imbecile!" Boris yelled, his voice filled with rage and panic. Mushu ended the call abruptly.

"That was very fast for them to retaliate against you," Ling Li said to Boris, her tone laced with ridicule.

Before Boris could respond, his phone rang again. Mushu put it on speaker mode once more.

“Master! Our warehouse is on fire!” another voice shouted.

Mushu didn’t wait for Boris to reply and ended the call. Boris slumped his shoulders, his mind racing. He understood that this was the end for him.

Those supplies were meant for his clients, and Boris had yet to pay the manufacturers. Boris would be as good as dead in their eyes. His clients had also given him initial deposits, and now all the goods were gone.

Despair and anger boiled within him, directed at Feng Zhang for ruining everything.

“Lock them up,” Ling Li ordered, waving her hand over Boris. She needed them to be obedient to her.

“Mom, I have understood everything. I don’t think we need the fifth microchip, though we still want to know who has it,” Shi Min said, his voice calm and composed.

“That is good to know. I want to check the lab and see the five men,” Ling Li remarked, her eyes glinting with determination and resolve.

The room fell into a tense silence as they awaited Feng Zhang’s arrival, the air thick with anticipation and dread.

Mushu’s phone rang, the sharp sound slicing through the tense air. He answered quickly, his voice steady despite the urgency he felt. After a brief exchange with his subordinate, he turned to Ling Li, who was standing with an air of calm authority.

Taking the phone from Mushu, “Yes?” Ling Li’s voice was firm but unhurried.

“Supreme Master, we discovered that Fen Zhang’s wife and his two-year-old son were abducted from their home some time ago. We have pinpointed their location. Should we proceed as planned?” the voice on the other end reported.

Ling Li’s eyes hardened. “I will send Mushu. Wait for him,” she replied curtly, handing the phone back to Mushu.

“Mushu, join the group and ensure their safe return,” Ling Li commanded, her tone brooking no argument.

Mushu nodded, determination etched on his face. “I won’t fail, Supreme Master,” he vowed before swiftly exiting, ready to lead the rescue mission.

In the pristine lab, the hum of machinery filled the air as Ling Li and Shi Min meticulously examined the experiment. The room was a testament to cutting-edge science, with advanced equipment and meticulously organized workstations. Shi Min’s eyes sparkled with determination as he studied the data.

“Mom, I can do this. I can finish what they started,” Shi Min said with a confidence that belied his youth.

Ling Li looked at her son, her expression a mixture of pride and concern.

“Son, are you sure? This is dangerous and could have severe repercussions.” Ling Li worriedly asked. She was planning to study the data and do it herself.

Shi Min squared his shoulders. “Yeah. I’ve been fascinated by this work since my college days. I’ve read every paper and every study about human androids. I couldn’t conceive of using a large animal for an experiment until you entrusted all the work and businesses under Grandfather to me, and I completely forgotten about this. Now that this opportunity has come, I’m ready. Leave this to me,” Shi Min affirmed, his voice resolute.

Ling Li sighed, seeing the fire in her son’s eyes. “Alright, but promise me you’ll be careful,” she said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Chapter 128: RETRIEVING CAMP PHOENIX: FEN ZHANG

In the chilly expanse of Russia, Leeroy, Lily's trusted bodyguard and assistant, a towering figure of strength and kindness, moved with purpose. His stern demeanor belied the warmth he reserved for those he cared about. He was setting up Lily's training area with meticulous care, ensuring every piece of equipment was of the highest quality.

Coach Carlos, a seasoned gymnastics coach known for his rigorous training methods, arrived to oversee Lily's preparation. His presence brought a sense of gravity to the training sessions.

Lily's determination was palpable as she practiced tirelessly, her movements fluid and graceful. Each jump, each flip, and each stretch was performed with unwavering focus. She was preparing for two major events: the Dance Sports Competition and the Asian Olympic Gymnastics. Her resolve shone through her every action, her eyes alight with the fire of a champion.

Ling Li was a whirlwind of activity. Balancing the demands of her family's safety measures and the businesses she managed was no small feat. Her leadership skills, honed through years of experience, were on full display as she coordinated strategies and made critical decisions.

Ling Li moved with grace and efficiency, her mind a constant flurry of plans and contingencies. Her ability to seamlessly switch between the roles of a business leader and a protective matriarch was nothing short of extraordinary. She was a force to be reckoned with, her presence commanding respect and admiration from all who knew her.

Midnight in China, a convoy of luxurious cars paraded grandly toward Camp Phoenix. The convoy belonged to Feng Zhang.

Ling Li informed of his arrival and waited with El Padre and El Capitan. The tension in the room was palpable, the air thick with anticipation.

When Feng Zhang walked into the office, it felt as if an ice bucket had been poured over him. His shivers were uncontrollable, and he wished he could dig himself into the ground to escape the piercing gaze of Ling Li.

"It has been a while, Feng," Ling Li said casually, her eyes never leaving his.

Feng Zhang wanted to reply, but his mouth felt glued shut. No words would come out.

"You have nothing to say?" Ling Li asked, raising an eyebrow.

Feng Zhang dropped to his knees in front of Ling Li, his head bowed, his entire body trembling in fear.

"Madam, I have been forced to do this behind your back. They took my wife and my son," Feng Zhang wept like a child.

"They forced you? Who are they?" Ling Li's voice was calm, but her eyes were sharp.

Feng Zhang choked and shuddered in fear. "They... they..." He wanted to say who they were, but the thought of his wife and son in their hands silenced him.

"Feng Zhang, whether you want to tell me who they are or not, do you think you have a choice? If you cooperate with me, I will save your wife and son."

Feng Zhang looked up at Ling Li, hope flickering in his eyes. "Madam, I will do everything you say as long as my wife and son are safe."

"Alright, your little family will be here later. Now, tell me who these people are."

"Madam..." Feng Zhang stammered. Feng Zhang hesitated, glancing at Ling Li, whose eyes were wide with terror. 'If I revealed who the person is, would I be sealing my fate, or was it the only way to free myself from Ling Li's relentless pursuit?' Time seemed to slow as Feng Zhang battled with the decision; though he wanted to reveal them to Ling Li, he still needed assurance that his family was safe.

"You don't trust me? Are you doubting my capability?" Ling Li's gaze was lazy, but her words were sharp. El Padre and El Capitan were already losing their patience.

"Brat! Are you waiting for me to beat you up?!" El Padre spat out angrily.

"Madam..." Feng Zhang looked down, unable to meet Ling Li's eyes. He took a deep breath, feeling the fragile thread of resolve snap, and reached into his pocket, a bead of sweat pooling at his brow.

The tension was palpable, the outcome hanging delicately in the balance. With a sudden rush of adrenaline mixed with trepidation, staring into Ling Li's unwavering gaze, uncertain of what would unfold next.

"Madam, several core group members wanted to take you down while they took advantage of you. They fear that you have become too powerful," Feng Zhang said in a shivering voice.

"Don't beat around the bush; just spill it out!" El Padre interrupted angrily.

"It's the Chinese President and his little followers." After Feng Zhang revealed the name, he heaved a sigh of relief as if a huge rock had been lifted from his chest.

"I see." Ling Li wasn't surprised; she already knew that the Chinese president was the only person who could possibly infiltrate Camp Phoenix.

"He has the fifth chip, right?"

Feng Zhang's head buzzed when he heard about the chips. His mouth fell open in shock. He couldn't believe that Ling Li had discovered this ultimate secret among the five of them.

'Madam Ling is truly the Supreme Commander,' he thought.

"Yes, Madam. He has the last chip."

"I need the chip inside you." Ling Li declared.

Feng Zhang was stupefied. 'She even knew the chip was embedded in my arm?'

Dane stepped forward and slit Feng Zhang's arm to retrieve the chip.

"Where is the chimp?" Ling Li asked.

"The Chinese President brought it to their military camp to test, but unfortunately, the chimp went wild. The person in charge lost control and had no choice but to shoot it," Feng Zhang replied.

"I understand. Your family is waiting outside. You can see them for a while, but I have to keep them safe with me. Keeping them with me is not to control you, but how can you keep them safe? After you meet them, go back and let them continue believing everything is going well as planned. Wait for my further instructions," Ling Li said.

"Madam, rest assured that I will do as you wish. Thank you for saving my family and keeping them safe. I am forever indebted to you," Feng Zhang said gratefully.

Ling Li waved her hand to dismiss him.

Chapter 129: NINA IS ALIVE

Feng Zhang hurriedly exited the office, his heart pounding as he searched for his wife and son. His eyes welled up with tears when he saw them standing outside, accompanied by Mushu. He could not hold himself back and ran toward them, tears streaming down his face.

His wife, seeing him, was momentarily frozen in disbelief. She had long lost hope of ever seeing him again. It wasn't until she heard their son call out, "Dad!" that she snapped out of her daze.

"Hubby, is it really you?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes, it's me," Feng Zhang replied, his voice breaking with emotion. "I'm so sorry for what you've been through. I failed you; I didn't protect you."

"Aren't we together now?" she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

"Yes, but we can't stay together for now. You must stay according to Madam Ling Li's arrangement to keep you and our son safe. Please, endure a little longer. I can't lose either of you," Feng Zhang pleaded, his voice choked with grief.

His wife hugged him tightly, understanding the complexity of his situation. Though she didn't ask, she could guess the dangerous circumstances he was entangled in. "I know. Don't worry too much. You have to take care of yourself and stay safe," she said softly.

"Yes, honey. I will leave our son in your care. I will miss you both dearly," Feng Zhang said, his voice heavy with sorrow.

His wife nodded, taking their son from him, and returned to Mushu, who was waiting patiently. Feng Zhang watched them as they boarded the chopper, his eyes never leaving them until they were out of sight. His wife did not look back, knowing it would only break her resolve.

As the chopper lifted off, Feng Zhang felt his knees buckle, and he collapsed to the ground. The weight of the sacrifice he was making for his family's safety overwhelmed him, and he could only hope that Madam Ling Li would keep her promise.

For the next four weeks, Shi Min worked tirelessly in the lab, barely pausing to rest, while Ling Li, Mushu, and Pharsa closely monitored the soldiers' recovery from detoxification and rehab. The atmosphere was tense and focused, the stakes higher than ever.

"Supreme Commander!" Wusheng's urgent voice broke the heavy silence.

Ling Li turned, seeing Wusheng clamber down from his truck, visibly flustered.

"What is it?" Ling Li asked, her voice calm but alert.

"Supreme Commander, you have to see it for yourself. Please come with me," Wusheng urged, his inability to explain adding to the urgency.

Ling Li exchanged a glance with Mushu, then nodded. They boarded Wusheng's truck together.

Camp Phoenix sprawled over a vast area, and the drive to their destination took ten long minutes. Wusheng had discovered a tiny, hidden hut during his patrol.

Upon arrival, Ling Li observed the hut carefully. It was delicately built, almost camouflaged against the landscape, suggesting an intent to remain hidden.

Ling Li, Mushu, and Wusheng entered the hut, leaving the rest outside to guard. Inside, the sight before her took aback Ling Li—an unconscious woman lying in a sick bed, connected to numerous medical machines. It was Nina.

Ling Li approached Nina, inspecting her closely. All of Nina's wounds had been treated, and she was healing well. Her face had even undergone plastic surgery to restore her appearance. 'Someone must have rescued her from the wolves that night,' Ling Li thought.

The room was ingeniously powered by solar energy, cleverly concealing the need for electricity. Ling Li placed her fingers on Nina's wrist to check her pulse, with Mushu standing by her side.

"She has a lot of internal injuries; her vitals are also very weak," Ling Li observed.

"Madam, what do you plan to do with her?" Mushu asked, concerned.

"Let's pretend we didn't see her. It will still take a while for her to wake up. I'm sure somebody will come for her. I want to know what they plan to do with her," Ling Li replied, her mind already strategizing.

Ling Li took a tiny tracker and implanted it under Nina's neck.

"Keep track of any movement on her," Ling Li instructed Mushu.

"Yes, Madam. Should we inform Master Chu Yan about her?" Mushu inquired.

"I will handle it. Let's go back. Thoroughly investigate what happened to Nina that night," Ling Li commanded. Mushu understood. The wolf den where Nina had been thrown was part of Ling Li's property, with cameras installed throughout.

"They went to great lengths to betray me, even entering the wolf's den to rescue Nina," Ling Li mused.

On their way back to the main building, Ling Li reflected on the past month. They had been preoccupied with the camp, and El Padre and El Capitan had departed a week after the camp was secured.

Ling Li's thoughts wandered to Four Eyes. 'Honey, please be safe,' she whispered to herself. She missed him and their children dearly.

'The twins will be turning one soon. Their father won't be there to celebrate with us,' Ling Li felt a pang of heartache.

Upon returning, she turned to Mushu. "Mushu, prepare a jet for me. I will visit the children incognito. You stay here and keep me updated on Shi Min's progress."

Though hesitant to let Ling Li leave alone, Mushu knew better than to argue. "Yes, Madam," he complied reluctantly.

Later, Ling Li boarded a jet by herself and soon landed in Russia, her heart filled with anticipation. She was going home to see her children.

Ling Li stepped off the Jet at Camp Blaze, the crisp winter air biting at her cheeks, a stark contrast to the tropical warmth she had left behind. Her breath formed little clouds as she exhaled, and she wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck, feeling a mix of anticipation and trepidation. It had been months since she had last seen her children, and the thought of reuniting with them made her heart race with a mixture of joy and anxiety.

As Ling Li drove home, her mind wandered to Lily, her youngest from her first marriage, whose fierce determination had turned her into a prodigy in both gymnastics and dance sports. Ling Li imagined Lily in the training hall, her body moving with precision and grace, every muscle taut with concentration.

Chapter 130: LING LI'S EMOTIONAL VISIT

As Ling Li drove home, her mind wandered to Lily, her youngest from her first marriage, whose fierce determination had turned her into a prodigy in both gymnastics and dance sports. Ling Li imagined Lily in the training hall, her body moving with precision and grace, every muscle taut with concentration.

The image of Lily's face, set in a look of steely resolve, brought a smile to Ling Li's lips. She couldn't wait to see her daughter's new routines and perhaps even share a quiet moment of pride and encouragement.

Upon arriving at the family home, Ling Li was greeted by the sound of laughter and the sight of Lily practicing a complex gymnastic maneuver. The newly built annex of the mansion was made into Lily's gym with mats and apparatuses strewn about.

Lily's coach, Carlos, a strict, no-nonsense man, watched her every move with a critical eye. Ling Li admired her daughter's dedication and resilience, marveling at how much she had grown in such a short time.

"Mom, you're here!" Lily exclaimed, mid-backflip, before running over to hug Ling Li tightly. Ling Li felt the strength and determination in her daughter's embrace, marveling at how much she had grown.

"You've been training hard," Ling Li said, brushing a lock of hair from Lily's forehead.

"Yes, I'm almost competition," Lily replied, her eyes shining with pride.

"I'm so proud of you, my little champion," Ling Li whispered, holding back tears.

"Madam Li, it has been a long time since we last met," Coach Carlos greeted Ling Li.

"Coach Carlos, indeed, it has been a long time. And thank you for training Lily personally; please do let us know if there is anything you need." Ling Li politely replied to the famous coach.

"No need to thank me. It is my honor to coach such an outstanding and rare talent." Coach Carlos beamed with joy.

"Then I shall not disturb your training," Ling Li said as she left to find Ren.

In another part of the house, Ren sat at a grand mahogany table, engrossed in her studies. Her tutor, a stern but kind elderly man, spoke in measured tones about the intricacies of Chinese government and traditions. The tutor's voice was a steady murmur, but Ren's face was animated with curiosity.

Ling Li stood quietly in the doorway, watching her eldest daughter absorb the information with an intensity that reminded her of her father. Ren's brow furrowed in concentration as she took notes, occasionally glancing up to ask a question. She was also receiving self-defense training from Reginald, her trusted bodyguard.

During a break in her lessons, Ren spotted her mother; she sprang from her chair wapping her arms around her mother's waist.

"Mom! I've learned so much about our heritage. Did you know that the earliest Chinese dynasties were...?" Ren's enthusiasm was contagious, and Ling Li found herself lost in his excitement, appreciating her thirst for knowledge.

Ling Li smiled, her heart swelling with pride. "I'm so glad you're passionate about this, Ren. Your grandfather would be proud."

"Mom, are you back with Shi Min?" Ren inquired.

"No, I came to visit you for a couple of days, but I still needed to go back." Ling Li explained.

"I understand, Mom. We miss you. You should check on Kim Kim and Chin Chin; they are learning to walk," Ren excitedly said.

"Alright, continue with your study, and I'll check on the twins." Ling Li stated.

Meanwhile, the twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, were in the nursery, their chubby legs wobbling as they took tentative steps. Ling Li felt a rush of emotions as she watched them, remembering the sleepless nights and the joy of their first smiles. The twins giggled and babbled, their innocence and joy a soothing balm to Ling Li's weary heart.

Ling Li knelt on the soft carpet of the nursery, her heart swelling with joy as Kim Kim and Chin Chin shuffled towards her, their tiny hands reaching out for balance. She laughed, tears of happiness glistening in her eyes as the twins giggled with pure delight.

"You're both getting so big," Ling Li whispered, scooping them up into her arms. Their laughter was infectious, and for a moment, all her worries melted away in the warmth of their embrace.

The twins took turns clinging to Ling Li's fingers, their chubby legs wobbly but determined. Ling Li's heart felt full to burst as she watched their innocent faces light up with every successful step. Ling Li showered the twins with kisses and words of encouragement, her voice thick with emotion. These moments, so fleeting and precious, were a reminder of the boundless love Ling Li held for her children. For a while, the worries of the world melted away, leaving just the simple, profound joy of being a mother.

Later, Ling Li made her way to the guest house where her in-laws were staying. The warm glow of the fireplace welcomed her as she stepped inside. Her father-in-law sat in his favorite armchair, reading a book, while her mother-in-law busied herself with knitting. They looked up as she entered, their faces breaking into welcoming smiles.

"My dear Ling, it's so good to see you," her mother-in-law said, embracing her warmly.

"I've missed you both," Ling Li replied, feeling a sense of homecoming. They spent the evening reminiscing about the past and catching up on family news, the bond between them growing stronger with every shared memory.

The dining room was filled with the comforting aroma of homemade dishes, a warm haven against the winter chill outside. Ling Li sat at the head of the table, her heart swelling with pride and contentment. Lily animatedly recounted her latest gymnastic training developments, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she described nailing a particularly challenging routine.

"I nailed the triple backflip on the balance beam today, Mom," Lily said proudly.

"That's amazing, Lily. Your hard work is really paying off," Ling Li responded, her voice filled with pride.

Ren chimed in with tales of her studies and self-defense training with Reginald. "I've been discovering ancient Chinese customs and practicing new defense techniques," she said, her enthusiasm contagious.

The twins, seated in their high chairs, added to the lively atmosphere with their delighted squeals and babbles, their faces smeared with mashed vegetables. Ling Li looked around the table, her heart overflowing with love and gratitude. These moments, filled with laughter, stories, and the simple joy of being together, were the treasures she cherished most.

"I'm so proud of you." Ling Li emotionally expressed barely holding her tears.

As the evening wore on and the house grew quiet, Ling Li stood by the window, looking out at the snow-covered landscape, feeling profoundly grateful for her family and the moments of joy they shared. She knew these were the memories that would carry her through the toughest of times, grounding her in the love that surrounded her.