

PROTEGE 181

Chapter 181: FIVE DAYS TO GO

Shi Min was the first to break the silence. "Hey, everyone! Just finished coordinating with the Camp Blaze team. They've confirmed that they are willing to take part in making the proposal grand. It's going to be perfect to keep it all a secret from Mom."

Ren quickly followed with her update, her enthusiasm palpable even through the screen. "I've sketched out all the paintings, and I have to say, they look amazing! Each one captures a significant moment in Paps and Mom's journey. I'm starting the painting process tomorrow."

Mushu jumped in, his excitement evident in his words. "The holographic technology is coming together beautifully! The paintings will come to life in ways you can't even imagine. It's going to be like walking through a magical love story."

Pharsa added her thoughts, her voice filled with emotion. "I've contacted Camp Blaze; we have formed a perfect group of orchestra and they're thrilled to play the song they danced to during the twins' celebration. They're working on a special arrangement to make it even more memorable."

Lily, ever the adventurer, had her own thrilling update to share. "Found the perfect fireworks provider! They've promised us a spectacular show that will light up the sky just as Paps proposes. It's going to be breathtaking!"

The group buzzed with excitement, their updates filling the chat with a flurry of messages and emojis. Four Eyes couldn't help but feel a swell of gratitude for his friends, their dedication, and their creativity.

Ren chimed in again, her message filled with determination. "I'm also taking charge of the decorations. Lily, don't forget to order the most beautiful cake for the celebration afterward."

Lily responded with a thumbs-up emoji and a flurry of cake-related gifs, her excitement evident. "Consider it done! I've already contacted the best pastry chef in the country. Mom's favorite flavors are on the list!"

As the group continued to share their updates and coordinate the final details, each family and friend was determined to make the proposal an unforgettable moment for Ling Li and Four Eyes.

With five days to go, the anticipation grew with each passing moment. The group chat became a hub of creativity, dedication, and love as they worked together to create a proposal that would be remembered forever.

This evening's collaborative spirit set the stage for the magical proposal that was soon to come. The stars seemed to shine a little brighter that night, as if they, too, were excited for the love story that was about to unfold.

Butler Peng later that night informed everyone that dinner was ready, causing them to jolt from their rest. However, everyone quickly noticed that Ling Li was the only one missing from the dining hall. A sense of unease spread through the group like wildfire.

"She must be in the alchemy room; let me check on her," Four Eyes said, concern evident in his voice.

"Let me go with you, Paps," Shi Min added, his anxiousness piqued; knowing the complex process of alchemy, he wants to make sure his Mom is safe.

To their surprise, everyone else decided to follow them. Some were genuinely curious about the alchemy room, having never seen it before. In contrast, others simply didn't want to be left out. The tension was palpable, as Shi Min and Four Eyes didn't stop them from tagging along, their own anxieties mounting.

Upon their arrival at the alchemy room, they were caught off guard by the number of security personnel surrounding the place. Mushu, who had joined Pharsa as soon as the training session that afternoon had ended, stood vigilantly by the door. The sight of Mushu and the security team raised alarm bells in Shi Min's mind.

"What's going on?" Shi Min asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"Good evening, Young Master, Masters, Young Miss Ren, Young Miss Lily," Mushu greeted them with a formal bow. As the highest-ranking official in the vicinity, it was his duty to address and answer Shi Min. "Young Master, your mom is refining important pills and will be in seclusion. She will be out in five days," Mushu explained, his voice steady yet revealing a hint of urgency.

"In five days?" Shi Min repeated, his worry evident in his tone as he confirmed the information. His mind raced with thoughts of what could go wrong in those five days.

Standing beside Shi Min, Four Eyes felt a wave of nervousness wash over him. Five days from now was his surprise wedding proposal for Ling Li. The thought of her being in seclusion and missing such an important moment filled him with anxiety. 'What if she didn't make it out in time? What if something went wrong during the refinement process?' Four Eyes silently thought.

"Young Master, Madam promised me that she would be out in five days," Pharsa assured Shi Min, her voice filled with determination. But even she couldn't hide the flicker of doubt in her eyes.

"And how can you be sure that Mom will come out in five days? How did you make her promise?" Shi Min asked suspiciously, his gaze locked on Pharsa. The air grew tense as the group awaited her response.

"I... I..." Pharsa stammered, her mind racing as she tried to find the right words. She had already lied to Ling Li once, and the thought of fabricating another lie now made her face flush red with embarrassment. With a deep breath, Pharsa revealed her alibi to the group, "I told Madam that Murphy and I have an important announcement to make and she couldn't be absent," her face as red as a cooked crab by the time she finished.

However, a certain Murphy was grinning from ear to ear. "Don't worry, Honey, and I will certainly help you on that day with your alibi. I think your plan is the best," Chatty shamelessly chimed in, his confidence unwavering.

The tension outside the alchemy room started to shift as Pharsa finished her confession, and the group's initial anxiety began to dissipate, replaced by a lighter, more playful atmosphere.

"Pharsa, you really know how to get things done," Ren teased, nudging her friend with a grin.

Chapter 182: T-REX

"Yeah, but you should have seen her face just now. Redder than a tomato!" Lily added, laughing.

Murphy, always quick with a witty remark, replied, "Of course, Mushu. I wouldn't dream of doing anything less. Pharsa's plan is top-notch, and I've got her back."

Pharsa, still blushing, tried to laugh off the teasing. "Alright, alright, you guys. Let's not make a big deal out of it. And you! Stop talking nonsense!" Pharsa said to Chatty.

But the group's playful teasing continued, lifting the heavy mood that had settled over them.

Just then, Cannonball said to Chatty, "Master, I think something is wrong with my eyes; I might be going blind!" Chatty, who was in a great mood, was startled by Cannonball.

"What do you mean? Let me see! Did something get into your eyes?" Chatty nervously asked.

"No, Master. You see, I just saw your girlfriend smiling and shy; I think I'm hallucinating!" Cannonball said.

"What?! How could that be? She was indeed blushing and shy!" Chatty said, wondering what Cannonball was implying.

"Master, it means Miss likes you too; all these years, this is the first time I saw her smile," Cannonball said. But before Chatty could reply, "Brat, do you need a beating? Why don't I send you back to T-Rex?" Pharsa scolded Cannonball.

"Miss, you misunderstood me!" Cannonball nervously said as he hid and curled in Chatty's neck, shivering in fear.

"Master, I told you, she's very fierce!" Cannonball whispered to Chatty's ear.

"I think you truly need a beating, and who is this T-Rex?" Chatty replied as he gave Cannonball a playful tap on his head.

"No, no, Master, please. Don't let Miss take me back to T-Rex. T-Rex is literally a T-rex. He is a level six beast who trains all of us in the training hall." Cannonball explained as he pleaded.

"Do you mean to say there are actually other beasts aside from you? And there is actually a T-Rex? A dinosaur???" Chatty asked, his jaw almost dropping.

"Yes, there were several of us, and the T-Rex is the strongest," Cannonball confirmed.

Chatty swallowed hard while contemplating. "Oh, a level six beast can transform himself to human form right? So, is the T-Rex male or female?" He curiously asked.

"T-Rex is a man; whenever he transforms, he is like a male god. He is too handsome," Cannonball disclosed.

"What are you guys chatting about? Murmuring secretly." Pharsa asked.

"Master, don't reveal it; I might get punished. I don't think this could be disclosed to everyone," Cannonball once again pleaded.

"I'm only trying to calm him down, nothing more," Chatty said, however, Pharsa snorted loudly.

Sensing that the tension had eased, Shi Min decided it was time to address the group and calm his step-father, Four Eyes. "Don't worry, Paps. Mom will definitely fulfill her promise. She's not the type to make promises lightly."

Four Eyes, despite his usually silent and calm demeanor, was inwardly anxious about the upcoming proposal. But knowing that he couldn't change the circumstances, he nodded in agreement with Shi Min.

With the group's spirits lifted, Shi Min led everyone back to the dining hall for dinner. The air was filled with a sense of camaraderie as they walked together, each person reflecting on the events of the night and the bonds that held them together.

As they sat down to eat, the conversation flowed more naturally, and laughter echoed through the hall until it was time to bid each other good night.

However, a certain someone tossed and turned all night; Four Eyes sighed heavily. The empty space beside him felt like an abyss without Ling Li in his arms, the cold sheets a stark reminder of her absence. Restlessness gnawed at him, urging him to rise from the bed and seek solace elsewhere.

Four Eyes quietly padded down the hallway to the twins' room. As he opened the door, a soft moonlight streamed through the window, casting a serene glow over his two little girls. Four Eyes paused, his heart swelling with tender emotion. He remembered the overwhelming fear and hope that mingled within him when Ling Li gave birth while in a coma. Their tiny bodies, fragile and delicate, could fit in a shoe box. Yet here they were now, nestled in their beds, their soft, even breaths a testament to their growth and strength.

In that tranquil moment, Four Eyes felt a mixture of pride and gratitude. He stood at the threshold, his eyes misting with unshed tears as he gazed at his daughters. Ling Li had always been the resilient anchor, but now, with her absence, it was his turn to fortify their family with unwavering strength.

Four Eyes leaned towards their beds, brushing a tender kiss on each forehead. Their skin was warm and soft, and the gentle rise and fall of their chests brought him a measure of peace. Upon returning to his room, sleep remained elusive, so he decided to cultivate.

As the night stretched on, Four Eyes' thoughts were a whirlwind of emotions. The future loomed large and uncertain, but the one constant was their family bond. With that steadfast resolve, Four Eyes closed his eyes, channeling his emotions into his cultivation.

The silent stillness of the night was soon interrupted. A sudden convulsion of energy surged through the atmosphere, causing Four Eyes' senses to sharpen instinctively. Ever since his breakthrough to the fourth level—Spirit Origin—his perception had become razor-sharp, attuned to even the slightest disturbances in his surroundings. His ears picked up subtle movements, faint yet deliberate, happening beyond the walls of his chamber.

A weight of unease settled in his chest. He wasn't alone. Four Eyes thought.

Stepping out of his room, he found Shi Min already also in the hallway, his expression taut with vigilance. Their eyes met unspoken understanding passing between them.

“Paps, you felt it too?” Shi Min asked, his voice low but firm.

Four Eyes gave a nod of confirmation.

Shi Min’s jaw tightened. “We need to check it out. I’m afraid Mom has attracted nearby ravenous cultivators.”

Four Eyes’ brows furrowed, his heart squeezing with worry. “Ravenous cultivators?”

Shi Min exhaled sharply, sensing his stepfather’s rising concern. “Paps, from the energy fluctuation, it’s clear—Mom is refining more than just an ordinary pill or crafting a simple elixir.”

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Dear cherished readers,

I sincerely apologize for the lack of updates over the past month. It was never my intention to keep you waiting, but I had an important personal matter to attend to—caring for my 82-year-old mother during her time in the hospital.

Family is the foundation of everything, and during this period, my priority was to be by her side, ensuring her comfort and well-being. I deeply appreciate your patience, understanding, and continued support. Your enthusiasm and encouragement mean the world to me, and I am truly grateful for this wonderful community.

Now that things have settled, I am looking forward to bringing you new Chapters with renewed passion and dedication. Thank you for your kindness and unwavering support—it truly makes all the difference.

Warm regards,

Sirius M

Chapter 183: SEVEN IMMORTALS

Shi Min continued to explain, “The sheer turbulence of the energy radiating from the alchemy room indicates something far beyond ordinary refinement. Depending on the strength of both the alchemist and the pill or elixir in progress, the energy can stretch across a considerable radius, acting like a beacon to those hungry for power. That’s why Mom ordered Mushu to secure the place in advance.”

Four Eyes nodded in understanding, but his heart still clenched at the thought of Ling Li being in potential danger. His wife was strong—unparalleled in her mastery of alchemy—but even strength had its limits. The thought of predatory cultivators lurking in the shadows, ready to seize an opportunity, set his nerves on edge.

His fingers curled into fists as he and Shi Min swiftly made their way down the dimly lit hallway. Shadows flickered under the soft glow of night lights, elongating their strides as they hurried forward. The air was thick with tension, charged with an eerie silence that spoke of the unseen threat lurking beyond.

Shi Min’s steps were quick and deliberate, his gaze sharp. “Stay alert, Paps. If there are cultivators in the vicinity, they won’t wait for an invitation.”

Four Eyes nodded, his muscles coiling with readiness. His breakthrough had sharpened his abilities, but he needed to be vigilant—ravenous cultivators were ruthless. Four Eyes knew he needed to be twice as vigilant since he was not as strong as Shi Min and his wife, Ling Li. This sudden incident made him more eager to make himself stronger.

As they approached the alchemy room, the hum of energy grew stronger, sending ripples through the air. The sheer pressure of it was suffocating, almost overwhelming, and Four Eyes instinctively raised his arm slightly to shield himself. His breath hitched. This energy was far stronger than he anticipated.

Shi Min’s expression darkened. “Mom is working on something monumental. This level of energy disturbance... it could change everything.”

Four Eyes swallowed hard, his heartbeat drumming against his ribs.

Ling Li was pushing beyond limits—and they weren't the only ones who had taken notice.

The arrival of Butler Peng, accompanied by a group of formidable warriors clad in samurai attire, shifted the atmosphere into something sharper, heavier—charged with an undeniable tension. Recognizing them instantly as Grand Commander Otako's subordinates, Four Eyes and Shi Min exchanged glances, both understanding the weight of the situation.

Butler Peng stepped forward with a respectful bow. "Master, Young Master Shi Min," he addressed, his tone steady but grave. "This is Butler Oda—Grand Commander Otako's personal steward."

Butler Oda followed suit, bowing deeply. "Master Chu Yan, Young Master Shi Min, I bring urgent news. Madam Ling Li's current activity has already drawn the attention of several clans and an evil cultivator. They are restless, and some are already communicating to join forces in an attempt to attack. As a matter of fact, we encountered two lurking groups on the way here—eliminating them before they could act." He paused, letting the gravity of his words sink in before continuing, "Grand Commander Otako has sent his seven top-tier warriors to reinforce your defenses."

Shi Min felt his breath hitch. His gaze darted toward the seven masked men standing before him, their presence exuding an indescribable aura of power—silent, unwavering, absolute. But then, realization struck him.

'Immortals?' Shi Min's mind reeled at the notion, nearly causing his jaw to drop. How unfathomably strong was Otako to have immortals under his command?

Shi Min was truly stunned, staring for far too long in awe until the moment became painfully awkward. Clearing his throat, he quickly scratched his nose in an attempt to compose himself. "Ehem, please extend our deepest gratitude to Grand Commander Otako for his generosity," he said, stretching his hand toward Butler Oda.

Butler Oda inclined his head with quiet dignity. "Madam Ling Li is very important to my master. I shall leave them in your care." With a final respectful bow, he exited the courtyard alongside Butler Peng.

Shi Min turned his attention back to the samurai warriors, still trying to process their extraordinary presence. Feeling oddly unsure of how to address them properly, he hesitated before finally bowing. “Thank you for your hard work,” he said earnestly. “May I know if you need anything from us?”

The leader of the group remained utterly still before responding in a voice devoid of any unnecessary formality. “No need.” With a simple lift of his hand, his command was understood—six of the samurai disappeared in an instant as if they had been mere illusions fading into the night. Only one remained, moving silently to position himself in front of the Alchemy door. Four Eyes blinked. Then he blinked again. Several times, as if his mind refused to comprehend what he had just witnessed. His gaze darted frantically, searching for any sign of movement—anything to explain how six warriors had vanished right before his eyes. Shi Min, who was equally astonished, finally let out a chuckle.

“Paps,” he said with amusement, placing a hand on his stepfather’s shoulder, “with them around, we can finally get a good night’s sleep.”

Yet, Shi Min immediately noticed the hesitation in Four Eyes’ expression. The older man remained still, worry glimmering in his eyes. His concern for Ling Li was unshakable, his protective instincts refusing to let him relax.

Leaning in slightly, Shi Min whispered, “Paps, those seven samurai—they are all immortal.”

Four Eyes blinked once more—harder this time—struggling to process the weight of Shi Min’s words fully. His thoughts raced as he tried to rationalize their overwhelming power.

Then, as if sensing the scrutiny placed upon him, the remaining samurai standing beside Mushu subtly inclined his head in acknowledgment, his sharp gaze meeting Four Eyes’.

A silent confirmation.

This was no ordinary protection detail.

This was an iron fortress—and it had just been established at their doorstep.

"Pap's, let's go back," Shi Min said. Without further hesitation, Four Eyes nodded and followed Shi Min back into the main house. His footsteps were steady, though his mind remained alert. The presence of Otako's immortal warriors offered a sense of relief, yet deep within, a lingering concern for Ling Li kept his heart vigilant.

Chapter 184: NONE SHALL PASS

As they moved through the halls, the flickering lanterns cast long shadows against the walls, their soft glow illuminating the rich carvings embedded in the wooden panels. Outside, the night remained eerily silent—too silent. The air was thick with tension, almost as if the world itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to unfold.

Shi Min's pace was brisk but measured. "Paps, I know you're worried," he said quietly, sensing his stepfather's unease. "But trust me—those warriors are more than capable of handling any threat that approaches."

Four Eyes exhaled, glancing once more at the door leading to the alchemy chamber. He had never been one to rely on others easily, but the sheer power radiating from the samurai had left little room for doubt.

As they stepped deeper into the estate, Four Eyes finally found himself allowing a fraction of his tension to dissipate. At least for now, he could take solace in the fact that Ling Li was protected.

But still—something about the silent darkness outside gnawed at his instincts.

And instincts were rarely wrong.

As the six samurai vanished into the night, Mushu and Pharsa instinctively stepped aside, making room for the remaining warrior. His presence was imposing yet effortlessly fluid as if he existed beyond the constraints of normal movement. Standing now as an unwavering guardian at the entrance of the alchemy chamber, his mere existence exuded a silent warning—none shall pass.

Mushu felt a surge of excitement course through his veins, his heartbeat quickening at the realization of such overwhelming strength. He had seen countless cultivators rise and fall, but this—this was a different kind of power, one that transcended the limits he had come to understand. His fingers twitched slightly, a habit he'd developed when battling frustration over his own cultivation stagnation.

Pharsa wasn't faring much better. She had always prided herself on her sharp instincts and control over the battlefield. However, standing before this immortal warrior, a bitter pang settled in her chest. How long had they been trapped at their bottleneck? Years of relentless effort, pushing themselves to the brink—only to find their progress locked behind an invisible barrier. Meanwhile, Otako's subordinates stood before them, unshakable, indestructible, existing at heights they had yet to reach.

A fleeting moment of jealousy crossed Pharsa's mind before she shoved it aside. Now was not the time for personal grievances.

Glancing sideways at Mushu, Pharsa noted his stiff posture. "Don't think too much about it," she murmured, her voice low enough that only he could hear.

Mushu huffed quietly, crossing his arms. "Easier said than done," he muttered back. His gaze flickered toward the warrior beside them, and despite his quiet bitterness, a deep respect bloomed in his chest. "Still... I suppose it's reassuring that they're on our side."

Pharsa smirked. "That's one way to look at it."

With a final glance at the alchemy room, both Mushu and Pharsa steadied themselves, discarding their personal frustrations in favor of the mission at hand.

Whatever lay beyond this night, they would face it—together.

Somewhere not far away, the tension in the lavishly adorned chamber was suffocating, thick with frustration and barely restrained fury.

"What do you mean you were ambushed before you could even discover where and who this powerful person is?! And you lost half of your group?!" The Young Master's voice erupted like a storm, his fury palpable as his sharp gaze bore into the bloodied figure kneeling before him.

The wounded man, his head bowed low in submission, trembled as blood continued to ooze from the deep gashes across his shoulder and back. His torn robes, now drenched in red, were a stark contrast to the pristine carpets beneath him. He swallowed hard, gathering the strength to speak despite the overwhelming pressure weighing him down.

"Master, I led a hundred men as per your order, but we never imagined seven samurai men would attack us." His voice was strained, laden with the shame of failure. "They were too powerful! Despite our numbers, we were instantly incapacitated and forced to retreat. Nearly half of our men perished before we could escape."

A chilling silence followed his words.

Then—

"Trash! Trash! You're all TRASH!!!" The Young Master bellowed, his rage uncontained. His hands gripped whatever item was within reach—a porcelain vase, a heavy inkstone, even documents—and hurled them at the kneeling man with relentless aggression. Each impact sent shards scattering, yet the injured subordinate did not flinch, unwilling to show further weakness.

"I don't care what methods you use, but I want that powerful elixir in my hands!" The Young Master's voice dripped with venom. "If you fail again, I'll personally bury your entire family alongside you!"

The bloodied man shivered. He wasn't afraid of death. No warrior of his rank feared such an inevitability. But his family—his parents, his siblings—he had fought all his life to keep them safe. Yet now, the cruel reality dawned upon him: hiding them wouldn't matter. His Master had already captured them, securing his control like an iron fist clenched around his very existence.

There was no way out.

Biting back the despair threatening to consume him, he forced himself to respond with unwavering submission. "Yes, Master." He cupped his hands together, pressing his forehead to the floor in a deep bow before rising, his steps slow and steady despite the sharp pain lacing his every movement.

The Young Master barely spared him another glance before turning away, pacing the length of his lavish living quarters, the silken rugs absorbing the restless sound of his footsteps. His expression remained cold, his brows furrowed as his mind raced.

'Samurai men?' The Young Master mused internally, the pieces of the puzzle still unclear. 'Only Otako and his subordinates are known to wear samurai garb. Could it be that Otako himself is handling the alchemy?'

His heart skipped a beat at the mere possibility, uncertainty coiling in the pit of his stomach. If Otako had truly entered the picture, then things had just become infinitely more complicated.

But then, reason fought against impulse.

'However, how could Otako be in Russia?' The Young Master's lips pressed into a thin line. 'Otako has no business here. It couldn't be Otako.'

Chapter 185: RAINING MEN

The thought reassured the Young Master—for now. His rigid posture loosened ever so slightly as he allowed himself a fleeting moment of relief, yet deep within the cavernous recesses of his mind, doubt festered like a slow poison.

'If not Otako—then who?'

And more importantly—'how powerful was this unknown force to warrant the intervention of his strong warriors?'

His fingers instinctively curled into a vice-like grip around the silk sash at his waist. The fine material crumpled under the force of his grasp, mirroring the storm brewing within him. His breath steadied, but his heartbeat remained erratic. Regardless of the answers, one thing remained immutable: he would obtain the elixir—no matter the cost.

Meanwhile, beneath the ruined temple deep within the forest, an older man sat in the shadows, his voice an eerie hum as he chanted in slow, deliberate cadence. His sunken eyes remained shut, his gaunt face illuminated only by the dim glow of the formation circling the unconscious woman lying before him. Dark tendrils of spiritual energy slithered through the cracks of the stone floor, snaking toward his fingertips.

Then—his eyelids snapped open.

A manic glint flashed across his pupils as he sucked in a sharp breath. The very air quivered under the force of the energy surging from afar.

'This energy... is overwhelmingly strong.' His lips curled into a twisted grin. 'And I feel it, even from the depths of this forsaken place.'

His skeletal fingers twitched, impatience seizing him. His mind raced—this was it. This was the breakthrough he had been clawing for, the key to surpassing his limits. He wouldn't have to rely on the inefficient sacrifices of young bitches anymore. The elixir would be his.

Without hesitation, his figure blurred and vanished like mist in the cold night air, shooting toward the source of the pulsating power.

At the same time, in the heart of a grand but dimly lit chamber, the three heads of martial arts factions sat stiffly around a circular table. Tension crackled like a taut wire between them, their eyes brimming with calculation and barely restrained greed.

The whispers of the Young Master's defeat had reached their ears, the news carried by spies and trembling subordinates. Half of his forces—gone. A crack in his armor, an opportunity they could not afford to waste. Yet, despite the unity in their ambition, discord brewed beneath their negotiations.

They were already arguing over the spoils—before the first strike was even made.

'Counting eggs without chickens, aren't we?' The youngest scoffed under his breath. His arms remained crossed, his expression unreadable, but his thoughts whirled like a storm. He knew the cunning depths of the two masters sitting before him. If not for his grandfather's insistence, he would never have agreed to this collaboration.

"Why don't we attack first and see what we can seize?" The oldest master leaned forward, his fingers tapping rhythmically against the aged wooden table. His voice was measured, but the hunger in his gaze was unmistakable. "Then, we divide accordingly."

The man with silver hair nodded without hesitation. "That will do. I'll send five hundred men."

The oldest master smirked, eyes gleaming with anticipation. "Likewise."

The youngest master hesitated—but only for a breath. His grandfather had made his stance clear, and hesitation in the face of these two wolves would only give them room to pounce. "Fine. I will send the same number," he relented, though his voice lacked conviction.

The decision was made.

"Alright, let's disperse and reassemble in an hour," the oldest master instructed, his tone sharp. They each rose, their figures disappearing into the shadows.

Just before dawn, the quiet hum of the night was shattered.

The Samurai man guarding the entrance to the alchemy chamber beside Pharsa and Mushu stiffened. His ears caught the distant sound of clashing steel, of hurried footsteps crashing through the underbrush. He unsheathed his blade in one fluid motion, the steel glinting under the cold light of the moon.

Then—bodies dropped.

One after another, lifeless forms tumbled before them, their blood painting the ground like a macabre warning.

Pharsa's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before amusement flickered across her sharp features. Is this what they meant by 'raining men'? She mused internally, the irony dark yet strangely fitting.

Mushu wasted no time. His voice rang with authority as he ordered his team, "Gather the bodies! Send them to Camp Blaze for identification and disposal." His men scrambled into motion, their expressions grim yet focused.

The Samurai beside Mushu stiffened. His sharp intuition prickled with unease—a lurking presence, unseen but tangible, exuded an ominous darkness. His grip on the hilt of his sword tightened.

“Guard the door,” he ordered, voice low and urgent. “Be on your guard.”

Without another word, he vanished into the night, a streak of silver amidst the shadows.

Mushu and Pharsa exchanged glances before simultaneously unsheathing their weapons, their stances mirroring one another—alert, ready.

The corpses continued to rain.

Shi Min stood near the window of his bedroom, his eyes locked on the battlefield below. He could feel it—a shift in the air, an unnatural tension crawling beneath his skin. His impulse urged him to chase the shadowed presence, yet as he saw the Samurai dart into the darkness, he steadied himself.

He would not act recklessly.

Four Eyes had remained in the twins’ nursery, his instincts a silent force that commanded him to stay. He sat unmoving in the rocking chair, his eyes closed, his breaths measured—but his senses sharpened. He felt it, too. The foreign presence. The disturbance in the air.

Worry gnawed at him.

Then, the thought of his parents tightened his chest.

Without a word, he moved.

In the living room, Butler Peng and several of Mushu’s top subordinates straightened as Four Eyes descended the staircase.

“Master, is there anything you need?” Butler Peng’s voice was polite but firm.

“I want to check on my parents,” Four Eyes answered, his gaze unwavering.

“Young Master Shi Min has already made arrangements. Pharsa’s team is guarding their courtyard, ensuring no disturbance. She performed acupuncture last night to keep them sleeping peacefully.”

Four Eyes remained still for a moment. Then, an exhale—one laced with gratitude.

Shi Min had thought ahead—far ahead.

Four Eyes nodded. “Thank you.”

With that, he turned, retreating to his silent vigil over his two princesses.