

PROTEGE 206

Chapter 206: DIVINE PUNISHMENT

The storm had passed, leaving the night eerily quiet. The air still crackled with lingering energy, the scent of burnt wood and scorched earth heavy beneath the calming breeze.

Ling Li cradled Chu Yan in her arms, his body limp, barely clinging to consciousness. His skin was pale, marred by fresh wounds, but his breathing, though shallow, was steady. Without hesitation, she lifted him, her movements fluid and effortless, and carried him back to their room. The tribulation had exhausted him, drained him of every ounce of strength, and now, he lay at the mercy of his own recovery.

At the same time, Shi Min, ever responsible as he is, stepped out of his quarters, his sharp gaze sweeping across the household. He had heard heaven's rage, had felt the oppressive force of the tribulation, and he knew that such a spectacle could not have passed without consequence. He moved swiftly, checking on everyone, ensuring that no harm had befallen their people.

When Shi Min finally made his way to his parent's room, he hesitated for only a moment before stepping inside.

His brows furrowed at the sight before him.

Ling Li was kneeling beside his stepfather, carefully stripping away the remnants of burned, tattered clothing. Her expression was unreadable, her hands precise, methodical. Though her movements were gentle, there was urgency in the way she worked, an unspoken worry clinging to the air around her.

Shi Min's voice was calm, but his concern was evident. "Is Pap's alright? The tribulation for the fifth level isn't usually that harsh. Why was it stronger tonight?"

Ling Li did not stop her work as she replied, her tone steady but laced with quiet frustration. "Because of your Pap's black magic."

Shi Min stiffened.

Of course. It made perfect sense. The heavens abhorred black magic and viewed it as an aberration, an unforgivable defiance against their sacred order. His stepfather had not merely faced a tribulation — he had faced ‘divine punishment.’

Shi Min exhaled slowly, watching as Ling Li retrieved a small vial from her space ring. A single pill tumbled into her palm, its surface glistening under the soft glow of the lanterns. She parted Chu Yan’s lips and placed the pill into his mouth, knowing that it would melt on contact, spreading its restorative properties throughout his body.

Ling Li sat back slightly, watching Four Eyes, waiting.

Shi Min crossed his arms. “Will he recover quickly?”

Ling Li sighed, brushing strands of damp hair from Chu Yan’s forehead. “He’ll live.” Her voice softened, but there was still an edge to it. “But the heavens were harsher tonight than I expected. He won’t wake soon.”

Shi Min nodded, exhaling deeply. “Then I’ll keep watch with you.”

Ling Li didn’t respond, but the quiet gratitude in her gaze was enough.

Ling Li’s gaze softened as she looked at Shi Min, the warmth in her expression unmistakable. He had always carried himself with a quiet strength, a reliability that had only grown with time. His words — words of gratitude rather than burden — tugged at something deep within her.

Ling Li let out a quiet sigh, a smile playing on her lips. “Shi Min, you truly have grown into a fine man,” she murmured, her voice laced with pride. “Your siblings are lucky to have you.”

Shi Min shrugged, a playful glint in his eyes. “Of course. If I weren’t here, who else would keep my four sisters in check?”

Ling Li chuckled, shaking her head. “I suppose that’s true.”

Ling Li's gaze lingered on Shi Min, her heart swelling with a mixture of pride and quiet guilt. Her son, her steadfast, responsible, ever-reliable despite being a middle child — had carried more weight than most children ever should. Ling Li knew that. She had seen it in the way he always stepped up and always looked after his siblings without question.

Ling Li let out a quiet sigh, her voice soft but laden with emotion. "Shi Min, thank you. You've always been responsible since you were young. I just hope you don't feel like I've thrown too much onto your shoulders." She hesitated before adding, "I never wanted you to bear more than you had to."

Shi Min blinked, then dramatically clutched his chest. "Oh, Mom, come on. What's with the drama? You're making me cry here," he teased, forcing his voice to tremble for effect.

Ling Li couldn't help but chuckle, shaking her head. Typical Shi Min, always lighthearted, always quick to ease the mood. But beneath his playful demeanor, she knew he understood her concerns.

Then, Shi Min's expression softened. His teasing nature faded just enough to reveal something sincere beneath it. "Mom, on the contrary, we should be thanking you," he said firmly. "You single-handedly raised us while carrying the responsibilities of the entire Li family as the family head. We all saw it. We all knew how hard you worked for us."

Ling Li felt her throat tighten, a warmth settling in her chest.

Shi Min continued, his voice steady, unwavering. "Now that we're adults, we have to share in the burdens too. You don't have to carry everything alone anymore. And besides..." He glanced toward Chu Yan, who lay unconscious but alive, his breathing finally even. "We're happy that you have Pap's now by your side."

Ling Li inhaled sharply, willing away the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. She had faced storms, fought battles, and endured tribulations, yet this moment, this simple acknowledgment, was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Instead of speaking, she reached out and placed a firm hand on Shi Min's shoulder, squeezing it gently.

Shi Min grinned, sensing her unspoken gratitude. “That’s right, Mom. No need to get all sentimental now.”

Ling Li chuckled, shaking her head. “You really are impossible.”

But her heart, for the first time in a long time, felt a little lighter.

Nevertheless, the weight of the evening lingered in her chest. Her gaze drifted toward Chu Yan, whose face remained eerily still in his unconscious state. Though the restoration pill would work its magic, it couldn’t banish the unease in her heart. The heavens had been merciless tonight. She knew he was strong, but even strength had its limits.

Chapter 207: I’M NOT SCARED OF ANYTHING

“I’ll check on the twins anyway,” she said, rising to her feet. “It’ll put my mind at ease.”

Shi Min nodded, his eyes reflecting understanding. “Go ahead, Mom. I’ve got things covered here.

Ling Li moved swiftly, her steps silent against the floor as she made her way down the dimly lit hallway. The echoes of the heavenly tribulation still seemed to hum in the air, whispering through the house like fading remnants of fury. When she reached the twins’ nursery, she gently pushed the door open.

The soft glow of a lantern illuminated the small chamber.

Inside, Kim Kim sat cross-legged on the bed, her delicate arms wrapped around Chin Chin, rocking her slightly. The younger twin’s breathing was soft and even, but dried tear tracks stained her cheeks, a lingering testament to the terror that had gripped her earlier.

Ling Li’s heart clenched.

Kim Kim was only a year old, yet she carried herself with the wisdom and composure of someone far beyond her age. This was no ordinary child—she was sharper, more aware, more attuned to the world than any toddler should be.

Kim Kim looked up as Ling Li entered, her small face lighting up in relief. “Mom,” she whispered.

Ling Li knelt beside them, reaching out to brush a gentle hand against Chin Chin’s forehead, her touch lingering for reassurance. The warmth of her fingertips soothed the child, but Chin Chin remained nestled against her sister, her tiny fingers clutching the fabric of Kim Kim’s nightgown as though afraid to let go.

Ling Li turned to Kim Kim, her voice filled with quiet appreciation. “You took care of your sister well,” she said, stroking her daughter’s hair. “Thank you.”

Kim Kim offered a small, proud smile, though the flicker of worry remained in her eyes. “She was scared, but I told her that the heavens were just being noisy,” she said in her small, childish voice, carefully pronouncing each word as if trying to make sure she got them right.

Ling Li let out a soft chuckle, tucking a loose strand of hair behind Kim Kim’s ear. “That was very wise of you.”

Kim Kim puffed out her chest proudly. “Of course! I’m not scared of anything.”

But Ling Li could see the exhaustion settling into her Kim Kim’s small frame. The way her shoulders drooped ever so slightly, the way her little fingers curled and uncurled unconsciously — she was drained, but she didn’t want to admit it.

Ling Li reached out, pulling both twins into her embrace and holding them close. She could feel their warmth, the steady beat of their tiny hearts against her own.

Ling Li sat at the edge of the bed, cradling the twins in her arms. Their warmth seeped into her, their fragile bodies pressed against her chest, their rhythmic breaths steadying her own. She held them tighter as if anchoring herself to the moment — to them. Though the storm outside had calmed, inside her, a different tempest raged.

The first golden streaks of morning filtered through the curtains, illuminating the quiet room in a soft glow. The scent of rain still clung to the air, a lingering reminder of the storm that had torn through the night, leaving nothing but hushed whispers of its passing.

Shi Min and Mushu had already departed, their duty calling them to confront Solaris. The urgency of their mission left no room for delay and hesitation.

Yet Ling Li hadn't slept. She returned from the twin's nursery and had refused to leave Four Eyes' side, watching over him with unwavering vigilance. His breathing was steady now, the fever that had gripped him through the night beginning to loosen its hold. Still, the worry gnawed at her. She dipped a cloth into warm water, wrung it out, and traced it gently over his sweat-dampened skin, her touch both delicate and firm.

And then — he stirred.

Ling Li's heart leaped.

Four Eyes' lips barely moved, but the whisper came nonetheless, fragile and strained: "Water..."

Water..."

Ling Li didn't think twice. Instantly, she reached for the pitcher, pouring warm water into a cup before carefully sliding a hand beneath his neck, lifting him just enough so he could drink. The moment the rim touched his lips, he drank eagerly, gulping down the soothing liquid as if it were the first relief he had felt in ages.

Ling Li frowned. "Drink slowly. No one is going to snatch it from you."

Four Eyes paused momentarily, then looked at her with pleading eyes. "Can I have some more?"

She exhaled, shaking her head with a small, tired smile. "Yes, but drink slower," she murmured, bringing the cup to his lips again, watching him intently to ensure he didn't swallow too quickly.

Finally, Four Eyes eased back against the headboard, the tension in his body lessening by a leap.

Ling Li studied him, her sharp gaze scanning his face. The exhaustion was still visible in the pallor of his skin, but his eyes — those ever-watchful eyes — were clearer now, sharper.

Ling Li leaned in slightly, her voice gentle but firm. “How do you feel? Any pain?”

Four Eyes shook his head.

“Are you hungry?”

He nodded.

A mix of relief and exasperation flickered across her expression. ‘Is he back to being silent after leveling up to the fifth level?’ she mused, suppressing the urge to roll her eyes.

Calling Butler Peng, she instructed him to prepare light dishes for Four Eyes before turning back to Four Eyes.

Then, taking his hand in hers, Ling Li squeezed it gently. “Hon, if you feel any discomfort or pain, you have to tell me.” Her tone was affectionate but edged with frustration. ‘And I can’t stand you returning to silent mode.’

Four Eyes blink was sharp, startled - as though something had just clicked into place.

Wait.

‘Had I just heard her thoughts?’

His eyes locked onto her face, searching, questioning, dissecting every expression. Ling Li frowned.

“Is there something on my face? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Her mind raced, her thoughts tumbling wildly. ‘Why is he staring at me so silently? He can’t be thinking of making out at a time like this, right?!’

Four Eyes stilled.

His breath caught.

And suddenly — he laughed.

Chapter 208: SHIMIN’S YIN AND YANG EYES

Ling Li stiffened. ‘Why is he laughing?’

Before Ling Li could react, he moved — swiftly, effortlessly, and deliberately. One moment, she was upright, and the next, she was against his chest, her body molded to his warmth, caged in the strength of his arms.

She blinked once. Twice.

‘I was just thinking about it, and I ended up under him within seconds. Dang! Who asked me to have such a strong husband?!’

Heat spread up her neck as the realization settled in.

Four Eyes smirked. ‘I will tell you how much I love this new ability. Not for now.’

Ling Li narrowed her eyes.

This man was going to be trouble.

Before she could protest, Four Eyes rolled her effortlessly, pinning her beneath him. His gaze burned with something deeper, something more primal. A silent intensity settled over them, tangible in the space between breaths.

Ling Li felt her heart stammer.

Without a single word, Four Eyes dipped his head, capturing her lips with his own. Heat surged, an electric current pulsing between them.

And then—

The door creaked open.

Butler Peng froze mid-step.

“!!!!”

He stood there, utterly horrified.

‘Who asked me not to knock?!’

“....”

‘I guess I need to wait for another call before I come back,’ he thought with a flushed face, swiftly turning on his heel and making an exit that was perhaps faster than necessary.

Ling Li groaned, pressing a hand over her burning face.

Four Eyes merely chuckled, pulling her closer.

As the morning sun cast long shadows over the streets, Shi Min gathered his men. The air was thick with tension as Mushu arrived, flanked by his top subordinates. The moment El Padre and El Capitan learned of the situation, they wasted no time in joining the operation, bringing their expertise to the table.

The team moved swiftly, knowing that every second counted. El Padre and El Capitan positioned themselves precisely a kilometer away — a calculated distance that allowed them to remain unseen yet close enough to execute an ambush should the need arise. Their presence was a silent, looming threat, ready to strike the moment Solaris made a fatal misstep.

Meanwhile, Mushu's team had already encircled Solaris' house, their formation flawless, cutting off any possible escape routes. Each soldier was placed strategically, their senses sharpened, their weapons primed. They were not here for a simple confrontation — this was a carefully laid trap, one that allowed no room for error.

At the center of it all, Shi Min strode forward to meet Rockie and Goldie, the two standing rigid at their watch post. Their gazes flickered with restrained tension, their postures betraying the unease simmering beneath their composed exteriors.

Shi Min's voice was low but commanding. "What's the situation?"

Rockie and Goldie exchanged looks. Goldie swallowed hard before speaking.

"Young Master... today is too quiet. Unnaturally quiet." Goldie's voice carried the weight of his apprehension. "Around this time, one of the household servants should have already come out to clean the front yard." His brows furrowed deeply. "But nothing. Not a single movement."

Shi Min's expression darkened slightly.

Goldie wiped his palms against his pants. "I attempted to approach the house just to take a closer look." He hesitated. "But every time I got near, I felt something — an aura so suppressing, so unnatural, that it literally pushed me back." His words hung heavy in the air.

Rockie chimed in, nodding stiffly. “I felt it, too. It’s not just an ordinary barrier — it’s something stronger. Something... dangerous.”

Shi Min’s jaw tightened. That confirmed his suspicions.

Without another word, he exhaled deeply, closing his eyes.

When he opened them again — his pupils glowed a sharp, eerie white.

The yin and yang eyes bestowed upon him by Shen Sei awakened, illuminating unseen truths. Though Shi Min seldom used them, given his low level-two celestial strength, they remained a valuable asset in moments like this.

Rockie and Goldie froze, their eyes wide. This was the first time they had ever witnessed Shi Min activate his yin and yang eyes.

As the world shifted before him, Shi Min scanned the surroundings — his enhanced sight revealing what had been hidden.

What he saw made his breath hitch.

A restraining array wrapped the house like a suffocating veil.

Level eight array.

An unforgiving force designed to keep intruders — especially martial artists—away.

Shi Min felt his stomach twist. That level of mastery was beyond him.

Solaris was far stronger than he had anticipated.

Shi Min clenched his fist. His mind raced.

This was no ordinary fight.

They were up against something more formidable than they had prepared for.

With a deep inhale, Shi Min pulled out his phone. He hesitated only for a second — he didn't want to disturb his mother. He knew how deeply distressed she had been since last night. Instead, he dialed Butler Oda, Otako's Butler. His Mother told him he could always call Butler Oda when he needed Otako's assistance.

The call was answered almost immediately.

"Young Master Shi Min, how can I be of service?" Butler Oda's crisp voice came through.

Shi Min didn't waste time with pleasantries. He relayed the details of the situation efficiently.

"Understood," Butler Oda said without hesitation. "I will send two high-level celestial masters immediately. Expect them in ten minutes."

Goldie and Rockie exchanged looks, astonished. The weight of their leader's influence was undeniable.

Shi Min turned back to them. "Has anyone exited the house since morning?"

Goldie shook his head. "Not a soul. However, soon, the household driver and maid should be heading out for their daily market run. We noted this from the day we started to guard the house."

Shi Min narrowed his eyes in thought before lifting his phone again. "Mushu, prepare your men. A vehicle will be leaving soon — capture whoever is inside. Solaris could be using a disguise."

Mushu's reply came swiftly.

"Copy that."

Shi Min thus also informed both El Padre and El Capitan and echoed their acknowledgment.

The anticipation crackled in the air.

And then — it happened.

The gates opened, and a black vehicle rolled out from the driveway.

Shi Min, Goldie, and Rockie barely had time to react — the sudden surge of energy was overwhelming. Their bodies instinctively tensed, their breaths caught in their throats as the very air around them shifted, crackling with power.

Chapter 209: THE SEVEN SAMURAI OF OTAKO

Then — two figures materialized out of thin air.

The Celestial Masters had arrived.

"!!!!"

The sheer force of their arrival sent a tremor through the ground, and for a fleeting moment, Shi Min swore his heart stalled.

Teleportation talismans.

Their efficiency was beyond comprehension.

It wasn't just the ability to move across distances — it was the way they did it. Effortless. Silent. Precise.

Had any of them been weaker in spirit, their hearts might have given out from sheer shock.

“.....”

'Can they at least give them a heads up.' Both Goldie and Rockie aggrievedly thought as they held their chest, and their lost ego.

But Shi Min's gaze locked onto the two celestial masters with sharp precision. Despite their Samurai masks, despite the veiled mystery of their aura, he knew.

His blood ran cold.

One of them — the leader of the Seven Samurai.

Shi Min had seen him before. The warrior had stood by Ling Li's side, guarding her without faltering while she had been inside the alchemy.

The power radiating from his very being was undeniable.

This person was the First Shah.

The strongest of the Seven.

And now, he stood before them with the Second Shah.

A force unlike any other.

The Seven Samurai of Otako were more than mere warriors — they were legends. Known as the Seven Pillars, they stood as the unshakable foundation of Otako’s domain, each possessing strength and mastery beyond mortal comprehension.

Their ranks were defined by an unbreakable hierarchy, with the First Shah reigning as the strongest among them — a force so unmatched that even celestial beings regarded his presence with reverence. His power was absolute, his command unquestionable.

Descending in rank, the Second Shah through the Seventh Shah carried their own unique strengths, each wielding abilities that set them apart, yet collectively making them an unstoppable force. Their roles weren’t dictated by mere physical prowess alone. Each Samurai possessed talents honed through centuries of battle, disciplines that transcended time itself.

But what truly made them terrifying was not their skill alone—it was their immortality. Bound by fate, duty, and their sworn allegiance to Otako, these warriors had long forsaken the limitations of human existence. Their lifespans stretched into eternity, their spirits burned with undying resolve, and their knowledge of celestial and martial arts made them entities feared across realms.

To challenge the Seven Samurai of Otako was to stand against the very laws of existence.

Few dared.

Even fewer lived to tell the tale.

The two samurai warriors wasted no time, moving swiftly to dismantle the restraining array. One samurai examined the surroundings while the other swiftly began drawing intricate patterns into the air, his fingers leaving trails of glowing energy.

The air pulsed with sudden force.

Then — a deafening ‘CLAP’ sounded.

The shroud blanketing Solaris’ house shattered.

Shi Min took a sharp breath.

“I’m afraid everyone inside is dead. The death aura and the smell of blood are too strong. Let’s move in.” The First Shah’s words barely left his lips before everyone surged toward the house.

The moment they crossed the threshold, an unnatural chill clawed at their skin. The temperature had plummeted to the lowest degree, and their bodies instinctively stiffened.

The First Shah abruptly raised a hand. “Stop.”

Shi Min and his men halted in place.

“Solaris is gone. Everyone inside is dead. We cannot waste time. Second Shah,” the celestial master gestured toward his companion, “go with Shi Min and hunt him down. I will handle what remains here — the spirits are restless. They demand retribution.” He also wants to check the place to understand Solaris more. If he could find information the better.

Shi Min clenched his fists but nodded. “Understood.”

The Second Shah nodded in return before they propelled themselves forward, moving swiftly across the grounds.

When they regrouped with Mushu, El Padre, and El Capitan, the air was thick with tension — an unspoken weight pressing down on them like an unseen force. The moment Mushu set eyes on Shi Min, he didn’t hesitate.

He dropped to his knees. Hard.

The force of his descent was enough to send dust scattering around him, but Mushu didn’t care.

His breath was sharp and ragged — his normally unwavering composure shattered.

“Young Master, I failed to capture Solaris. I deserve punishment.”

His voice was not just remorseful... it was anguished.

Mushu, the man who stood closest to Ling Li, the one who never faltered, who never allowed mistakes — was now forced to confront his failure.

For him, perfection wasn't just a trait — it was an expectation.

Yet here he was. Defeated. Overcome.

And this loss, this single flaw in execution, was a devastating blow to the very identity he had built.

Mushu's fingers curled against the ground, digging into the earth as his jaw clenched. His breathing was sharp and controlled, but the tension in his shoulders betrayed just how deeply this failure tore at him.

El Padre and El Capitan stood nearby, silent witnesses to the unraveling of a warrior's pride.

Shi Min observed him carefully, his gaze unreadable.

But deep inside, he understood.

Mushu wasn't asking for forgiveness.

He was demanding atonement.

Shi Min's gaze flickered sharply, his expression unreadable as he looked down at Mushu. His mother's trusted right hand — a man who never faltered, who held precision as his creed — was kneeling and head bowed in quiet devastation.

“It’s not your fault. Get up.” His voice was calm, but there was an undeniable edge to it — a weight behind the words.

Mushu hesitated for only a fraction of a second before rising to his feet, but the tension in his body remained. The failure gnawed at him. It was not something he could simply dismiss.

Then, their attention shifted.

The truth lay before them.

The household driver and maid — were brutally slaughtered.

Their skulls were nothing but hollowed remains. Their stomachs had been turned inside out, ravaged by something far beyond human cruelty. Their hearts and brains — gone.

Shi Min felt his pulse hammer violently against his ribs.

This slaying wasn’t a simple murder.

It was consumption.

Solaris hadn’t just killed them — he had fed on them.

The realization settled like lead in his chest.

The Second Shah stepped forward, his gaze grave and piercing. His presence alone was enough to command silence.

Chapter 210: THAT’S HOW IT WORKS

A thunderous sneeze burst from her, shaking her entire frame

The force rocked through her body, snapping her forward as she groaned in frustration, rubbing her nose with slow, irritated strokes.

‘Alright, who’s trying to boss my cells around today?’ For that split second, she felt as though the ceiling above were a silent judge, waiting for a cosmic retort.

She narrowed her eyes at the ceiling, half-expecting the heavens to crack open with some divine response. Superstitions were just whispers of old beliefs, but still — her gut twisted with the certainty that somewhere, someone was talking about her. And not kindly.

Meanwhile, across the room, Four Eyes — still fastening the last button of his fresh shirt — paused mid-action. His gaze flickered toward Ling Li, initially out of habit, but then —

Something shifted.

Something strange.

Her sneezing thought. That spark of irritation. That flicker of superstition laced in her silent grumbling —

He heard it.

Or, more accurately, felt it.

A small frown tugged at his lips. He glanced down at his hands, flexing his fingers as if testing them, then let his eyes drift back to Ling Li.

Fate intervened when Ling Li stepped closer, her damp fingertips brushing against his arm as she reached for her hairbrush. In that fleeting touch, the vague hum of the moment sharpened into startling clarity: Her thoughts sharpened into clarity, no longer a vague murmur but a crystal-clear stream flowing into his mind.

That moment sealed his realization.

Four Eyes stilled, his mind racing.

'So that's how it works.'

Four Eyes mused silently, a wry smile tugging at his lips — a mixture of astonishment and humor as dry as it was unexpected. This secret ability, hidden beneath the ordinary guise of a morning routine, promised endless surprises. He could only hear Ling Li's mind when he touched her.

'Fascinating.'

Ling Li noticed the sudden shift in his expression — the way the corners of his mouth lifted just enough to be suspicious. Her brows furrowed, her grip tightening around the hairbrush.

"What are you smirking about?" she demanded, her tone laced with both amusement and mild reproach.

Four Eyes decided it was best to keep this newfound secret under wraps. Four Eyes only hummed, crossing his arms as he leaned against the wall, studying Ling Li's with dark amusement.

'No way in hell am I telling you just yet.' he thought, crossing his arms in a gesture that was part guarded coolness, part mischievous delight.

Ling Li blinked.

And that's when he realized it.

She had absolutely no idea.

Not a single clue that he could hear her every unspoken thought.

Suddenly, he moved — swift, deliberate.

He pulled her into his arms with a confidence that stole the breath from her lungs, his arms caging her, warmth radiating from his body like an unrelenting fire.

Ling Li's heart slammed against her ribs, her pulse stuttering wildly as she attempted to wriggle out of his embrace.

'What the hell! If I don't run now, I'll be eaten by this wolf again! Dang, how strong is he?! He should still be bedridden, and yet here he is, up and already swallowing me whole!'

Her indignation flared, a frustration so deep that she mentally kicked herself for losing sleep over worrying about him.

She scowled.

Then — snorting, cheeks burning — she twisted with rabbit-like desperation, slipping free from his grip in a flash, retreating like prey, narrowly escaping a predator's jaws.

Four Eyes let her go, but his amusement was palpable, thick enough to taste.

His smirk deepened.

Meanwhile, Ling Li remained blissfully unaware that her inner monologue had just been broadcast with every accidental touch — a twist of fate that turned an ordinary moment into one brimming with humor, intrigue, and a dash of intimacy.

'I wonder if it only works with her? I'll try it with someone else later to check.'

The scent of freshly cooked food wafted through the hall, mingling with the earthy sweat of warriors fresh from their training. Pharsa stood at the head of the group, her presence commanding yet calm, as her team gradually settled into their seats, still shaking off the remnants of exertion.

Then, footsteps echoed down the hall—steady, purposeful.

Four Eyes and Ling Li descended the staircase, their movements fluid yet unhurried. Four Eyes carried an undeniable air of quiet authority, his sharp gaze flickering over the gathering warriors as if assessing them instinctively. At the same time, Ling Li walked beside him, the subtle grace in her every step making her presence just as potent.

The moment they entered, the atmosphere shifted.

The warriors, still riding the adrenaline high from their morning training, turned their attention toward the couple. Some greeted them with respectful nods; others simply acknowledged their presence with faint smiles, their exhaustion evident yet their discipline unwavering.

Then came the sudden pattern of small, hurried footsteps.

“Papa... up!”

Kim Kim’s voice rang out, high and eager, slicing through the chatter as she sprinted toward Four Eyes, her small arms stretching toward him like a child reaching for the sky.

Four Eyes barely had time to react—his body moved instinctively. Without hesitation, he bent down and lifted his daughter into his arms, her warmth pressing against his chest, her soft weight settling comfortably as if it were the most natural thing in the world. A tender smile flickered across his lips.

Ling Li followed closely behind, her laughter soft yet knowing as she scooped Chin Chin into her embrace. The twins had been joining the morning training sessions, albeit not for combat. Ling Li had

allowed it, knowing their young minds were attuned to sensing the energy shifts, the invisible yet powerful presence of warriors honing their strength.

Even if their bodies were still small, their spirits were absorbing everything.

Kim Kim, nestled comfortably in her father's arms, peered curiously at the group, her bright eyes scanning each face. She shifted slightly, gripping the fabric of Four Eyes' shirt as her gaze locked onto Pharsa.

'These warriors are so strong... I wonder if Papa is stronger than all of them?'

Four Eyes had expected this thought and wasn't surprised in the slightest — he could hear her mind as if it were his own. Four Eyes smirked at the thought, though he said nothing, merely keeping his daughter in place as he approached the dining table.