

PROTEGE 211

Chapter 211: HARD TRAINING KEEPS US SHARP

Ling Li, still carrying Chin Chin, exhaled softly, adjusting her hold on the younger twin. “They look like they went through some serious drills this morning.”

Pharsa lifted an eyebrow, a glint of amusement surfacing. “Hard training keeps us sharp.”

‘I wonder if Papa fought before breakfast? Maybe that’s why he looks so strong.’ Four Eyes inwardly sighed, amused by Kim Kim’s never-ending fascination with strength.

Kim Kim nestled into her father’s hold, a proud glint flashing in her eyes.

‘I wish Papa saw me this morning. I performed really well.’

Her unwavering need for recognition amused Four, bringing a smirk to his lips.

Then, like a blade slicing through silk, a new thought flooded his mind.

And his expression darkened.

‘How did I end up having a stupid twin sister?!’ Kim Kim silently complained while looking at Chin Chin with disgust.

Four Eyes’ expression dropped instantly, his gaze hardening. He turned his head slightly, eyes narrowing at Kim Kim, his arms unconsciously tightening around her as his once-soft features hardened.

“You can’t call your sister stupid,” he murmured, his voice steady, quiet, but laced with authority.

Kim Kim froze.

Her wide eyes snapped up to meet his — shock flashing within them. No — not just shock. Fright.

‘How did I get caught?! Did I say it out loud? Or did Papa hear my thoughts?!’

Four Eyes held her gaze, watching the storm of realization flicker across her young face. He nodded, slow and deliberate.

Kim Kim’s breath hitched. Her tiny fingers curled into his shirt, her body stiffening like a rabbit caught in a predator’s gaze.

‘So... Papa heard my thoughts?’

Another nod.

Kim Kim’s lips parted in a silent gasp, her mind whirling at breakneck speed, scrambling for an explanation, an escape — anything.

“But it’s a secret,” Four Eyes whispered, his voice dipping low, conspiratorial.

Kim Kim immediately latched onto the intrigue.

‘Oh! What is a secret? Is it delicious?’

Four Eyes blinked.

“...”

A heavy sigh left his lips. His daughter’s intelligence far exceeded her years — but sometimes, just sometimes, her logic left him utterly speechless.

“A secret means you cannot tell anyone else,” he explained, adjusting his hold on her. “It’s something only you and I should know — no one else.”

Kim Kim frowned deeply, absorbing his words. He could already sense the gears shifting in her mind, the early sparks of scheming.

‘Papa, does it mean only Kim Kim knows you can read my thoughts?’ she tested, sending the words directly into his mind.

Four Eyes smirked and nodded.

Instantly, Kim Kim’s eyes sparkled with victory. A joyous, triumphant look spread across her face, her small chest puffing out like a tiny emperor reveling in her newfound power.

‘I knew it! Papa loves me the most!’

Four Eyes lifted a brow at her, tapping her nose lightly in a silent reprimand. “But remember — you cannot call your little sister stupid.”

Kim Kim huffed, her pout deepening, stubbornness settling into her expression. ‘But she is truly stupid,’ she thought with another frustrated snort.

Then — realization struck.

Her father had heard everything. Again.

Everything.

Kim Kim’s eyes widened, horror flooding her tiny frame.

“Mama! Mama! Carry Kim Kim!” she suddenly screeched, launching herself toward Ling Li in desperate retreat. She practically flung her arms in her mother’s direction, a frantic attempt to escape like she was the only lifeline left in a hopeless battle at whatever fate her father had planned.

“....”

Four Eyes exhaled through his nose, unimpressed. He silently snorted.

Ling Li, barely containing her laughter, tightened her grip on Chin Chin as she watched Kim Kim scramble for sanctuary. She narrowed her eyes slightly, curiosity sparking.

‘What exactly has Kim Kim done this time?’

“What happened?” Ling Li asked as she shifted her hold on the twins.

“She called her twin sister stupid,” Four Eyes replied before calmly reaching out to scoop some food for Ling Li, now holding both girls.

Chin Chin, hearing the exchange, perked up with innocent enthusiasm.

“Stupid! Stupid!” She blurted out loudly, her small voice cutting through the room without hesitation.

Kim Kim turned her head sharply toward her father, a victorious gleam flashing in her eyes.

‘I told you.’

Four Eyes’ eyes visibly darkened, his expression plummeting into something indescribably exasperated.

He sighed.

'Better leave this matter to his wife.'

And indeed — Ling Li had already taken full control.

Four Eyes wisely remained silent, continuing to eat as if the conflict brewing between the twins was none of his concern. Instead, he focused on feeding both his wife and daughters in between his own bites, a practiced rhythm of care and control.

But Ling Li was already handling the situation, her tone both sharp and patient — the unmistakable voice of a mother fully prepared to manage the storm of mischief.

She turned her gaze toward Kim Kim, her expression unreadable at first, then softened with just a hint of authority.

"Kim Kim," she began, with both twins sitting on her lap. "I want you to understand something very important. Both you and your sister are only one year old. Unlike Chin Chin, who is acting exactly as she should for her age, you are gifted. You have a higher IQ than most children, and that sets you apart."

Kim Kim listened, her small hands gripping the edge of the table, her brows furrowed, but she felt where this was going.

Ling Li's voice remained steady, unwavering. "But intelligence does not give you the right to bully or insult others — especially your sister."

A flicker of defensiveness sparked in Kim Kim's eyes, but she didn't speak.

Ling Li, ever perceptive, leaned in slightly. "Now, tell me, what if things were the other way around?" She paused, letting the weight of her words settle. "What if Chin Chin were more talented than you?"

What if she called you stupid just because you were acting according to your age? How would you feel?"

Kim Kim stiffened.

A strange discomfort crawled up her spine. She pursed her lips into a thin line, brows knitting deeper together.

"This," Ling Li continued, "is called empathy. It means putting yourself in someone else's shoes. Do you understand?"

Before Kim Kim could respond, Chin Chin — blissfully unaware of the heavy moment — perked up, happily munching on her food given by her father.

"Understand! Understand!" she chirped, her voice muffled by the meal in her mouth.

Chapter 212: SOLARIS ESCAPED

Four Eyes subtly sighed, shaking his head at his younger twin's lack of awareness.

Ling Li barely suppressed a smile before turning back to Kim Kim, waiting.

Kim Kim's lips twitched. She knew what her mother was saying was correct — but that didn't mean she liked it.

"And you, Chin Chin," Ling Li said, her voice carrying finality, "you need to behave well."

The younger twin, still chewing, bobbed her head enthusiastically.

"Chin Chin, behave! Chin Chin, behave!"

Kim Kim's expression darkened even further.

She shot a glare at her sister, her irritation practically tangible, while Chin Chin, oblivious to Kim Kim's frustration, continued eating without a care in the world.

Four Eyes glanced at his eldest daughter, observing the storm brewing within her tiny frame. He exhaled lightly, already accepting defeat.

Not long after, Shi Min and the rest returned.

The dining hall, previously filled with the warmth of conversation and routine, seemed to shift the moment the group walked in. There was an undeniable weight to their presence—an energy thick with frustration, tension, and lingering traces of failure.

Kim Kim exhaled quietly, her relief palpable the second her older brother stepped into view. She felt safer when he was around, like a shield against whatever had just transpired just now.

Naturally, Shi Min, as keen-eyed as ever — picked up on the unease almost instantly. His sharp gaze flickered toward his younger sister, taking in the way she sat stiffly, her small fingers curled against the edge of the table. Something was off.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, voice steady but probing. His eyes narrowed slightly. “What happened to Kim Kim?”

Ling Li, ever perceptive, intercepted before the conversation spiraled into unnecessary concern.

“Don’t worry about her,” she said smoothly, gesturing toward the table. “Have a seat—all of you. Eat first.”

Shi Min hesitated for only a fraction of a second before obeying, lowering himself into a chair beside Kim Kim before scooping her into his lap.

Ling Li studied the group closely — Mushu’s storm-dark expression, Shi Min’s tightened jaw, El Padre, and El Capitan’s uncharacteristic silence. It didn’t take much to realize that whatever their task had been, it hadn’t gone as planned.

Still, she asked, if only to confirm what she already suspected.

“How was your task?”

Shi Min, ever direct, did not sugarcoat.

“Solaris escaped.”

The words were sharp. Cutting.

His brows crunched together, his displeasure etched deeply into every angle of his face.

Silence weighed down the table for a moment, the impact settling into everyone’s bones.

Ling Li took a slow breath, calmly assessing. She could tell that the failure still hung in the air around them, curling into their thoughts like an unwelcome shadow. The disappointment was thick — but frustration? That was even thicker.

She knew better than to push the conversation now.

“Alright,” she finally said, voice cool, measured. “Eat first. Let’s talk about it later.”

She didn’t have to say it twice.

Everyone began their meal, though the tension remained — unspoken, heavy, lingering.

Solaris had escaped.

And no one was happy about it. Most especially Lily.

The lingering warmth of their meal had barely settled when Ling Li straightened, her expression shifting into quiet seriousness.

“Shi Min, everyone who was with you — come to the living room. We need to discuss Solaris.”

Her tone was firm, carrying the weight of authority that left no room for hesitation.

Around the room, movements followed swiftly.

Those who had gone out with Shi Min exchanged glances before rising to their feet, instinctively falling into step behind their young master. Meanwhile, the others — those who had spent their time training — headed toward their respective rooms to freshen up, their minds focused elsewhere.

As they walked into the living room, the air seemed to thicken.

Solaris.

The name alone was enough to cast a shadow over the space.

Ling Li settled into her seat beside Four Eyes, her fingers lightly tapping against the armrest as she waited for everyone to gather. Her sharp eyes flicked toward Shi Min, expectant — ready to hear everything.

Shi Min inhaled deeply as he took his place, his gaze steady, his mind recalling every chilling detail.

The conversation was about to begin.

And the fate of Solaris hung in the balance.

The atmosphere was heavy with anticipation as the group prepared to delve into their discussion — when suddenly, a booming voice shattered the moment.

“Hello, everyone! Long time no see!”

The entrance doors flung open as the Russian President strode in, his energy as unrestrained as ever. Behind him, Butler Peng followed with quiet discipline, and trailing in their wake were six aides, each burdened with lavish gifts stacked in their arms.

El Padre wasted no time, his voice dry with a reprimand. “We just saw each other two days ago. How long was it for you to make this havoc?!”

The Russian President snorted loudly, planting his feet firmly as he threw his arms up with exaggerated indignation. “Hey, Brother! Two days is still two days! Can you not be pricking at me all the time? You’re such a party pooper — hmph!”

A barely concealed smirk curled on Ling Li’s lips as she observed the exchange from her seat beside Four Eyes, who merely flicked his gaze toward the spectacle, mildly amused.

El Padre leaned back, arms crossed, eyes sharp with knowing amusement. His voice carried that distinct edge of directness, cutting through any pretense.

“Heh, Old Man, don’t think I don’t know why you’re here.” His smirk was almost taunting, though his tone remained measured. “You need Madam’s help to deal with Solaris.”

The Russian President visibly bristled, letting out a deep huff before attempting to compose himself.

El Padre was merciless. No hesitation. No sugarcoating.

“Have you cleaned up the area?” The question was almost rhetorical — El Padre already knew the answer.

The Russian President clicked his tongue, throwing him a glare.

“You! No one will say you’re mute if you don’t talk!” He huffed again before sighing, arms thrown up in surrender. “And yes, I sent my special forces to handle the corpse — to keep everything under wraps.”

Chapter 213: THE HIDDEN VALLEY

Despite the Russian President’s words, there was an underlying tension in his voice, a quiet acknowledgment of just how dire the situation had become.

This wasn’t just politics anymore.

This was survival.

His expression quickly shifted, a deeply aggrieved look overtaking his features as he turned toward Ling Li, lowering his tone dramatically. “Madam, please enlighten me about this. I am truly helpless.”

Ling Li, watching the exaggerated display, exhaled lightly, amusement flickering in her eyes. “Sit down and join us. We were just about to discuss this matter.”

At her invitation, the Russian President brightened instantly, his dramatic grievance vanishing as quickly as it had come.

“Ah, thank goodness! Madam, I saw the picture of the corpses, and —” he visibly shuddered as if recalling some deep horror, “they were gruesomely killed, and I think I won’t be able to sleep for years!” His words were thick with exaggeration, but beneath the performance, a trace of unease lingered.

Ling Li, still unaware of the full details of Solaris’ carnage, stiffened slightly. Her amusement melted into unreadable stillness as her gaze flicked toward Shi Min.

Shi Min, who had been quietly observing the exchange, felt his mother’s stare settle on him — expectant, questioning.

She knew.

She could see it in his expression.

Something had gone terribly wrong.

Without hesitation, Shi Min straightened, exhaling as he prepared to recount everything — every gruesome detail, every terrible discovery, every horrifying reality of their pursuit against Solaris.

Shi Min exhaled deeply, the weight of the morning's events pressing heavily on his shoulders. The room remained eerily silent, the gravity of his words settling into the very bones of those present.

His fingers reached up to rub the space between his brows, an attempt to steady himself as he gathered his thoughts.

Every gaze in the room was fixed on him, expectant, wary. They knew — whatever he was about to say carried grave importance.

Shi Min's voice, though controlled, was edged with a frustration that belied his calm exterior. "This morning, Solaris' house was protected by a level-eight restraining array. Strong — too strong for any of us to break through."

A tense murmur rippled through the gathering. The implications were immediately undeniable — a level-eight array wasn't simply a precaution. It was a fortress, a calculated defense. Solaris had anticipated intrusions. He had expected them.

Shi Min's jaw tightened as he pressed on. "I had to call Butler Oda for assistance from Otako. Two celestial masters were sent to help us dismantle the array."

The silence grew heavier as his words hung in the air, pregnant with unspoken dread.

"We managed to break through the barrier," he continued, each syllable carefully measured. "And we entered the house."

A sharp pause — Shi Min's throat bobbed as he swallowed, his grip tightening around the edge of the table. The memory clawed at his mind.

“But it was too late.”

A cold wave washed over the room.

Ling Li’s expression shifted — the sharp flicker in her eyes betrayed her internal realization. Not just concern — something deeper. Something keener.

‘I underestimated Solaris,’ she thought. ‘He is not simply a dark art practitioner but also a celestial master.’

Four Eyes, standing beside her, didn’t miss her momentary change. He caught the tension in her fingers, the way her shoulders squared ever so slightly. And he heard the thought she hadn’t voiced aloud.

Shi Min inhaled sharply, his composure carefully held in place. “Solaris used an invisibility talisman to escape.” The words were clipped, filled with something darker. His eyes hardened. “He killed his own driver and maid in the process.”

The air grew suffocatingly still.

He took a slow breath, then his voice dropped, laced with restrained disgust.

“...by eating their brains and hearts.”

A collective chill slithered through the room.

Ling Li stiffened, her fingers pressing lightly against the armrest of her chair. She hadn’t anticipated that. This was beyond brutality. It was desperation.

‘However... it makes sense,’ she realized grimly. ‘Solaris is badly injured. He had no choice but to maintain his youth. Without the opportunity for a proper ritual, he resorted to consuming his servant’s hearts and brains.’

Four Eyes shuddered involuntarily at the thought. But then, something else flitted across his mind — a memory of his own savage survival. The way he had consumed the internal organs of the mystical beast to strengthen his cultivation.

‘Then... I suppose it’s expected for Solaris to do what he actually did.’

“...”

‘Four Eyes, can you differentiate eating a beast from a human? It’s cannibalism!’

Shi Min didn’t falter. “Solaris is now disguised as a young woman, but we have no clear idea of his current appearance. The Second Shah said that, with his injuries, he won’t be able to change disguises for the time being.”

He finally leaned back, exhaling slowly, closing his eyes for a brief moment before delivering the final warning.

“So, Lily must remain guarded. Solaris won’t give up so easily.”

A silent understanding settled over the room.

This wasn’t over.

“You’re right.” Ling Li spoke, her voice steady yet weighted. “Evil practitioners have obsessive tendencies. They don’t simply let go of what they’ve set their sights on. Solaris has spent years meticulously laying the foundation for this attack. He will target Lily again.”

The Russian President, unable to suppress his unease, leaned forward. “Madam Ling Li, how do we find Solaris?” His voice carried urgency. This wasn’t just a problem to ignore — this was a threat, an immediate danger.

Ling Li took a measured breath, calculating. “Right now, since Solaris knows he’s being pursued, there’s only one place he can hide.”

Everyone instinctively leaned in.

“The Hidden Valley,” she revealed.

A silence heavier than before dropped over the gathering.

The Hidden Valley.

The Russian President straightened in his seat, his eyes narrowing. The mere mention of it sent a ripple of unease through him. That place carried weight — a refuge wrapped in secrecy, spoken of only in hushed tones.

Mushu’s fingers tightened slightly. His chest rose and fell with measured breaths. “The Hidden Valley... I had suspected it, but to hear it confirmed...” His voice trailed into tense contemplation.

El Padre exhaled sharply, a smirk creeping onto his lips — not of amusement but of bitter understanding. “Of course, Solaris would run there.”

Chapter 214: THIS IS A HUNT

El Capitan, standing beside El Padre, crossed his arms. “That place is dangerous for outsiders. All martial arts practitioners, even those of the dark arts, have long used it as a sanctuary — to recover, hide, and strengthen themselves. If Solaris is wounded, he’ll certainly seek out rituals to accelerate his recovery.”

Ling Li’s gaze remained firm. “That’s why we need to act fast. If he regains his strength, he’ll become even harder to find... and nearly impossible to defeat.”

Shi Min exhaled again, his mind racing. “Then we need to prepare for the worst. The Hidden Valley is not a place we can storm into recklessly.”

The Russian President leaned forward, his face tight with urgency. "Madam Ling Li, what will it take to enter? We need to stop him before it's too late."

Ling Li considered this for a moment before speaking. "First, we need to understand what we're up against. Ancient barriers protect the Hidden Valley. Only martial arts cultivators can enter."

Her tone was pointed.

"We can enter," she said calmly, "but you cannot."

The Russian President froze for a beat. Then he blinked once, twice.

"...."

'Who said I wanted to go?'

Ling Li continued without pause. "The news of the evil practitioner has already reached the Hidden Valley. The residents, those who have lost loved ones, are causing turmoil outside the constabulary."

A new wave of tension settled.

"Let me speak to Otako," Ling Li said. "He is the head of the constabulary of the Hidden Valley.

Once I relay the news about Solaris, we will hear what he has to say."

Shi Min's gaze sharpened. "Then it's decided. We wait for Otako's advice. Then we infiltrate the Hidden Valley. Solaris cannot be given the chance to recover."

The weight of his words shifted the air around them.

Anticipation morphed into action.

This was no longer just a pursuit.

It was a hunt.

The Russian President had been sitting silently, absorbing every chilling detail of Solaris' escape. His fingers were steepled against his lips, concealing the weight of his thoughts as he listened.

When Shi Min revealed the gruesome truth — that Solaris had eaten the brains and hearts of his own servants — a flash of sheer horror crossed the Russian President's face. His controlled demeanor faltered, just for a fraction of a second. He had witnessed brutality before, but this — this was something else. Something primal. Something monstrous.

Ling Li caught the slight twitch in his brow, the tightening of his jaw. Though a man of unshakable authority, she could see the flicker of unease beneath his diplomatic mask.

"This is beyond political maneuvering," The Russian President finally said, his voice low, measured — but unmistakably troubled. "This is no longer just a crisis. It's a nightmare walking among us."

He leaned forward, his gaze searching Ling Li's face as if willing an explanation. He was a man accustomed to dealing with threats — assassins, insurgents, covert operations — but this was different. This was an enemy that defied the very rules of reality as he knew them.

"This... this is your domain, Madam Li." The Russian President's tone was not skeptical but rather cautious. "I understand war, power struggles, and diplomacy. I do not understand the world of martial artists."

His words hung in the air — neither an admission of weakness nor an attempt to distance himself.

Just honesty.

He exhaled sharply, pressing his fingers together again. "But I know one thing: monsters like Solaris don't stop. And from what you've told me, he is wounded, desperate, but still dangerous."

He turned to Shi Min, his voice laced with determination. "You say he's fled to the Hidden Valley?"

Shi Min nodded once, his expression unreadable.

The Russian President sat back, considering this. His knowledge of the Hidden Valley was limited, but he had heard whispers — stories of an untouchable sanctuary, a place where the laws of

ordinary men held no power.

"El Capitan said it is off limits and dangerous for outsiders." The Russian President's eyes sharpened slightly. "Then tell me — if I cannot step foot into this place, what can I do? Because I refuse to sit idly while something like this festers within my borders."

Ling Li regarded him carefully. The Russian President wasn't afraid — he was frustrated. A leader accustomed to taking direct action was now faced with an enemy he could neither see nor understand.

"You cannot go," Ling Li said smoothly, "but you can still command influence."

The Russian President held her gaze, waiting.

"The chaos outside the constabulary — it will grow," Ling Li continued. "Families of the victims. Those who fear Solaris' return. If this spreads beyond the Hidden Valley, it will become your problem. You must keep the fear contained."

The Russian President's fingers curled slightly over the armrest of his chair. "You mean to keep my people from panicking."

Ling Li nodded. "A frightened public is dangerous. Rumors will spread, civilians will begin to see shadows where there are none, and soon, fear will birth problems that even martial artists cannot control."

He exhaled through his nose, his mind already working through the implications. The thought of a frightened nation trembling at an enemy they could not comprehend was deeply unsettling.

Ling Li pressed forward, unwavering. "Otako leads the constabulary. I will speak to Otako personally. Once I know his assessment, I will share it with you so you can prepare accordingly."

The Russian President's jaw tightened, but he nodded. "Then do it quickly. If Solaris is allowed to recover, I have no doubt he will strike again." His fingers tapped once against the table. "And when he does, I refuse to have my people caught unaware."

He turned his gaze back to Shi Min. "You said this is a hunt." His lips pressed into a firm line. "Then let's make sure it's one where Solaris does not escape."

The tension in the room was no longer simply that of unease — it had shifted. This was now a war room. A battleground of strategizing, assessing, preparing for what lay ahead. Every movement was measured, and every decision weighed with careful calculation. But then, the soft knock on the door broke the air like a pebble rippling through still water.

Chapter 215: HE DID WHAT???

Butler Peng entered with precise elegance, walking beside Ling Li with quiet composure. He bowed slightly, his voice carrying respectful urgency.

"Madam Ling Li," he said, "Coach Sam is requesting an audience with you." Coach Sam is Lily's dance coach.

Ling Li lifted an eyebrow slightly, but her demeanor remained calm and composed. "Oh, yes, let him in," she responded, nodding. Then, as though remembering something, she added, "Also, check on Lily. If she's out of the shower, let her come down."

Butler Peng bowed once more before retreating with unspoken efficiency.

Moments later, Coach Sam entered, his posture upright yet cautious, his presence bringing an entirely different energy into the room. His usual confidence wavered slightly as he took in the scene before him.

His eyes darted across the room — Ling Li seated at the head, surrounded by figures he hadn't expected. His instincts told him this wasn't an ordinary gathering.

"Good morning, Madam Li," Coach Sam greeted, polite yet uncertain. "I apologize for coming unannounced. I seemed to have interrupted an important discussion."

"It's alright, come in," Ling Li comforted him with a smile.

Coach Sam turned slightly, his gaze sweeping over the table of distinguished individuals. And then — he froze.

His breath hitched.

His stomach twisted.

Surely, his eyes were deceiving him.

'No — it couldn't be!

Am I seeing things?!

Coach Sam blinked rapidly as though expecting the illusion before him to dissolve. But the distinguished man in front of him remained seated, composed, unmistakable.

He swallowed thickly.

"Sir... Mr. President," he stammered, voice laced with disbelief.

His words hung in the air like a misplaced note in a symphony.

The Russian President tilted his head slightly, amusement flickering in his eyes as he leaned back into his chair. He had seen reactions like this before, and they never failed to entertain him.

“Don’t worry,” he said smoothly, lips quivering with restrained humor. “It’s really me.”

Coach Sam blinked again, still struggling to reconcile the reality before him.

“No need to be nervous,” the President continued, an easy charm settling into his tone. “It happens. Just don’t faint in front of me.”

A breath of surprised laughter escaped from El Capitan while Shi Min hid the faintest smirk behind his fingers. Even Ling Li’s lips tugged ever so slightly at the corners.

Coach Sam exhaled sharply, shoulders slightly stiff. “I — well, I — no, of course not. I wouldn’t —” He stopped himself, realizing that his own flustered state was proving the exact opposite. His legs almost turned into jelly.

The Russian President chuckled.

Ling Li gestured toward an empty seat. “Please, sit, Coach Sam. I know we have something urgent to discuss.”

Coach Sam nodded quickly, forcing himself to regain his composure as he took a seat.

Though the shock was still settling in his system, one thing was certain — the morning had taken a turn he never could have predicted.

Coach Sam sat stiffly, his fingers curled against the edge of the table as the weight of the revelation crashed into him. His mind reeled, trying to grasp the scope of Solaris' actions — this wasn't just betrayal. It was something far more sinister.

"I... I can't believe it," he muttered, his voice thick with disbelief. His throat felt dry and constricted. "I nurtured him as a talent since he was three years old... alongside Lily." His brows furrowed deeply as he shook his head, struggling to reconcile the child he once knew with the monstrous figure they were now hunting.

Ling Li observed him carefully, noting the raw emotion carved into his features. She understood the depth of his shock. Solaris had been more than a protégé — he was once a promising talent, a star in the making. To see him spiral into darkness was a tragedy beyond words.

Before anyone could respond, soft footsteps descended the staircase.

Lily.

She stepped into the room, her hair damp from her shower, dressed in a simple yet elegant robe.

Her gaze immediately scanned the room, sensing the heavy atmosphere. There was something tense — something grim — and she knew this wasn't just an ordinary discussion.

Behind her, Fatty followed closely, his presence as large as his nickname implied, yet the worry in his round face overshadowed everything else. His arms were crossed over his chest as though he were shielding himself — shielding her — from an unseen force.

Lily's eyes flitted to Coach Sam, catching the way his hands trembled slightly as they rested against the table.

"What's wrong?" Lily's voice was soft, cautious. She turned to her Mother, then Shi Min, her expression shifting as realization set in. "Is this about Solaris?"

Fatty frowned deeply, his entire focus sharpening. If anyone thought he wasn't taking this seriously, they'd be sorely mistaken.

Shi Min inclined his head slightly. "Yes," he answered simply.

Coach Sam inhaled shakily. "Lily," he began, his voice quieter now, almost pained. "Do you understand what has happened? Solaris — he's not the person we thought he was."

Lily's brows furrowed. "I heard from Big Brother that he is an evil practitioner?" Her voice held a strange apprehension, a hesitation — an unwillingness to believe something so drastic had changed.

Ling Li decided there was no point in sugarcoating the truth. "Solaris has embraced the dark arts. He is wounded, and in his desperation to recover, he resorted to consuming the brains and hearts of his own servants."

Lily flinched, her breath hitching sharply.

Fatty's entire expression darkened in horror. His arms instinctively moved, pulling Lily closer as though he could physically shield her from the mere idea of Solaris.

"He... he did what?" Lily's voice barely left her lips.

Coach Sam closed his eyes briefly, exhaling through his nose and gathering his thoughts before speaking again. "This isn't the same Solaris you trained with. He's changed."

Ling Li nodded, her gaze unwavering. "And he won't stop. He has set his sights on you, Lily."

Fatty tightened his grip on Lily's arm, eyes wide with protective alarm. "Then we need to do something now! Solaris is out there, probably plotting his next move! If he targeted Lily once, he'll do it again."

Shi Min leaned forward, his voice firm yet measured. "We are already preparing for that. We believe Solaris has fled to the Hidden Valley."