

PROTEGE 231

Chapter 231: LING LI PERFORMS HEAVENDEFYING ACCUPUNTURE TECHNIQUE

Ling Li studied Fatty's neck carefully, adjusting her hands into position. "I'll start with myofascial release therapy, loosening the tight connective tissues around his injury. Once the tension eases, I'll apply low-amplitude spinal manipulation, correcting the cervical misalignment without excessive force."

Shi Min, quiet until now, murmured, "Mom, you make it sound easy."

Ling Li gave the faintest hint of a smile. "It's anything but. Every adjustment has to be precise. If I exert too much pressure, I risk worsening the ligament damage. If I stimulate the wrong nerve clusters with acupuncture, I could disrupt his cerebral circulation instead of stabilizing it."

Shi Min nodded slowly, absorbing her explanation.

Ling Li exhaled, rolling her shoulders back before lowering the first acupuncture needle toward Fatty's skin.

"Watch closely," she said. "This is where precision matters most."

Ling Li moved with measured precision, her hands steady as she prepped the sterile golden needles, aligning them in a meticulous sequence beside Fatty's bed. The beeping of the monitors filled the room — a rhythmic reminder that every action, every choice at this moment, could influence his recovery.

Shi Min, Mushu, and Pharsa stood on one side, observing closely, their eyes sharp with anticipation.

"This is only the first session," Ling Li stated as she examined Fatty's pulse points, her fingers barely grazing his skin. "It will take time for his body to recover fully, and the number of treatments will depend on how quickly his system responds. Healing is not just physical — it requires alignment between his neurological pathways, vascular circulation, and musculoskeletal recovery."

She selected the first needle, holding it delicately between her fingers. "We begin with the 'Baihui point,' located at the vertex of the skull; this controls cerebral blood flow and helps regulate autonomic function. It will assist in stabilizing the two untreated aneurysms."

With a precise motion, she inserted the needle, its fine tip disappearing effortlessly into the skin. The air in the room tensed as she continued, her voice calm and controlled.

“I will now stimulate ‘Shenting and Fengchi points,’ which will increase oxygen perfusion and ensure adequate blood supply to the cerebral arteries.” Ling Li followed the process, inserting each needle with deliberate care. “These placements will allow the brain to autoregulate blood flow without creating vascular strain.”

Shi Min watched closely, his physician’s mind dissecting every movement. “You’re targeting cerebral perfusion directly without invasive intervention.”

“Exactly,” Ling Li confirmed. “This avoids the risk of perfusion deficit caused by surgical recoil. His brain will heal at its own pace.”

Ling Li moved to Fatty’s neck, gently brushing her fingers along the areas of tension before selecting another set of needles.

“For the cervical ligament rupture, I’m applying ‘myofascial release therapy,’ starting with stimulation of the ‘Jiaji points’ along the cervical vertebrae. These will relax the deep connective tissues and relieve pressure surrounding the torn ligament.”

Mushu frowned slightly, intrigued. “You can repair connective tissue with this alone?”

Ling Li inserted the next needle, her expression unreadable. “No, this only prepares his muscles for the next phase — manual manipulation therapy. Once his fascia relaxes, I can correct the vertebral misalignment.”

Just as Ling Li prepared to begin the spinal adjustments, the door to the ward opened.

El Padre and El Capitan entered, their movements crisp, authoritative.

Ling Li did not flinch, though she immediately registered their presence.

El Padre's gaze flickered over the setup, then to Ling Li, his expression unreadable but keenly observant. "We heard you were conducting this procedure. We wanted to witness it firsthand."

El Capitan nodded, his arms crossed, his stance firm. "Few have the expertise to perform integrated acupuncture alongside spinal manipulation. You trained us well, but this — this is rare."

Ling Li's tone remained neutral. "Then observe closely."

She returned to her work, shifting her stance before placing her palms firmly against Fatty's neck.

"Now, I apply low-amplitude spinal manipulation. Small, controlled adjustments will realign his cervical vertebrae without aggravating the injury."

A measured breath.

Then, with the precision of a master, she moved — applying gentle but firm pressure, adjusting the vertebral segments with a technique so smooth it seemed almost effortless.

A faint shift.

A subtle correction.

Fatty's muscles reacted unconsciously, his body adjusting to the newfound balance.

Ling Li exhaled as she finally withdrew her hands.

"The first session is complete," she stated, stepping back. "His body will now begin the recovery process naturally."

El Padre and El Capitan exchanged a glance, their expressions unreadable.

El Padre spoke first. "Flawless execution."

El Capitan gave a nod of approval. "No wonder you remain the best."

Ling Li removed her gloves. "This is only the beginning."

As Fatty was stabilized and prepared for rest, Ling Li turned to her team. "We will monitor his progress. The number of sessions will vary depending on how well his body responds."

Shi Min gave a slow nod, digesting everything he had witnessed.

Pharsa released a breath she didn't realize she had been holding.

Mushu murmured, "That was remarkable."

Ling Li didn't respond. She simply turned, already thinking of the next steps.

There was still much to do.

Ling Li shook her head with a faint chuckle. "You may call everyone in. Otherwise, they might faint from anxiousness."

Mushu wasted no time, stepping toward the door. One by one, they entered the ward.

Lily was the first, her steps quick, almost desperate, her eyes locked onto Fatty's unconscious form. Ren and Shun followed closely, their presence solid beside her, while Chatty and Four Eyes moved in behind them.

Four Eyes hesitated just for a moment, his gaze locking with Ling Li's unspoken questions flickering in his eyes — questions he didn't dare voice.

Ling Li met his silent plea with a firm squeeze of his hand and a reassuring smile. The tension in his shoulders loosened almost instantly, the silent assurance enough to make him relax.

She turned to face the rest, standing tall, unwavering.

"I would say this accident was meant to happen," she declared, her voice steady, carrying an undeniable weight. "In fact, we should be grateful for this calamity because the injuries Quan Ye incurred from the crash are nothing compared to the hidden danger of the two large aneurysms lurking in his brain. Had we not discovered them now, they could have ruptured at any time, and then — none of you would have had the chance to save him."

Chapter 232: YOU ARE WARRIORS. ACT LIKE IT

A ripple of realization passed through the room.

Chatty clenched his jaw, a flicker of guilt in his expression. Lily's fingers curled against the fabric of her sleeves, her throat tightening. Four Eyes exhaled slowly, his eyes drifting back to his best friend.

Ling Li pressed on, sharper now, more commanding.

"This accident should serve as a lesson to all of you," she stated, her gaze sweeping across her disciples. "You are being cultivated as warriors, not just in combat, but in resilience. Strength is not measured by mere physical prowess or reckless courage. True strength is found in how you rise after a fall, in how you face the unknown without crumbling, in how you carry yourselves even in the face of disaster."

She let that sink in, then continued.

"Quan Ye will recover — slowly, but he will. His body needs time, but his mind must remain sharp. He will continue to cultivate and soak in the medicinal herbs I will prepare for him. His path will not be easy, but neither is yours."

Lily, unable to hold back, finally spoke, her voice soft, uncertain. "Mom... when will he wake up? Will he... really be okay?"

Ling Li's gaze softened slightly but remained firm. "He will wake up tomorrow. His body needs rest, and the best thing we can do for him now is let him heal without interference." She gestured toward Goldie. "Goldie can stay by his side for now."

Ling Li turned back to the group, her expression hardening once more.

"I advise all of you to go home," she continued, her voice carrying force and authority. "Do not let this incident shake your minds nor weaken your spirits. This is a small mishap — nothing more."

She paused, assessing each of them before delivering the final blow.

"You are warriors. Act like it."

The words cut through the lingering tension like steel against stone.

Ren inhaled deeply, standing taller. Shun straightened, his posture solidifying with unspoken determination. Four Eyes clenched his fists slightly, nodding once in silent agreement. Even Lily, though still pained, tightened her grip on herself, forcing herself to endure.

Ling Li observed them all, satisfied.

Quan Ye would recover. And so would they.

The hum of the engine filled the quiet space inside the car as Rockie steered steadily through the dimly lit streets. The night had settled deep, yet the weight of the day's events lingered thickly in the air. Mushu sat in the front passenger seat, his gaze flicking between the rearview mirror and the road ahead, but he remained silent as if waiting for Ling Li to speak.

Ling Li exhaled softly, looking out the window.

"Hon, this is actually a very common thing for new racers," Ling Li murmured, her voice carrying the edge of knowing experience. "Their excitement, their adrenaline rush—it takes over the moment they feel like they've mastered just a fraction of the craft. They mistake eagerness for capability, and recklessness takes hold before wisdom does. They're itching to drive fast to the finish line, but in reality, they're itching for a beating."

Ling Li sighed, shaking her head, recalling the raw emotions from earlier.

Four Eyes listened, his thumb brushing against her knuckles as he held her hand tightly. He knew exactly what she meant because he had felt it — felt the pull, the challenge, the fleeting temptation to push the engine to its limits. But he had remembered her words.

He always did.

And for that, he was always grateful.

The moment he'd felt the impulse to press his foot harder on the gas, her voice echoed in his mind, word for word. Not just caution, but wisdom, experience, and foresight.

Ling Li understood the thrill, but she saw further than he ever could.

'I guess it's a man's instinct and ego to do such recklessness,' Four Eyes silently admitted, watching Ling Li as she thoughtfully gazed ahead.

Ling Li's voice carried through the quiet.

"When I sent Murphy to Germany, I made sure this wouldn't happen to him," she continued, her fingers absentmindedly tracing circles against Four Eyes' palm. "I knew his carefree, reckless character would get the best of him, so I gave strict instructions to the instructors to monitor his every move. I made sure there was no room for him to lose control."

She paused for a moment, the weight of responsibility settling deeper in her thoughts.

"But I didn't expect it to be Quan Ye in this kind of predicament," she admitted, her voice softer now. "And yet, just as we said earlier, this accident was a blessing in disguise. If the crash hadn't happened, we never would have discovered the aneurysms lurking in his brain. A ticking danger waiting to strike when no one would have seen it coming."

A moment of silence filled the car as her words sank in.

Mushu shifted slightly in his seat, rubbing his chin. "Fate has a cruel way of reminding us of things we refuse to see," he murmured.

Ling Li's fingers tightened around Four Eyes' hand.

As their Master, she felt the weight of every decision, the responsibility of their lives resting on her shoulders. She had spent years shaping them, cultivating their strength, guiding them toward the paths they were destined to take.

And yet — even with all her planning, all her foresight — there were moments like this.

Moments where fate intervened in ways no amount of preparation could predict.

Four Eyes sensed the slight shift in her grip and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"You did everything right, and that's why Fatty will make it through this," he said, his voice low but firm. "We can never anticipate everything, but you — we all — are strong enough to adapt. That's what warriors do."

Ling Li exhaled quietly, a flicker of warmth crossing her expression.

He was right.

She straightened slightly in her seat, letting go of some of the burden she had carried since stepping into that operating room.

Her disciples would learn.

They would grow.

And they would rise stronger than ever.

Four Eyes sensed the weight lingering in the air — the quiet contemplation that sat heavy between them. Four Eyes didn't want to dwell on the accident any longer, so he shifted the conversation.

Chapter 233: THE PERSON BEHIND THE SAMURAI MASK

"How was your meeting with Otako earlier?" Four Eyes asked, his grip tightening slightly around her hand.

Ling Li's fingers remained relaxed in his hold, but her expression was unreadable.

"It went well," she answered simply, her voice even betraying nothing. "Otako will personally go to Hidden Valley to investigate if there is any sign of Solaris."

And just like that, she fell silent again.

No elaboration. No additional thoughts.

Just silence.

Four Eyes frowned ever so slightly, his thumb brushing over her knuckles as he studied her profile. He was trying — trying to listen beyond her words, trying to discern even the faintest ripple of emotion or inner thought.

But it was impossible.

Ling Li was impenetrable when it came to Otako — an enigma locked away so tightly that even her mind felt unnaturally silent.

Four Eyes furrowed his brow. 'How can this be?' He had always prided himself on reading people, sensing emotions even when they weren't spoken aloud, once he held any part of their body. But with Ling Li, there was nothing when it came to Otako.

A void where there should have been thoughts.

Was it deliberate? Or was her mind simply too disciplined — too controlled — to betray anything?

Still, Four Eyes knew better than to push. Ling Li was always aware of what she was doing, and if she wanted to keep him from probing, she would succeed effortlessly.

He took a slow breath, suppressing the curiosity gnawing at him.

"Then, this is good," he finally said, though a part of him still felt restless.

Ling Li turned her gaze to him then, meeting his eyes for a brief moment — a fleeting glance, one that didn't reveal anything yet carried an undeniable weight.

And just like that, the silence returned.

*** A Short Flashback From Earlier ***

The grand hall of Otako Sentoki's estate was bathed in the muted glow of lantern light, casting long shadows against the finely polished floors. The air carried a sharp stillness — a quiet intensity that spoke volumes about the weight of the meeting about to unfold.

Ling Li stepped forward with an unshaken presence, her navy robes embroidered with golden accents flowing like a tide behind her. She was a phantom among men — a force that dictated the very course of history in shadows unseen. Each footstep was deliberate, calculated, and soundless against the hard surface.

At the entrance, Butler Oda bowed deeply, his movements crisp, precise — every gesture measured with the perfection expected of him.

"Madam." His voice carried quiet reverence yet absolute firmness.

Ling Li turned slightly, glancing at Mushu, who had accompanied her. Without breaking stride, she spoke.

"Mushu, just wait for me here. I'll call you when I need you." Her tone was an order, not an offer.

Mushu did not protest, only gave a curt nod. Yet his sharp gaze lingered on Butler Oda a moment longer before shifting back into position, standing guard outside the door like a silent sentinel.

With practiced ease, Butler Oda led Ling Li into the inner chamber, where seven samurai warriors awaited.

The instant she stepped through the threshold, every single one of them — including Butler Oda — knelt with cupped hands pressed together in deep reverence.

"Welcome, Master!" Their voices thundered in unison — firm, unwavering, absolute.

Ling Li did not pause. She did not slow. Their presence did not command acknowledgment — it was expected, as natural to her as breathing.

She moved straight toward the main seat at the front, where an elevated cushion was positioned before them. Lowering herself with effortless grace, she sat, posture poised and unshaken.

For an outsider, witnessing this display would have been unbelievable.

But in this room, at this moment, it was merely reality.

Indeed, the true identity behind Otako Sentoki's infamous samurai mask was none other than Ling Li herself.

Otako was not simply an alias — it was her creation, a legend sculpted from the ground up, forged with precision, and designed for dominance. A persona built on wealth, ruthlessness, and absolute supremacy, ensuring that no enemy dared approach too closely, ensuring that no adversary even considered challenging what they could not understand.

It was fear crafted into form.

It was reverence, sharpened into steel.

It was Ling Li.

Yet, only seven men and Butler Oda knew the truth.

Not even their subordinates.

Because knowledge itself was power, and power — when placed in the wrong hands — was destruction.

And none of them would ever betray it.

Or better yet, none of them would dare.

While each of the seven pillars was immortal, none of them could compare to the true force that Ling Li possessed. None of them came close.

Immortality was merely longevity.

But power? Real power was absolute. The real power was Ling Li.

They understood their place. They understood their limits.

They followed her not only out of loyalty but out of pure survival instinct. Being immortal with power meant danger.

To defy Otako Sentoki — to defy Ling Li — was to invite ruin unlike anything they had ever imagined.

Because the consequence of betrayal was not simply punished. It was erased.

And every single one of them had witnessed it firsthand.

There was no second chance for traitors.

Ling Li's rule was absolute.

The very notion of betrayal was incomprehensible because to betray Otako was to self-destruct. Literally.

They had seen it — watched with their own eyes as one of their own had dared to test the boundaries of their oath.

A warrior who once sat among them — a warrior who once held the privilege of standing in Otako's shadow—had taken a single misstep.

And that misstep, greed, and jealousy had led to his ruin.

Not a battle.

It's not an execution.

Not even an exile.

He had ceased to exist before them.

Because Ling Li was never merciful.

And Otako? Otako did not forgive.

The self-destruction of an immortal was a terrifying spectacle—one that could never be reversed, one that could never be undone.

It was not pain.

The pain was too human. The pain was for those who could survive.

It was an obliteration.

A slow, agonizing dissolution of the body, the soul, the very essence of existence.

Chapter 234: THE CHESS MAKER

The warrior had collapsed in front of them, grasping his throat, eyes wild with horror, as his skin peeled from his bones, and his body began to devour itself, as his immortality twisted into a death sentence.

And the last thing he saw?

The cold stare of Ling Li.

The final command of Otako.

Not a flicker of regret. Not a trace of hesitation.

Only judgment.

Only power.

And so, the seven pillars knelt.

They knelt not because they were commanded to, but because they knew it was the only thing they could do in front of her presence.

Otako's name alone was enough to command their reverence.

Otako was the unseen empire, the unchallenged force — the master of fate itself.

Ling Li sat before them, hands resting lightly on her lap, her expression unreadable, her presence a force that did not belong to this world.

None of them dared to meet her eyes for too long.

Not out of fear.

But because to stare for too long was to feel the abyss staring back at them.

Ling Li did not need to speak for the room to remain motionless.

She did not need to command for silence to reign.

Her Samurai Mask, which represents Otako, lay on a special cushion beside her.

Otako's mask was not ordinary — it was a curse, a warning embedded into its very existence.

Only Butler Oda was permitted to wear a replica of the mask, and only Ling Li knew the difference between the two.

If any outsider attempted to place it upon their face, their skin would burn away, corroding down to the bone, reducing their flesh to ruin and agony.

A fate worse than death; this was also Ling Li's masterpiece.

Ling Li had designed Otako's legend to be untouchable, ensuring her identity remained a mystery, even in the highest circles of power.

Her disciples — her true family — could never know.

To know would be to carry a burden heavier than any of them were prepared for.

Ling Li was never just a chess player.

She was the chess maker.

And all others? Simply pieces in her grand design.

Once everyone had settled, tension thickened in the chamber.

Even these warriors — men who had stood against storms of blood and death — could feel it.

Ling Li's voice sliced through the silence like a blade.

"I'm here to discuss Solaris and his dark arts."

The air in the chamber shifted instantly.

A weight pressed upon them, heavier than before.

The very mention of Solaris sent a ripple of tension through the room — a name none wished to hear. Dark Arts cultivators were taboo, an abomination that violated the sacred laws of cultivation.

And the punishment?

Eradication. Without exception.

This rule was not merely spoken — it was etched into them, woven into their very existence. To tolerate such corruption was to stain one's own honor, to fail in their duty as a warrior.

And yet Solaris lived. Still breathing. Still walking.

Ling Li's gaze swept across her warriors, cold, steady, unshaken.

First Shah and Second Shah exchanged tense glances, the memory of Solaris' actions burning fresh in their minds. Their bodies remained rigid, each breath controlled — but every muscle coiled, prepared for what was coming.

Ling Li turned her sharp focus onto them.

"You both witnessed how he kills — how his methods leave no trace, only suffering."

The Second Shah's fingers curled tightly into fists, his knuckles turning white. His jaw locked in place, barely containing the storm inside him.

The memory still haunted them.

Bodies twisted unnaturally as if bent by some unseen force. No brains. No heart. Their life was stolen, drained, and devoured, as though something had reached into their very souls and ripped them apart.

An unholy destruction, one no mortal should ever wield.

The First Shah finally spoke, his voice lower now, edged with certainty.

"This is not just another enemy."

He exhaled slowly, voice hard as steel.

"Solaris doesn't kill. He eats and erases."

A heavy pause followed.

Ling Li nodded once, slow, deliberate.

Her mind was calculating, far beyond the immediate moment.

Beyond mere vengeance.

Beyond the hunt itself.

"And now, he is hiding."

Silence stretched.

"A predator does not hide unless it is preparing to strike."

Ling Li let that thought settle, let them feel it, let them understand the magnitude of what was coming.

And then, she spoke again.

"There is only one place he can remain unseen — the Hidden Valley."

At the mention of it, several pillars shifted, exchanging cautious glances.

Hidden Valley.

A haven for martial arts families, a sanctuary only for cultivators.

An isolated world, untouched by outsiders.

A place where names ceased to exist.

Where existence bent to those who understood how to wield it.

If Solaris had buried himself there, it meant only one thing.

He wasn't running.

He was planning.

Ling Li's expression did not waver.

Her eyes remained cold, steady.

Unmovable.

"I am the head of the constabulary in Hidden Valley, but I cannot leave because of my upcoming wedding."

The Second Shah exhaled sharply, shaking his head.

"Your absence will create an opening Solaris could exploit."

Ling Li's lips pressed together, unreadable.

A small opening would not matter.

Because Solaris would not live long enough to take advantage of it.

"Which is why it's time for you to visit the place yourselves."

Her voice carried weight — absolute command.

She turned toward Butler Oda.

"Oda will lead the team."

Oda straightened, eyes unblinking, stance unshaken.

Ling Li leaned forward slightly.

"Remember... Solaris can change his face. He can walk among men as someone else. If you are not vigilant, you will overlook him entirely."

Her words settled over them like a decree.

Like an inevitable fate.

Failure was not an option.

Failure meant bringing darkness greater than any of them had ever known.

As the meeting concluded, Ling Li remained seated, watching as each of her warriors prepared for departure.

She did not move.

Her posture was still.

But her mind?

Her mind was far from silent.

Solaris was waiting.

And his return would not be just another hunt.

It was the beginning of something far greater.

She could feel it.

She only hoped her warriors were ready for what was coming.

The moment the distinctive beeping of her phone echoed through the chamber, Ling Li's sharp focus shattered. It was a tone unlike any other — a unique frequency reserved only for her husband. A message.

Chapter 235: LÉON MOREAUX

Ling Li's breath hitched for the briefest moment, instincts kicking in before thought could even catch up. Fatty. An accident.

Without hesitation, she rose, her movements fluid yet filled with urgency. The warriors of Otako watched in silent reverence, but Ling Li spared no time for explanations.

She didn't walk. She moved like a storm, her robes sweeping behind her as she strode out of the chamber, the tension in the air left hanging in her wake. Oda barely had time to register her departure before she was gone.

Her fingers flew over her phone screen, scanning the details.

Critical condition. Surgery. Unknown complications.

A cold determination gripped her chest — not fear, not doubt — just absolute resolve.

As soon as she reached the outer gates, her car was already waiting.

The moment the door slammed shut behind her, her voice was firm, commanding.

“Drive.”

And with that, she was gone, rushing toward the hospital, toward the unknown, toward Fatty’s fate.

*** Back present ***

Ling Li and Four Eyes, together with the rest, arrived back at the mansion.

As the mansion gates swung open and the convoy of cars rolled past the gravel drive, a subtle shift rippled through the air, like the first gust of wind before a celebration banner unfurled. Tension, thick and cold from the hospital, dissolved with every step they took toward the familiar warmth of home.

Inside, the sunset streamed through the grand windows of the entrance hall, spilling over satin fabrics and floral arrangements in progress. The scent of fresh peonies and faint perfume wafted in the air, mixing with the sound of soft music and hurried footsteps.

And waiting for them — standing proudly under the towering arch of the ballroom doors — was the full entourage of the wedding planning team, each member glowing with anticipation. Beside them were towering racks draped in protective silk covers, each one containing a masterpiece yet to be revealed.

“Welcome back!” chirped Belle, the lead planner, clasping her hands together. “You’ve returned just in time for the most important fitting session!”

Everyone instinctively straightened.

Lily blinked in confusion, then gasped. “Today?”

Belle nodded, practically bouncing on her heels. “Yes, the final fitting — for the wedding and the twins’ birthday celebration. We’ve been waiting to surprise you.”

Chatty whooped in delight. “Finally, something that’s not terrifying!”

But that wasn’t all.

A hush suddenly spread across the room as one of the assistants rushed forward to whisper something in Belle’s ear. Her eyes widened before she turned back to the group, visibly trembling with excitement.

“There’s... there’s someone here to see you all,” she said breathlessly. “He didn’t announce his visit. He just arrived — straight from Paris. He insisted on being here for this fitting himself.”

Gasps and exchanged glances filled the air. Shun arched a brow. “Wait. He? Who?”

Then, the double doors of the ballroom swung open with perfect theatrical timing.

And in stepped Léon Moreaux — also known as M, the world-renowned, couture-enshrined, avant-garde designer whose name alone caused fashion houses to quake and influencers to weep.

He wore his signature pale blue scarf looped artfully around a pinstriped coat and black leather gloves tucked under one arm. His silver-blond hair shimmered like moonlight, and behind his rose-tinted glasses, his eyes sparkled with devilish charm.

“Bonsoir, my darlings,” he purred in his signature smoky accent. “Forgive the intrusion. I was dying to see how my vision has come to life on you. After all... what is genius without the proper canvas?”

Everyone stood frozen for a moment, except for Ling Li, who had a smirk — then chaos erupted.

Lily squealed and clutched Ren’s arm in disbelief. “THAT’S LÉON MOREAUX!”

Ren, eyes wide, nodded slowly. “He’s the one who designed the Empress of Austria’s wedding veil last year...”

Even stoic Shun exhaled a quiet “Damn.”

Chatty turned to Mushu. “I thought he only worked with royals.”

Mushu laughed, “Guess that makes Madam Ling Li royalty, doesn’t it?”

Four Eyes turned to Ling Li, squeezing her hand with gentle pride. “You planned this, didn’t you?” His voice was low, warm.

Ling Li’s lips curled into a faint, knowing smile. “He owed me a favor.”

Léon glided forward with arms outstretched, his voice rising theatrically. “Mes étoiles, there is no such thing as ‘just a fitting’ when Léon is in the room. Today, we create magic!”

And with that, the silk covers came off one by one, revealing gowns and suits so intricate, so breathtaking, that even the most composed among them fell speechless. Lavender silks embroidered with gold thread, jackets adorned with phoenix-feather motifs, qipao-inspired creations that shimmered under light — each garment told a story.

The twins’ outfits for their birthday were miniature versions of regal finery — playful yet elegant. A blend of traditional cuts with modern brilliance.

Then came the wedding attire.

The room hushed once more.

When Ling Li stepped forward, and Léon gently unfolded the final gown — an ethereal, multi-layered ensemble kissed with hand-stitched jade petals and a flowing translucent train — Four Eyes forgot to breathe.

He held it in her hands, reverent, speechless.

Léon leaned in and whispered, “Designed for a warrior who wears grace as her armor.”

The mood transformed entirely. Laughter bloomed. Even Chatty cried. Mushu twirled in his coat and declared he would never take it off. Belle and her team snapped photos and buzzed around the fittings, their joy infectious.

For the first time in weeks, the mansion felt weightless, filled not with shadows but with light.

A celebration was coming.

A union.

A rebirth.

And everything, for just a little while, felt exactly as it was meant to be.

*** Moments later ***

The double doors eased open with a quiet creak, and for a beat, no one moved.

Then Ling Li stepped out.

She stood at the threshold in full bridal glory, her poise regal, her expression calm — but behind her eyes was the smallest flicker of emotion: something between restraint and radiance.

The gown — M’s masterpiece — clung to her like a second skin sculpted from light. The bodice hugged her with hand-stitched jade-thread embroidery that shimmered subtly when she moved, catching every stray sunbeam filtering through the tall ballroom windows. The skirt unfolded around her like the petals of a celestial lotus — layered silk upon silk, flowing effortlessly as she stepped forward. Delicate streams of embroidered cranes in pale gold and silver seemed to soar across the train when she walked.