

## PROTEGE 236

Chapter 236: WAR ARMOR FOR A GODDESS

A hush swept across the room like a change in wind direction.

Even the soft rustle of fabric as Ling Li walked seemed choreographed.

Ren gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. "Mom looks unreal..."

Chatty blinked as if trying to focus.

Pharsa, "That is not just a wedding gown. That is war armor for a goddess."

Lily let out a high-pitched squeal that made Leeroy hop backward and bark once — just once — before sitting obediently with her tail wagging, mesmerized like everyone else.

Four Eyes, the groom — stood frozen halfway between tension and awe. He had seen Ling Li command in a bloodstained lab coat, her sleeves rolled up and a blade in her hand. He had seen her walk into boardrooms and have men twice her age scrambling to adjust their collars. But nothing, nothing, could have prepared him for this. He stood staring at his bride in awe.

It wasn't just that she was beautiful. It was that she looked completely at peace — and still entirely untouchable.

His chest tightened with the force of everything he couldn't say in front of all these people.

And M, Léon Moreaux — arms crossed dramatically near the full-length mirror — exhaled with theatrical pride. "Voilà," he announced, eyes a bit glassy behind his tinted glasses. "If the bride must cause a landslide of emotions, let it start here."

M turned to the planning team and hissed softly, "We are canceling Plan A for the aisle entrance. She's floating. We'll build her a cloud."

Laughter bubbled around the room, light and giddy.

Ling Li tilted her head slightly and raised a brow at him. "A cloud?"

M grinned. "Darling, don't ruin the illusion by walking like a mortal."

The team set to work again, fussing with the hem and making minor adjustments, but nothing could distract from the mood that had settled over the room: a soft, weightless awe.

After all the battles, all the secrets, and all the storms she had weathered —

Ling Li stood in white, unshaken, radiant. Not a symbol of fragility but of power wrapped in silk.

And somehow, just seeing her there made it feel like the wedding was no longer a distant event on a calendar.

It was real.

And it was coming.

That night, after the Fitting, the evening settled like a silk veil over the estate — soft, still, gilded by the fading warmth of amber twilight. The final threads of chatter had dimmed to quiet laughter. The wedding planners packed their last bolts of fabric, the twins had been whisked away to bed with kisses and cake crumbs on their cheeks, and M disappeared in a swirl of cologne and eccentric praise, declaring this fitting day "a poetic crescendo of mortal joy."

The main hallway lights dimmed one by one as the household retired.

And then — tranquility.

Ling Li stood barefoot near the open balcony of the master suite, her hair loose now, flowing like black river silk past her shoulders. Her gown had been replaced by a simple ivory wrap, soft against her skin. Outside, the cicadas had begun their symphony, night birds cut across the sky, and the wind whispered secrets through the mountain trees.

Behind her, Four Eyes stepped in from the adjoining room, freshly showered, casual in dark linen pants and a loose white shirt unbuttoned just enough to reveal the steady rise and fall of his breath. There was something unguarded in his gaze now — a softness that rarely breached his careful composure.

He watched her quietly.

How she stood with her arms resting on the carved wooden banister, her shoulders relaxed for once, how she stared up at the stars without armor.

"You didn't say anything," she murmured, not turning around.

Four Eyes stepped closer, each movement deliberate. "If I had opened my mouth, I might've ruined it."

Ling Li smiled faintly at that.

"I've never seen you look like that before," Four Eyes said, voice lower now, with something reverent curled into it.

Ling Li finally turned to face him. "Like what?"

Four Eyes searched for the right words — ones weighty enough to carry the truth but light enough to touch her.

"Like you were... made to be loved out loud."

Ling Li blinked once, surprised. Her lips parted slightly, but no words came out — not right away. Not when her heart gave a traitorous lurch in her chest.

"And I get to be the man standing next to you that day," Four Eyes continued. "Knowing everything you've carried. Everything you've hidden. And somehow, you're still standing."

"I'm standing because I had to," Ling Li said, voice quiet, brushing against the moment like silk on skin.

Four Eyes stepped even closer. "But tonight... You don't have to. Not with me."

Ling Li looked up at him then, and something in her shifted — something she rarely let anyone see. Not pain. Not power.

Peace.

"Come here," Ling Li whispered.

Four Eyes didn't hesitate.

They stood together on the balcony as the night deepened around them. Four Eyes wrapped his arms gently around Ling Li's waist, and she leaned her head against his chest. The world could burn, kingdoms fall, and stars collapse — but in this pocket of time, there was only the sound of his heartbeat under her ear and the cool breeze tangling softly through their hair.

Neither of them spoke for a while.

Eventually, Chu Yan murmured against her temple, "You know, this is probably the last quiet night we'll get before chaos returns."

Ling Li smiled faintly. "Then I'm glad it's with you."

He held her tighter, anchoring her in a way no mask, title, or legend ever could.

Above them, a thousand stars blinked like quiet witnesses.

And down in the still halls of the mansion, past the floral-scented corridors and sleeping warriors, the silence of the night wrapped around them — a lullaby cradling two hearts that had fought, survived, and now, for once, simply belonged.

Meanwhile, it was Butler Oda's Journey to Hidden Valley. The moon hung high, casting its pale glow over the winding mountain paths leading to Hidden Valley, also known as Heavenly Dao. Mist clung to the peaks, swirling like phantom whispers, wrapping the dense forest below in an eerie embrace.

### Chapter 237: THE HUNT HAD BEGAN

Butler Oda stood at the helm of the small elite force, leading the charge with the First Shah and Second Shah flanking him on either side. The remaining pillars followed close behind, their footsteps silent against the uneven terrain.

They moved as specters, unseen, unheard — warriors trained to vanish into the night.

This was no ordinary mission.

Solaris was not a target that could be approached casually, not an enemy that could be cornered without absolute precision.

Dark Arts cultivators did not run — they prepared.

And preparation meant one thing: death was coming for someone.

Oda's eyes flickered toward the narrow passage ahead. Hidden Valley was close.

"We'll reach the valley before dawn," he murmured, voice barely above the breeze.

The First Shah tightened his grip on the hilt of his blade.

"Solaris won't stay still if he knows we're coming," he muttered.

The Second Shah exhaled slowly, gaze sharp.

"Then we must ensure he never sees us coming."

By the time they entered Hidden Valley, the sky had begun its slow transition into dawn — streaks of deep violet bleeding into the edges of black.

The valley was vast, untouched by the outside world. Rows of ancient pavilions stretched along the ridges, each belonging to powerful cultivation families, their history carved into the very foundations of the land.

The warriors of Hidden Valley were unlike any others.

They were trained from childhood and taught that cultivation was not merely an art — it was life itself.

To be weak was to be dead.

To be strong was to be immortal.

If Solaris had infiltrated this sacred place, it meant one thing — he was searching for power beyond what he already possessed.

And that?

That could not be allowed.

Oda stopped just short of the main hall, his sharp gaze scanning the gathering forces.

"We move in pairs," he ordered. "Spread out. Watch every movement, every shadow. Solaris can change his face — you won't see him unless you're looking for what shouldn't be there."

The warriors nodded and then vanished into the valley.

The hunt had begun.

The valley remained eerily quiet, its vast terrain illuminated by the soft glow of lanterns flickering from the outer pavilions. A place meant for warriors, for cultivators dedicated to their craft, now held the shadow of something far darker.

Oda stood at the base of the constabulary hall, his posture unwavering, his presence commanding even before he spoke.

But tonight, he was Otako.

Clad in deep crimson robes, the mask of Otako sat firmly over his face — a masterpiece of craftsmanship forged from a material unknown to common people. The edges gleamed faintly, unnatural, as if embedded with power beyond mere appearance.

If any outsider dared touch it, their flesh would decay upon contact.

Otako was not meant to be impersonated.

He was a legend.

He was feared.

And he was here.

The moment Otako entered, every warrior inside the Hidden Valley Constabulary knelt in immediate reverence, their hands cupped before them.

A declaration. A submission.

"Master Otako." Their voices rang through the hall in unison.

Oda strode forward, his steps slow, deliberate, calculated.

The atmosphere shifted thick with authority — this was not a visit. This was an order being put into motion.

Ling Li could not afford for anyone to suspect her absence. Not now. Not ever.

The hidden truth behind Otako must never be known.

Oda's voice, deepened beneath the mask, cut through the silence.

"A Dark Art Cultivator has entered our grounds. He is Solaris. He can change his face, from male to female, from old to young. And he eats the brain and the heart of his victims."

A ripple passed through the ranks — tense, unreadable, but unmistakable.

No warrior of Hidden Valley could allow this.

A Dark Arts cultivator was a corruption — an insult to their traditions.

The assistant constabulary commander, also a seasoned cultivator named Jin Yuan, clenched his jaw as he raised his head slightly.

"There has been news about this dark cultivator, and it has caused riots here at the constabulary for several days. We were only able to pacify the people yesterday.

Master, do we have confirmation?"

Otako — Oda beneath the mask — turned his gaze toward him, the weight of his presence pressing into the room.

"You dare doubt me?" Otako's voice was low, lethal.

Jin Yuan flinched, lowering his head immediately, his hand pressing against the floor.

"Forgive me, Master Otako."

Silence.

Then, Otako exhaled slowly, measured.

"He is here. You will assist in the search. You will obey without question."

Jin Yuan bowed deeper.

"As you command."

The warriors of the constabulary followed suit.

Otako straightened, then turned.

There was no need for further words.

The hunt had begun.

Oda's command rippled through the forces, spreading out among Hidden Valley's vast network of cultivators. The pillars moved swiftly, splitting into search units, each assigned to a specific section of the valley.

The First Shah and The Second Shah moved along the ridge-side temples, watching for any anomaly in energy fluctuations — Solaris could alter his form, but his presence would not be undetectable.

The others searched within the deep forest pathways, using their trained senses to locate anything unnatural.

If Solaris were in Hidden Valley, it would only be a matter of time before he was found.

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Two days before the wedding, the estate buzzed with electric energy — each hour drawing the wedding closer, each heartbeat louder under the mounting thrill. For two days, cars streamed in through the gated driveway, delivering faces etched with familiarity and prestige.

From every corner of the world, they came. Ling Li's extended family. Her parents were now glowing with joy and quiet pride; her cousins, martial uncles, and high-ranking guests, whose presence sent whispers rippling down the hallways. Elders greeted one another beneath lantern-lined pavilions while quiet security lines blurred behind the rose hedges.

It was a convergence of the respected, the powerful, and the fiercely protected.

And behind this perfectly orchestrated chaos?

Shi Min, sleeves rolled up, eyes sharp as a hawk. Mushu, hair slightly more unruly than usual, darted between the front gates and the logistics terminal. Pharsa is calm but strict, managing rosters and room assignments like a seasoned general with a clipboard.

They worked without sleep, barely pausing to catch their breath, ensuring each VIP guest was met with grace, escorted, and protected. Shuttle routes, background scans, guesthouse clearances — every detail was double-checked, annotated, and color-coded. On the second night, Pharsa was caught muttering in her sleep, "Room 314 is feng shui-neutral; we move Master Wong to 218."

#### Chapter 238: THE WEDDING DAY: LET THE GAMES BEGIN

Thank the heavens that El Padre and El Capitan arrived when they did.

With the kind of quiet authority only immortal martial warriors could summon, they stepped into the fray. They halved the weight on everyone's shoulders.

El Padre handled the diplomatic families with his silver tongue and velvet gloves. At the same time, El Capitan patrolled the perimeter with his hawk-like gaze, fingertips always just inches from his concealed dagger. Wherever they appeared, the atmosphere steadied.

Still, on the evening before the wedding, Mushu leaned wearily against the hallway pillar, glancing at the others.

"If I didn't know better," he muttered, voice dry, "I'd say we were prepping for a royal coronation."

Shi Min, eyes dark-ringed, didn't look up from his device. "It is, Mushu. You just haven't realized it yet." He said with a chuckle.

Pharsa chuckled as well from a couch cushion she hadn't moved from in two hours. "We survive tonight, and we'll make it to the altar alive."

If not for El Padre passing out hot ginger tonic and El Capitan confiscating Shi Min's fourth caffeine patch, they really would've looked like panda-eyed ghosts in the official photos.

But for now, beneath the moonlit sky and blooming magnolias, everything was in place.

Tomorrow, the world would bear witness to a union carefully built in shadows — anchored in love, tempered in storms.

And behind the veil of glamour, the people who loved her were working until their bones ached, all so that when Ling Li stepped forward, the world would pause. And only she would shine.

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Finally, The Wedding Day: Let the Games Begin

The sky above the Ling estate was a soft watercolor of pale gold and rose, the sun still stretching itself awake. Yet the grounds below were already alive with vibrant motion. Crimson ribbons lined the hedges, firecrackers crackled against the stone courtyard, and golden mist swirled like celebratory smoke over the drive where the groom's motorcade roared into view.

A convoy of sleek black cars rolled in with polished aggression. At the lead — Four Eyes himself — dressed in a custom modern hanfu of bright red and golden embroidery, shoulders broad with purpose, jaw set with nerves and giddy determination.

Beside him in the groom's car sat Shi Min, composed and sharp in a matte charcoal jacket with jade buttonwork; Shun, arms crossed and smirking like he was prepared for war; Fatty, regal in his wheelchair, a crimson sash tied around his torso in celebration.

And behind them, Chatty was hyping up the rest of the entourage. "We're going to look good losing, boys — so let's lose in style!"

As they parked and stepped out, loud firecrackers exploded along both sides of the gate — a barrage of sounds that marked the arrival of the groom.

Smoke filled the air as bursts of red and gold confetti rained down from the upper balcony.

Inside the bridal chamber, excitement bloomed like fireworks.

Ren was already bouncing on her toes beside the tall lacquered screen where Ling Li sat with Pharsa, the two of them calm as still water — until Lily peeked through the door and squealed.

"They're here!" she announced with glee, spinning back into the room with her twin sisters Kim Kim and Chin Chin trailing behind her like twin hurricanes in tulle flower girl dresses.

Kim Kim declared proudly, "We'll guard Mommy!" Chin Chin followed with a firm nod, brandishing a plush toy like it was a divine weapon. "No one gets past us!"

Ling Li smiled faintly, dabbing a bit of rose balm on her lips as Pharsa adjusted her earrings. "Let them sweat a little," she said quietly, regal as ever.

Back at the front gate, the men assembled, holding red gift boxes and traditional satin pouches loaded with cash.

But the doors remained locked.

A voice filtered through the hidden mic in the entry intercom — cheeky, bright.

"State your purpose," Ren's voice demanded.

Four Eyes stepped forward. "I've come to collect my bride."

"Then prove you're worthy," Lily said in mock sternness.

Chatty leaned into Four Eyes. "This feels like an ambush."

"It is," muttered Shi Min.

Then came the challenges.

First: The Love Quiz. Four Eyes was forced to name Ling Li's favorite tea, her blood type, and what she once said in passing about how she preferred her noodles on a rainy night in Baguio. For every wrong answer, the red pocket offering had to grow fatter.

He flubbed two questions and was sent staggering backward by a confetti cannon.

Second: Declaration of Love — sung in chorus.

Fatty led with a ballad so heartfelt that even Lily choked back laughter, listening through the upstairs monitor. Chatty, on the other hand, performed a terribly off-tune rendition of "Endless Love" with fake tears and a rose stem in his mouth.

"That's enough torture," Pharsa muttered, shaking her head — but not stopping the games.

Third: The Strength Challenge.

Four Eyes, Shi Min, Chatty, and Shun were made to do 100 pushups — with Kim Kim and Chin Chin adding little satin pillows on Four Eyes' backs for "extra training." The twins shrieked with delight, counting loudly and giggling whenever someone's elbow wobbled.

And the final task: The Bride's Password.

Four Eyes stepped forward, handing over the thickest red envelope yet. "All these trials," he said breathlessly, "just to see her smile."

Ren peered from behind the ornate door screen. "Password?"

Four Eyes paused, then said quietly, "Qīng lúo yǔ — her favorite poem line."

A beat of silence.

Then click.

The doors parted.

And as petals floated from above, Four Eyes took his first step into the room, to where his bride waited, serene as moonlight, surrounded by laughter, family, and the faint scent of sandalwood and jasmine.

He had made it through the firecrackers, the games, and the red envelopes.

Now came the only prize he ever wanted — her hand in his.

The moment hung like a crystal on the edge of time — light glancing through, emotions refracting in all directions.

Four Eyes knelt gracefully, bouquet in hand, his gaze steady and unwavering. The vibrant reds and creamy magnolias in the bouquet mirrored the blooming warmth on his face, but behind his confidence was a heart pounding like a war drum.

Chapter 239: THE WEDDING: CATHEDRAL OF IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

"Ling, Honey..." Four Eyes' voice cracked slightly despite the smile. "Will you marry me?"

The room went still.

Even the giggling twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, paused mid-twirl. Lily clasped both hands over her mouth; Ren had frozen mid-whisper; Pharsa looked like her breath had caught just beneath her ribs.

Ling Li didn't speak right away.

She just stared down at her groom.

Not cold, not uncertain — but mesmerized, as if his voice had cut through every defense she had ever constructed.

There was astonishment in her eyes — rare and wild, like she was watching a star fall just for her.

Seconds passed.

Each one echoed like a gong in Four Eyes' skull.

Thirty seconds.

The longest of his life.

Then, finally, Ling Li nodded, eyes still holding his.

"Yes, I will marry you." She said, teary-eyed.

Four Eyes didn't waste a heartbeat.

He stood in one clean motion — and, without warning, scooped Ling Li up into his arms with a grin that split into a laugh when she gasped, stunned.

"Chu Yan!" she exclaimed, hands gripping his collar.

But Ling Li's laughter burst through in the next breath.

Her vision spun in a graceful 360° as he turned with her, bridal style, striding across the polished marble like he was walking out of battle, victorious.

The entire house erupted in cheers.

The Kim Kim and Chin Chin squealed with glee and followed at full sprint, flower skirts bouncing behind them. Chatty fist-pumped so hard he nearly knocked over a vase. Ren and Lily cheered loudly for their mother, enough to shake the chandeliers. Pharsa — ever composed — allowed herself a quiet smile as she gathered the train of Ling Li's gown like a general tending to her queen.

Petals rained from the second-floor balcony. Traditional instruments swelled to life. The white limousine glided away from the mansion like a pearl-hulled vessel cutting through golden morning mist. Inside, Four Eyes held Ling Li tenderly in his arms, her veil cascading over his sleeve, her lips parted in astonishment that hadn't yet caught up to her smile.

Outside, the world was already watching.

A convoy of sleek luxury cars followed each one, a symbol of quiet dominance. Black sedans with diplomatic plates, custom Rolls-Royces, gold-rimmed sports cars wrapped in wedding ribbons — it wasn't a procession. It was a declaration.

As they turned onto the avenue leading to the heart of the city, bystanders paused on sidewalks, mouths agape, watching the bridal motorcade as if royalty had returned from exile.

The towering silhouette of the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception rose ahead like a sanctified crown, its ancient stones bathed in morning light. Bells rang from its high spire — not just ceremonial, but thunderous, proud. The sound echoed down the boulevard like a call to witness the extraordinary.

The cathedral was packed.

Not a single pew was unclaimed.

Guests stood shoulder to shoulder — political leaders, heads of conglomerates, martial family elders, and society's most elusive names. The fragrance of white gardenias and thousand-year peonies floated through the arches. Camerapersons scrambled discreetly behind velvet curtains to capture history in the making.

And when the white limo pulled up before the cathedral's marbled steps, the noise outside fell away.

The driver opened the rear door.

Four Eyes stepped out first, straightening his tailored jacket. Then, with practiced care, he reached inside and lifted Ling Li out once more, the bride in his arms, to the stunned delight of everyone watching.

Gasps broke into applause. Even the iron-hearted El Capitan at the cathedral doors couldn't help the faint smirk that tugged at his lips.

Ling Li looked out across the sea of faces, stone columns, and vaulted light. None of it frightened her.

She had faced assassins, betrayal, dark arts — but this...

This was hers...

The beginning of something no longer hidden.

At the top of the steps, Shi Min and Shun waited with solemn nods, flanked by gold-robed clergy and twin girls holding baskets of orchids.

And just like that, under the ceremonial arches etched with ancient calligraphy, the bride and groom crossed the threshold — not just into a cathedral, but into a Chapter that would change everything.

The Cathedral Ceremony

The doors of the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception glinted under the light of a thousand crystals. Inside, the air shimmered with anticipation. Gold-trimmed ribbons crowned each pew, while pale orchids and white lotuses overflowed from marble vases placed between columns that stretched toward the heavens, painted with saints and stars.

An orchestra near the altar stirred to life. Soft notes of a classical overture threaded through the air like a whisper of fate.

Then, the cathedral doors parted once more, and the groom's procession began.

Chu Yan, known as Four Eyes, stepped into view, flanked by his closest companions.

Four Eyes wore a tailored dove - white suit with silver embroidery that caught the light with each movement, the design subtly echoing the phoenix that adorned Ling Li's gown — a silent promise that they were already in sync.

To his right was Shi Min, eyes cool, precision in every step. To his left, Shun, chin high, exuding confidence with a protective edge. Just behind them came Fatty, wheeled gracefully by a junior attendant, his ceremonial crimson sash and proud smile stealing hearts with every inch forward. Then Chatty couldn't help but throw a wink at the guests, subtly adjusting his boutonniere like he was walking a red carpet rather than the aisle.

Whispers scattered softly through the pews, phones discreetly tucked away, all eyes drawn to the strength of the groom's circle — each man walking not behind him but beside him.

As Four Eyes reached the altar, he stood tall, hands trembling just enough to betray the storm behind his calm. His eyes fixed on the cathedral doors ahead, waiting.

And then the music changed.

The strings grew fuller, sweeping upward into a swell of heartbeats.

The entourage procession had begun.

Pharsa stepped forward first, dignified and regal, her silver-hued gown rippling like tempered moonlight. Her shoulders were drawn back, her spine tall, the embodiment of silent strength. She did not just walk beside Ling Li — she carried her loyalty in every stride, the weight of decades distilled into one vow of sisterhood and unshakable presence.

## Chapter 240: THE WEDDING: THE VOW THAT SHATTERED THE AISLE

Following Pharsa were Ren and Lily, like opposites wrapped in harmony.

Ren, a vision in emerald green, moved like a queen of her own realm. Her gaze never wavered from the aisle ahead, her chin lifted with pride and fierce protection. In her hands, a bouquet of snow peonies trembled slightly, less from nerves and more from the electricity of the moment.

Lily, wrapped in a soft blush-pink gown that glistened with crystal dust, walked delicately but with a heart full of thunder. Her expression — somewhere between tears and a triumphant smile — spoke of years of watching her mother fight, rise, and love without compromise. Her bouquet mirrored Ren's, but her heart — so wide, so full — was all her own.

Their eyes were moist with emotion, but they weren't yet ready to admit it.

Then came a scatter of laughter — Kim Kim and Chin Chin, the little flower girls in soft pearl dresses, came skipping down the aisle. Their hair was braided with tiny white flowers, and their baskets — overflowing with petals — trailed a snowy carpet behind them. Each toss was erratic but enthusiastic, with Kim Kim at one point tossing a whole handful onto Chatty's shoes just for fun.

Trailing them proudly was their young cousin, no more than six, holding a velvet pillow shaped like a lotus bloom, the two rings cradled at its center. His small steps were serious, noble, and practiced — but his tight grip on the pillow told the story of nerves and duty mingling together.

Chu Yan swallowed.

He knew what came next.

The music swelled once more, richer now, threaded with trembling strings and the beating hearts of every witness.

The entire cathedral turned as the main doors once again slowly creaked open.

Framed by light, Ling Li appeared at the threshold — no longer just a bride but a vision forged from myth and grace.

She did not walk immediately.

She took one breath. And then another.

The silence in the cathedral seemed to deepen, as though even the air had stilled to admire her.

Her gown, Léon Moreaux's *pièce de résistance*, clung to her silhouette with celestial precision. The bodice was sculpted in ivory silk, hand-stitched with jade-thread embroidery that shimmered with every breath she took. The pattern was subtle but deliberate — tiny phoenix mid-flight across her torso, each one symbolizing freedom, endurance, and rebirth.

The sleeves were made of translucent organza, floating around her arms like morning mist, while the layered skirt — soft, weightless, and ethereal — cascaded behind her in waves of pearl tulle. Each layer was designed to move like drifting cloud petals, and as she walked, the hem whispered secrets across the aisle.

Trailing behind her was a long veil flowing from a crown of intricately woven white jade blossoms. The veil's edge was embroidered with fragments of ancient poetry in an invisible thread — seen only when the light struck just right. It was a gown that did not just speak of beauty. It spoke of legacy.

Gasps rippled through the cathedral. Even guests who had once seen war and wonder now forgot to breathe.

Each step Ling Li took was composed, graceful, yet powerful — like a queen entering a battlefield she had already conquered. Her veil drifted gently from her delicate crown of white jade blossoms, her earrings swaying softly against her neck as if reluctant to disturb the quiet majesty of her arrival.

Her eyes were locked on him.

Four Eyes stood transfixed.

His knees nearly gave under the weight of it. Of Ling Li.

Four Eyes — who had stood in burning boardrooms, who had faced assassins recently, who had once watched her tend to wounds no one else could — breathed in a way he hadn't since childhood.

Ling Li walked not like a bride... but like a woman stepping into sovereignty.

With every step she took, the cathedral grew warmer. And as her eyes lifted to meet Four Eyes' — resolute, calm, powerful— he knew he would never again take for granted the gift of being seen by her.

As Ling Li approached the altar, the petals scattered before her steps. Each motion of the train was ghostlike yet grounded in something more ancient than ceremony.

She reached him — finally.

And for a second, no one moved.

The air was heavy with something holy. The couple's eyes met, and the cathedral — full of people, wealth, warriors, and legends — vanished.

"Hi," Ling Li whispered, a rare softness blooming in her voice.

Four Eyes smiled, eyes glistening. "You came."

Ling Li's brow arched playfully. "Of course. I heard someone wanted to marry me."

Soft laughter rippled around the altar.

Their hands met — his fingertips tracing over hers, grounding himself in the reality that, yes, she was here. This was now.

The priest cleared his throat with quiet gravity.

And just like that, the ceremony began — not as a ritual, but as a moment where two worlds finally stood still, just long enough to become one.

The air in the cathedral had never felt more sacred, charged with anticipation, painted by sunlight through stained glass windows, perfumed with the softest jasmine and burning frankincense.

Everything — the gold-trimmed altar, the standing congregation, the silent flutter of flower petals clinging to the hem of Ling Li's gown — led to this breathless moment.

A hush fell as the priest opened the ceremonial tome, his voice deep and solemn.

"Xu Chu Yan, do you take Ling Li as your lawful wife," he began, "to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?"

Chu Yan gazed at the woman before him—her expression serene, her eyes unwavering — and smiled.

"Yes," he said with conviction. "Yes, I do."

A soft murmur of approval swept through the pews.

The priest turned, looking upon Ling Li. "And do you, Ling Li, take Xu Chu Yan as your lawful husband..."

Her breath hitched just barely, but her voice was poised, ready.

But before she could speak...

"Stop!"

The cry split through the air like a thunderclap.

Gasps exploded from every corner of the cathedral. Heads turned. Whispers turned into stunned silence.

Ling Li's lashes lifted slowly toward the entrance.