

PROTEGE 241

Chapter 241: THE WEDDING: THE BETRAYAL

There — framed by the arched doorway, silhouetted by the light — stood a woman clutching the hand of a small boy, no older than six. Her hair was windblown, her face streaked with tears, her voice trembling with urgency and emotion.

Four Eyes froze.

His hands, which had been holding Ling Li's so tenderly, fell limp.

The moment shattered.

Ling Li's heart cracked — not in confusion, but in sharp, bitter confirmation. She'd read the energy from the start. Her instincts whispered lies draped in silk. But what she couldn't read... was his reaction. And there it was.

That stagger in his breath. That flinch. That recognition.

He knew her... however, 'how could it be?'

"Chu Yan..." the woman continued, stepping forward. "I've been looking for you. They said you were abroad, that no one knew where. This..." She turned to the boy, "This is our son."

A strangled silence wrapped the cathedral.

It was her, Charissa. His first love. The woman lost to tragedy six years ago, presumed dead when the cruise ship vanished beneath merciless waves.

Four Eyes stepped back, lips parted, eyes clouding with something ...

And in that moment, he released Ling Li's hand.

The absence of that touch echoed louder than any scream.

Ling Li's spine straightened ever so slightly.

She had survived ambushes in alleyways, poison in porcelain cups, and betrayal through blade and blood. But that single moment — watching Four Eyes' hand fall away from hers — was the heaviest blow she had ever taken.

Yet her composure did not break.

Without a word, Ling Li turned from the altar, her gown trailing behind her like the tail of a phoenix descending in sorrow. She walked down the marble aisle, past guests too stunned to rise. Her twins rushed to her side, their wide eyes fearful.

She knelt to them, kissed their foreheads, and turned to Mushu and Pharsa, voice low and commanding, "Take the twins to Bayside Castle. Now."

Pharsa moved immediately. Mushu hesitated — torn — but nodded.

Then Ling Li left.

Alone.

Not a single soul dared follow.

Four Eyes tried to breathe, to step after her, to say something — but he was paralyzed. Torn between past and present, haunted by a ghost that never should have returned.

"Chu Yan," Charissa cried, her voice cracking. "I was rescued... I lost everything. My memory, my home. But when I remembered who I was, I came back. I had to. For him... for you."

Her tears spilled fast and unrestrained. The boy looked up, confused, clutching her sleeve. It would have been a tragic reunion — if not for the silence that followed.

And then—

An electric chill swept through the cathedral.

The stained glass flickered. Candle flames stilled.

A presence emerged at the doors.

Power draped in samurai silk, footsteps silent, the mask gleaming with deathless grace. A hush deeper than fear cloaked the hall.

Otako had arrived.

Every soul went still.

Otako stood with the gravity of a mountain, his voice slicing through the air like a blade unsheathed.

"I warned you, Chu Yan," he roared, his voice thunder-rolling through the stone arches. "That to betray Ling Li... would cost everything."

He raised a single hand.

Chu Yan collapsed.

His knees hit marble, a cry of pain ripping from his chest as something inside him burned, stripped from the soul down.

Guests screamed. Fatty tried to wheel forward but was blocked by an invisible force. Shi Min stepped forward, but Otako raised a single finger, stopping time itself.

"Why would you choose this over Ling Li? This impostor! This illusion!"

And with a single gesture—

The woman's face peeled away. The lifelike mask fell to the floor.

It wasn't Charissa.

It was Nina.

The room erupted in cries.

Chu Yan's scream tore through the cathedral. "NINA?!"

"Surprised, Brother?" she snarled, her voice mocking. "I wanted you to see how fragile your trust is. If I couldn't have your luxurious life, no one would."

Otako's presence ignited.

With a wave of his hand, masked warriors appeared from thin air, seized Nina, and disappeared into the shadows.

Silence returned.

Except for Otako's final words — words that would remain burned into every witness's soul:

"Ling Li is gone now. And with her, everything you once had. Your powers. Your future. Your place in this world. You betrayed her in the one moment that mattered — and now, you will wake up as nothing."

He raised his palm one last time.

Chu Yan fell silent, unconscious.

And Otako vanished.

The altar stood empty. Petals scattered like ashes.

The wedding was no longer the beginning.

It was a warning.

The ornate stillness of the cathedral trembled with residual shock. The air that had once been filled with sacred vows and floral perfume now hung thick with disbelief.

Amidst the murmuring crowd and shaken silence, Shi Min stepped forward — jaw tight, shoulders squared with duty, not grief. He turned to the guests, his voice clear despite the undercurrent of restrained fury.

"On behalf of my mom," he began solemnly, "I deeply apologize for what today has become. You've all traveled far, and your presence means more than words can offer. Please proceed to the hotel for the banquet. A sumptuous meal awaits you — just as intended."

Then, with grave respect, Shi Min bowed deeply — not just from the waist, but from the heart. Not a single guest moved at first. Then, one by one, the crowd returned the gesture with silent nods, hands on chests, eyes dimmed with empathy.

El Padre and El Capitan, calm yet commanding, moved through the pews, reassuring those who lingered. With knowing glances and gentle guidance, they escorted elders and high-profile guests toward the cathedral doors, shielding them from the rumors already brewing like a storm.

Shi Min's gaze swept the space, eyes locking on Mushu, who stood quietly near the aisle, one hand on each twin's shoulder. The girls clung to his sleeves in wide-eyed silence.

"Mushu." Shi Min's tone was clipped and professional.

Mushu straightened instantly.

"Take the twins to my penthouse," Shi Min instructed. "Grandma and Grandpa are already on their way. Stay with them until I give the next instruction."

Mushu didn't argue. "Yes, Young Master." He knelt to the girls' height, voice softening. "Let's go see Nai Nai and Grandpa, okay?"

Chin Chin looked up tearfully. "Where's Mommy?"

"She'll be with us soon," Mushu said gently, his smile calm, but his eyes betrayed his worry.

Chapter 242: YOU ALL MISUNDERSTOOD

Four Eyes blinked up at the ceiling, lips parting as if the words might come. But none did.

He sat up slowly, wincing at the dull pressure still lingering through his nerves, his hand reflexively brushing the acupuncture points Shi Min had placed so skillfully.

Silence reigned again.

"I..." he began, then stopped. His jaw tensed.

Then, with a defeated breath:

"Can you read my mind?"

His voice was hoarse, laced with shame and weariness.

"I don't know how to explain."

That did it.

Shi Min's jaw clenched so hard that a faint click echoed.

For a fraction of a second, the air thickened with tension — the kind that snapped bones when miscalculated.

Shi Min stood up abruptly, paced once, twice, and then spun on his heel.

"You don't know how?" His voice cracked.

"You had her. You had everything. And when Mom needed just one thing — your hand — you let it go."

Chu Yan looked at him, throat constricting.

Shi Min's voice dipped again, quieter, deadlier.

"Mom trusted you when the whole world only ever took from her. She chose you. You were supposed to be the one man she never had to fight for."

The silence that followed wasn't empty.

It was suffocating.

Four Eyes turned his head away. "I was surprised to see the face... She's Clarissa..."

"I know who she was supposed to be," Shi Min snapped. "But didn't your soul feel something was wrong? Or were you still so tangled in the past that you couldn't see the woman right in front of you?"

Four Eyes' chest rose sharply, eyes closing. Pain throbbed — not from Otako's wrath, but from the deeper wound he now knew he deserved.

"I didn't want to hurt your mother," he whispered.

"But you did," Shi Min said, cold. "She left the altar alone. And you weren't unconscious yet."

Silence.

Then, softer, but no less painful:

"I'll take care of her. You rest."

And with that, Shi Min turned and walked toward the door, shadows trailing behind him like the shards of a bond yet to be repaired.

Shi Min's fingers froze against the cold steel handle.

That voice — strained, hoarse, almost swallowed by pain — should've vanished under the pulse of adrenaline roaring in his ears. But his hearing, trained sharper than any ordinary man's, caught it like a whisper laced with regret.

"...you all misunderstood."

Shi Min turned slowly, his eyes hard, unreadable.

Four Eyes sat half-upright now, face pale, trembling slightly, his breath was still uneven. But there was a truth there, buried under bruised pride and months of silence, clawing its way out.

Shi Min said nothing. He waited — his silence louder than fury.

Four Eyes' throat tightened, but he pushed through. "I wanted to tell your mom... about something important," he began, voice thick. "I was waiting for the right moment. But... a few days ago, something changed."

He paused to steady his breath, then raised his gaze to meet Shi Min's.

"After my breakthrough... I don't know what to call it — but it gave me the ability to hear... things." Four Eyes tapped the side of his head gently. "Thoughts. Intentions. Not all the time — not clearly — but if I focus hard enough and the connection is strong... It's like standing inside a room that isn't yours, listening."

Shi Min's brows furrowed — his fury giving way to calculated curiosity, trying to decipher if this was guilt or confession.

"I didn't recognize that woman," Four Eyes continued. "I knew it wasn't Clarissa. I'd... buried her years ago. I'd confirmed it myself, beyond doubt. But when I saw that woman walk in, pretending to be her..."

He swallowed hard. "I wanted to know who the impostor was, what she wanted. If she was being manipulated."

"And instead of acting," Shi Min said tightly, "you froze."

"No," Chu Yan shook his head. "I was trying to read her — but I was still holding your mom's hand."

A beat passed. "And all I could hear... was her."

Shi Min's chest tightened.

"I couldn't shut it out," Chu Yan said, tears welling now. "Your Mom's thoughts were louder than anything I've ever heard. Every ounce of pain. Her fear. Her heartbreak. I wanted to act, but I couldn't concentrate. I failed, Shi Min."

He pressed a hand to his temple. "I tried to pull away — not from your Mom — but to break the connection, to think clearly. But the moment I did, it looked like something else."

He looked up, eyes rimmed red. "It looked like betrayal."

Shi Min stood frozen.

Something in his shoulders dropped — not forgiveness, not yet — but the first dent in the armor of doubt.

"I love her; I love your Mom very much. And this family." Chu Yan whispered. "That never changed. But I couldn't protect her — not the way I promised."

A long silence passed.

Then Shi Min exhaled — sharp, shaky, almost inaudible.

"...Do you still love her enough to fight for her now?"

Chu Yan's eyes locked with his. And this time, the answer was fire.

"Yes. Always. And it will never change."

Shi Min turned fully, the air between them beginning — just barely — to thaw.

"Then you'll get one chance to prove it," he said. "Because the next time you hurt her, no breakthrough in the world will save you from me."

And without another word, he stepped into the hallway, already reaching for his communication link.

Ling Li was out there.

And she wouldn't wait forever.

The ride back to the mansion was quiet, but the kind of silence that sat between two warriors after a battle — tense, simmering, thick with unsaid truths, and barely bridled urgency.

Inside the black vehicle, the smell of antiseptic still lingered faintly on Four Eyes' suit.

The crisp air from the car vents fluttered against his face, cooling the emotional sweat still damp on his brow.

He sat upright beside Shi Min, eyes cast out the window. But the reflection he saw wasn't of the sea.

It was of himself, back at the altar, watching the woman he loved turn and walk away.

Every heartbeat since has been penance.

He shifted slightly, glancing at Shi Min with hesitation, then opened his mouth.

"Shi Min... Is your mom pregnant?"

The question dropped like a stone.

Shi Min's eyes narrowed slightly. His grip tightened — not visibly. But the silence that followed veered toward dangerous territory.

Chapter 243: HE'S KNEELING AT THE GATE

Shi Min remembered his mother's words from last month — her smile subdued, her hand unconsciously hovering over her abdomen. "I'll tell your stepfather about this on our wedding night as a gift and surprise," Ling Li said with excitement.

Shi Min didn't answer at first. Instead, he threw the question back to his stepfather. "Why are you asking me?"

Four Eyes exhaled, his voice softer now but sincere. "I heard it. From your mother's thoughts. Right before everything fell apart." His brows furrowed as he tried to recall more. "She was trying to focus... to stay calm. But she was worried. About the baby. About what the stress would do."

Shi Min's eyes flicked to him for a brief moment before returning to the road, his jaw tightening with a quiet fury.

"How long have you had this ability?" he asked.

"Since the breakthrough," Four Eyes replied. "I was still adjusting... trying to understand how to manage what I hear. At first, I could only read people through touch — but now, it's... getting louder. I can hear other thoughts just by looking."

Shi Min let out a low breath. "Then you already know what's at stake."

"I do," Chu Yan answered.

"Then ask her yourself," Shi Min said flatly. "If she lets you."

There was a beat of silence before Four Eyes murmured, "Thank you, Shi Min."

A dry chuckle escaped Shi Min's throat — barely there, edged in disbelief.

"Don't thank me yet."

Their car turned sharply at the next intersection, the sea breeze curling through the opened sunroof, cutting the tension like a whetted blade.

"You'll have to explain everything to my mom. Every word. Every pause. Every thought you didn't say when you should have. You'll have to stand in front of her and make her believe you again."

Shi Min's voice turned steely, expression unreadable. "And if you lie—or falter — don't wait for Otako. You'll deal with me first."

They drove on in silence.

The cliffs curved into sight, revealing their mansion in the distance — its ancestral towers flanked by mountains and shrouded in rolling mist. It loomed like a citadel of refuge and reckoning all at once.

Inside those stone halls was the woman whose trust had once been a fortress.

And now, rebuilding it would take more than love — it would take war.

The fortress-like gates of the mansion loomed before them — ancient, iron-forged, and wreathed in the early hush of dusk. The ocean wind tangled the rose bushes along the outer walls, and somewhere within, the woman both men loved was searching for air between the cracks of heartbreak.

As the security personnel recognized the incoming vehicle and signaled to open the gates, Four Eyes suddenly unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the car door.

"Paps?" Shi Min turned sharply in his seat. "What are you—"

But Four Eyes was already stepping out onto the stone-paved path, the shadow of the towering estate reflected in his determined eyes. Without hesitation, he dropped to his knees.

PLOP!

"Paps," Shi Min called again, incredulous now, pulling open the passenger door. "What are you doing?!"

Four Eyes didn't flinch. His palms rested against his thighs, back straight, head bowed — but his voice, when it came, was clear and unshakable.

"I'll wait here."

Shi Min took a step forward, half-staggering between frustration and awe.

Four Eyes didn't look up. "I'll wait here, like this, until she comes out. Until she's ready. Until I'm someone she can look at again and not flinch."

The gates groaned open behind them, the road now clear, but still he did not move.

"I failed her, I failed your Mom," Four eyes said softly, the ache layered in every syllable.

"Not just today. Not just on the altar. I made her feel like she had to carry everything on her own. And now... she is. Again."

Shi Min stared at his stepfather, the wind brushing past both their coats.

"You think kneeling here will fix that?" he asked, voice lower, cracking at the edges.

"No," Four Eyes replied. "But I have to start somewhere."

He looked up — not at the castle — but at the balcony where her lights were still dim, her silhouette absent.

"I'll be here when she's ready. Or until my body gives way. But I won't run, not again."

Shi Min's fists clenched at his sides. He wanted to shout, to drag him back into the car, to storm into the castle himself and tear down the walls that now stood between them all.

But instead... he nodded once.

Then turned to the guards.

"Watch over him," Shi Min muttered. "It's going to be a long day."

Shi Min let him be, and he rushed into the mansion.

The halls of the Ling estate were quiet, not with peace, but with the heavy hush that follows a broken symphony.

Shi Min's footsteps echoed through the marble corridor, purposeful and fast, each stride slicing through the tension that still clung to the walls like smoke from a fire.

He passed the dining room, the music salon, the guest atrium — until he reached her chambers.

The door was ajar.

He didn't knock.

Inside, Ling Li stood beside her open wardrobe, dressed in slate-gray slacks and a fitted black jacket that clung to her like armor. Her hair was still pinned in soft waves from the wedding, but her face — bare of makeup now — was carved from focus and exhaustion.

She was folding clothes into a travel pack with military precision: undergarments, tactical outerwear, a sealed satchel of spiritual seals, and acupuncture needles. Her ceremonial jade ring rested on the nightstand beside a small black blade she hadn't worn since her last mission in Tibet.

Shi Min entered with a muted breath. "Mom."

Ling Li paused.

Her back remained turned, one hand tightening on the fabric she was folding.

"I'm leaving for Bayside Castle tonight," she said flatly. "Ren and Lily are staying here. The twins will remain at the penthouse until I return."

"Mom," Shi Min repeated, softer now.

She still didn't turn.

"Paps is outside," he said finally. "He's kneeling at the gate."

At that, Ling Li froze.

Slowly, she placed the folded jacket down. Her hands stayed pressed to the edge of the dresser, gripping the wood like it might splinter beneath her palms.

Chapter 244: YOU MISUNDERSTOOD HIM

"You should bring him to the infirmary instead." Ling Li nonchalantly said.

“I did. He’s fine. Or... healed enough to walk,” Shi Min replied carefully. “And he walked with me. But the moment we reached the gates, he got out of the car and dropped to his knees. Said he would stay there. Said he’d wait until you were ready to forgive him.”

Silence. Tangible. Suffocating.

Ling Li drew a long breath through her nose, then finally turned.

Her expression was unreadable — but her eyes... they were tired. Older than yesterday. Older than battle.

“That man,” she whispered bitterly, “who promised me forever... couldn’t even hold my hand through a moment.”

“He didn’t let go because of her,” Shi Min said. “He let go because he was trying to find the truth. He’s not proud of it. But he’s not lying.”

Ling Li’s stare flicked to her son. Measured. Controlled. And then softened — only slightly.

“I’m not leaving to punish him,” she said after a long beat. “I’m leaving because if I stay, I won’t be able to separate what’s real and what I imagined. Right now... I need to remember who I was before him.”

“You’ve never forgotten, Mom.”

Ling Li looked away. Her hands returned to the suitcase.

“Do you want to speak to him?” Shi Min asked.

“No,” she said, closing the bag with a firm zip. “If he wants to speak to me... he can get up off his knees and face me.”

She shouldered the bag and walked past Shi Min, pausing at the door.

But then—

She turned, just for a moment.

"If he's still out there by dawn," she said softly, "offer him tea."

Then she left the room, her footsteps fading down the hall with quiet finality.

The wind pulled at the sheer curtains of the corridor's arched windows, casting shifting shadows on the marble floor as Ling Li moved down the hall like a woman possessed — not by fury, but by the need to move, to act, to escape the weight behind her ribs that refused to uncoil.

She didn't hear the sound of padded footsteps at first.

But then—

"Mom, please wait."

Shi Min's voice — firm, urgent — echoed through the silence like a blade slicing through fog.

Ling Li stopped—but she didn't turn.

She stood at the threshold to her study, her fingers gripping the polished brass door handle tightly. Her shoulders rose and fell with quiet restraint, her back a fortress.

"You misunderstood him," Shi Min said, pacing forward but careful not to rush her. "Paps... he knew the woman was an impostor."

Ling Li's fingers twitched.

"He wasn't paralyzed by grief. He wasn't drawn to that woman. He was trying to find out who she really was by reading her mind."

At that, Ling Li slowly turned, her eyes narrowed in restrained disbelief.

"You're saying... he let go of me to listen to her?"

"No," Shi Min clarified, stepping closer. "He let go because he could only hear you."

A pause.

Ling Li blinked, but her expression didn't soften.

Shi Min pressed forward, a note of pleading entering his voice now. "Paps gained a new ability after his breakthrough. At first, he could only hear thoughts when touching someone, but recently, he said he can hear clearly even at a glance."

Ling Li's brows furrowed, skepticism trembling behind her composed exterior. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"He was going to." Shi Min's tone dropped lower, his hand balling into a fist at his side. "But he didn't want to burden you until he understood it better himself. He was waiting for the right moment."

Her arms folded slowly across her chest, as if holding herself together. "So instead, he chose our wedding day — the one moment I needed him — to let go and listen to someone else?"

"I saw him afterward," Shi Min pushed on, voice cracking with emotion. "He was destroyed. Not by what happened, but by what you thought happened. And I brought him here so he could tell you himself."

The hallway stilled.

Ling Li looked at her son for several heartbeats, her gaze still shadowed with the ache of betrayal, but her breaths had lost their edge.

Shi Min stepped closer, no longer the son or the strategist, but the only soul brave enough to bridge the fracture between two hearts.

"You know me best, Mom. I would never let anyone hurt you," he said, his voice heavy now. "I've seen how Paps looks at you when he thinks no one's watching. I've seen how you soften when he walks into a room, even if you don't say a word. He cares for you like you're the last light in a broken world."

Ling Li's jaw clenched.

"I know you love him too," Shi Min added, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Don't let this misunderstanding turn into regret."

Ling Li blinked slowly, her hands loosening around her arms.

Then, finally, she said nothing but took a step toward the window.

The wind danced through her hair. And outside, just barely visible beyond the courtyard trees, she could see Four Eyes — kneeling before the gate, unmoving, unwavering, the weight of his remorse heavier than the cold stone beneath him.

Her heart shifted.

Not forgiven.

Not yet.

But moved.

As Ling Li turned down the corridor, her bag slid off her shoulder with a muffled thud against the marble floor.

She didn't break stride.

"Mom, where are you going?" Shi Min called, the urgency in his voice rippling down the long hallway as he chased after her, worry etched into every line of his face.

Ling Li's footsteps didn't falter. Her voice was calm but cold, as though spoken from a place far away.

"I'm going to consult the Heavens. I want to be alone."

Shi Min halted.

The words struck him like a stone thrown into deep water. They reverberated. Final. Absolute.

Shi Min watched as his mother turned down a corridor flanked by twin gilded lion statues. This path led to her private chamber of invocation.

No one followed her there.

No one dared.

Behind that obsidian-laced door with no handle was a sanctuary reserved for moments when mortal reason failed — and only divine insight would suffice.

Inside, the room radiated a still, golden energy. The air itself seemed to hum, heavy with unseen forces.

Chapter 245: WEARING PENANCE LIKE AN ARMOR

The walls were lacquered obsidian overlaid with protective calligraphy — ancient talismans and ancestral scripts sealed by blood oaths. At the center lay a circular mat of pure golden weave, its intricate pattern woven from sacred threads passed down through generations of celestial bloodlines.

Before the mat stood a polished pedestal bearing the three sacred tools:

A golden dagger, its curved edge imbued with star-metal filigree, resting on crimson silk.

A gilded cup, carved with twelve eyes, each belonging to a different divine constellation.

A thick scroll, locked shut and trembling faintly beneath an unseen wind, unopened since her last invocation.

Hanging from a silver hook was her celestial robe, threaded with rune-stitched gold that shimmered like flowing sunwater.

Ling Li disrobed with quiet grace and donned the robe with ceremonial precision. She breathed in deeply, centering herself, then stepped barefoot onto the mat.

With practiced fluidity, she lifted the dagger. Her hand did not shake.

She slit her left palm — a clean, precise cut — and watched the crimson stream trickle into the golden cup. Her blood hissed as it touched the vessel, reacting to the age-old enchantment etched within.

And then—

She chanted.

Her voice — low, ancient, shaped by syllables no longer spoken in this age — filled the chamber. Ling Li's eyes glowed faintly with inner light. The robe lifted slightly around her as wind spiraled upward from the stone beneath.

Then, without warning—

A massive eye opened midair, unblinking, iridescent, ancient.

It blinked once, and the heavens unraveled.

Galaxies, memories, divergent timelines — they poured into her sight, as if reality itself had been peeled back. She saw herself. Her unborn children.

Ling Li's breath caught as a vision flickered—

Four Eyes, kneeling at the gate. Still. Resolute, his hands scarred, his soul wide open in anguish.

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Meanwhile, outside the estate...

The sun was high behind the western cliffs, casting elongated clouds across the estate's outer wall.

El Padre and El Capitan approached from opposite flanks — each sensing that the estate's atmosphere was wrong. Too quiet. Too weighted.

They rounded the entrance curve and halted mid-stride.

There, at the gates — kneeling in the moonlight — was Four Eyes.

His hands rested on his thighs, blood speckled on his knuckles from bracing the hard stone. His suit coat was draped over his shoulders, but the night air had begun to bite, reddening his fingertips.

El Capitan's nostrils flared. "So it's true. Shi Min did bring him back."

"If he hadn't, I would have by now," El Padre said flatly, crossing his arms. "Though I had plans to leave this guy with a few fractured ribs first."

El Capitan grunted. "How long's he been out here?"

"Not too long." El Padre's voice carried a faint measure of reluctant respect.

Still kneeling, Four Eyes slowly opened his eyes and looked at them, not flinching, not apologizing, but neither pleading.

"Welcome back," he rasped, voice hoarse. "I deserve everything. But I'm not moving... not until she speaks to me herself."

El Capitan raised a brow. "She might not. Ever."

"I'll still be here," Chu Yan whispered.

El Padre exhaled, then exchanged a look with his brother-in-arms.

"This man's either a fool..." he muttered.

"Or finally a fighter," El Capitan said.

They didn't interfere.

Not this time.

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Back inside the mansion, the gilded sconces in the Ling estate's grand hall cast flickering shadows across the high ceiling as Shi Min paced like a storm bottled into human form. His polished boots clicked sharply on the marble floor, each stride laced with tension, lips pressed into a hard, unyielding line.

The living room doors opened.

El Padre stepped in first, his long coat still dusted from the road, followed closely by El Capitan, whose eyes scanned the space out of habit even as they entered friendly ground.

They saw Shi Min before he saw them. He was muttering to himself — half-measured phrases, fragments of contingency plans, the kind of restless strategizing done only by someone who feared stillness.

"Where's your mother?" El Padre asked, straight to the point.

Shi Min turned to face him, his expression taut. "She's in the chamber. Consulting the heavens."

El Capitan's brows lifted faintly, settling into one of the plush armchairs with the quiet heaviness of a man who'd seen too much and stayed sharp anyway.

"Did the guests get back safely?" Shi Min asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

"No need to worry about that," El Capitan replied with a dismissive wave, already tugging at his gloves. "We handled it. Shuttled every last guest to their accommodations. Nobody dared make a fuss with us there."

"And the press?" Shi Min asked.

El Padre gave him a tight nod. "Silenced. The cathedral footage never made it past internal feeds. Anyone who saw something has already forgotten it. We bought you time."

Shi Min exhaled sharply, shoulders dropping for the first time since the chaos unraveled.

But the room didn't feel any lighter.

"She's been in there longer than expected," he murmured.

"She's not searching for an answer," El Padre said, arms crossed. "She's searching for whether she wants one."

El Capitan leaned forward, elbows on his knees, gaze steady. "We saw the groom. Still kneeling."

Shi Min didn't respond right away.

"He won't leave," he finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "He said he'd wait until Mom forgave him, or his knees gave out — whichever came first."

El Capitan gave a low hum. "That man's wearing penance like armor. You sure he's still worth the fight?"

Shi Min didn't blink. "Yes. I saw his eyes when he spoke to me. He's not broken... just bleeding. But he's still standing."

The tension between the three men hovered in the quiet, each one wrestling with their own measure of loyalty — to Ling Li, to her legacy, and to the man who had once let go at the worst possible time.

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And above them, deeper in the estate, the wind whispered across the locked chamber doors — where a woman clad in starlight and pain had just glimpsed her future and was now deciding whether to accept it... or rewrite it entirely.

Inside the invocation chamber, the golden eye blinked once more — and closed.

Silence swept through the space, profound and absolute.

Ling Li exhaled, her breath trembling slightly as the connection severed. The last trace of starlight faded from her irises.