

PROTEGE 246

Chapter 246: I'LL NEVER LET GO, EVEN IF THE WORLD SPLITS OPEN

Ling Li lowered the golden cup with both hands, now half-filled with her own blood, and pressed a silk bandage across her palm with practiced calm.

But inside, her heart thundered.

What she had seen... was not a warning. It was a choice.

There had been three futures. One steeped in betrayal and shadows. One drenched in cold sorrow. And one—faint, flickering — built on a path not yet walked, where forgiveness shaped fate.

And in all three, Chu Yan had stayed on his knees beneath her gate.

She rose slowly, the robe's hem whispering across the mat, and walked to the basin to cleanse her hands. The crimson swirled down the drain like vanishing threads of fear.

The golden light from the setting sun stretched long across the marble floor as the doors of the sacred invocation chamber finally slid open.

For hours, no sound had escaped it—it-no flicker, no ripple. Only silence and tension that coiled tighter with each passing minute.

Now, the silence broke.

By the time Ling Li stepped out of the chamber, she had changed.

Not into silence. Not into fury.

But to resolve.

Serene yet unreadable, her celestial robe replaced by a grey jacket that hugged her frame like armor. Her hair was tied high in a warrior's knot, not a single strand out of place. Her movements were fluid, eyes forward, every step deliberate — like a blade drawn slow and final from its sheath.

In the grand sitting room, Shi Min, El Padre, and El Capitan stood from their seats the moment they heard the inner door shift open.

"Mom—" Shi Min started.

"Ling—" El Padre stepped forward.

"Madam—" El Capitan said, voice low.

But Ling Li didn't stop.

Didn't acknowledge them. Not even a glance.

Ling Li passed by, her gaze fixed beyond them, beyond the confines of the estate, beyond this fractured moment.

Her footsteps echoed through the living room like thunder beneath velvet. Each squeak of her boots against marble sent chills rippling up Shi Min's spine.

Shi Min blinked, momentarily stunned. "She didn't even look at us."

El Padre's brows drew together. "She's made a decision."

El Capitan adjusted the ring on his thumb, eyes narrowed. "The question is, which one?"

Without a word, they moved.

All three men turned and strode after her in synchronized urgency, the polished floor flashing beneath their steps as they followed the commanding figure of a woman who had seen futures and now moved as if destiny were catching up to her heels.

Outside the estate, the air had shifted—the world holding its breath.

And at the gate... still kneeling, blood drying on his knuckles, heart trembling beneath his ribs — Four Eyes.

Would she speak?

Would she pass him by?

Would she save him — or leave him to drown in the silence he had once chosen?

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Four Eyes' knees had gone numb, but he didn't shift. He won't. Not if the wind bit deeper. Not when the stars changed places. Not even when the moon drifts high above the sea cliffs.

He knelt there not because he was told to do so.

He knelt because his soul wouldn't allow him to rise.

Then—

A sound.

Soft footsteps across stone. The unmistakable rhythm of Ling Li.

The estate gates opened with a gentle groan.

Ling Li stepped forward.

No guards. No words.

She came alone.

Her hair was tied in a simple twist, her grey cloak cinched tightly at her waist, eyes clear and unreadable under the faint torchlight.

Four Eyes looked up, pain and hope clashing in his expression like two storms fighting for the same sky.

For a breath, neither spoke.

Then, Ling Li drew in air like a blade being unsheathed.

"Why didn't you look at me," she said quietly, "when I needed to see your eyes the most?"

Four Eyes' lips parted, and his voice was hoarse.

"Because I couldn't look at you and lie," he whispered. "And I was afraid... if I looked too long, I wouldn't hear the truth I was trying to find."

"And instead," she said, eyes flashing, "you made me believe everything else was louder than me."

He nodded once, trembling. "That's the failure I carry now."

Silence again.

Ling Li stepped closer. His heart thundered.

"You told Shi Min," she said slowly, "you'd wait for me. No matter how long."

"Yes."

"And if I never forgave you?"

Four Eyes' chin lifted. "Then I would have waited until the bones in my knees turned to dust."

A pause.

Then Ling Li's voice dropped — not softer, but deeper, carved from vulnerability carefully unraveled.

"I saw the truth," Ling Li said. "With my own eyes. And more than that — I saw you. In every version of the future I could choose."

Four Eyes' breath caught.

Ling Li crouched before him now, her face inches from his.

"If I take your hand again," Ling Li said, "there will be no more others. No more questions. Only us. Can you still carry that?"

"I will," Four Eyes whispered. "I already do."

Ling Li stared for one more breathless moment.

And then — slowly, with trembling grace — she reached out and placed her hand in his again.

Not gently. Not hesitantly.

Completely.

And when their fingers touched, a breath passed between them, weightless and seismic all at once.

Not a sound stirred on the grounds of the estate.

Not the whisper of the wind through the cypress trees. Not the murmured hush of the guards at the walls. Not even the low voices of El Padre, El Capitan, and Shi Min, who had halted at a respectful distance, witnessing from the shadows with bated hearts.

Four Eyes let out a ragged breath, as if he had just been released from a ten-thousand-pound weight he didn't even realize had been crushing him. His hands trembled as they closed around hers, reverent, like a man touching sunlight he thought he'd lost forever.

"I'll never let go again," he breathed, voice barely louder than the wind. "Even if the world splits open."

Ling Li searched his face.

There were no more masks there.

No more armor.

Just him — laid bare, bleeding, aching, but still here.

Ling Li's expression softened — not melted, not surrendered, but opened like a steel lotus that had chosen, with precision and grace, to bloom on her own terms.

"Then get up," she said, voice low.

Four Eyes blinked.

Her grip on his hand tightened ever so slightly.

"Get up, Chu Yan," Ling Li repeated — this time with a note of command threaded with something gentler.

Chapter 247: ONLY US

"Because if I'm standing again... I won't do it alone." Ling Li said.

Four Eyes rose — not quickly, not dramatically, but with the kind of steadiness that came from knowing you were being given one final chance.

And when they stood face to face, eye to eye under the golden sky, a hush seemed to fall over the estate.

Then—

From a distance, Ren, Lily, Kim Kim, and Chin Chin, together with Pharsa and Mushu, had just arrived to witness this scene. The twins were crying loudly and demanding to go home to see their Mom and Dad, so Ren decided to come back without Shi Min's knowledge.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin let out synchronized gasps and squeals of delight. "Mama's holding hands with Papa again!" Kim Kim shouted, tugging on her flower girl's sash like it might help her fly down faster.

Ren and Lily had appeared at the archway, blinking back emotion with soft smiles as Pharsa stepped into the light behind them, her arms crossed and her lips twitching faintly.

El Padre tilted his head. "Seems the tide turned."

El Capitan smirked. "About time."

And Shi Min exhaled — deep and long — as his shoulders relaxed, the tension washing from him like rain off armor.

Ling Li looked up at Chu Yan and gave one steady nod.

"No more misunderstanding," she said again. "Only us."

His eyes glistened. "Only us."

Hand in hand, they turned toward the house.

And though the day had unraveled, though a thousand things still needed to be repaired...

This was how they chose to begin again — not with vows in silk and ceremony...

But with truth, bruised knees, and a love that refused to shatter.

The moment fractured — like sunlight through stained glass — as Ling Li halted mid-step, her voice calm but unmistakably laced with command.

"Are you all just going to stand there and not come in?"

She didn't look over her shoulder with softness — she looked back like a general beckoning her unit to fall in line.

Behind her, at the end of the driveway, the group blinked as if released from a trance.

"Ah! We're coming!" Ren cried out, breaking the standoff with a breathless laugh and tugging at Lily's sleeve.

But before the sisters could herd the littlest ones forward—

Kim Kim, and Chin Chin broke free.

Tiny feet smacked against stone as they bolted forward with squeals of joy, their flower gowns fluttering like capes behind them.

"Mama!" cried Chin Chin.

"Papa's standing again!" Kim Kim added proudly, as if she had conjured it by magic.

They ran full speed until Ling Li crouched just in time, catching them against her like a wave meeting the shore. One in each arm, she closed her eyes briefly, burying her face in their hair with a breath that wasn't quite a sob, but close.

Chu Yan stood frozen for half a second... then moved. He crouched beside them, carefully wrapping all three into his arms — his family, if they would still have him.

The moment — messy, unscripted, raw — was perfect in ways the ceremony never had the chance to be.

Behind them, Pharsa approached slowly, her eyes glistening just a little as she watched the twins chattering away at both parents.

Lily stepped forward, stunned. "Did we just..."

"Did we just witness Mom forgive Paps?" Ren murmured, blinking.

Shi Min let out a breath like it had been held for a century. "Not forgiven. Not yet. But she's walking with him. That's something."

El Padre leaned over to El Capitan, arms crossed. "You owe me tea. I told you she wouldn't make him grovel all night."

El Capitan grunted. "That wasn't groveling. That was penance done right."

"...."

As everyone finally stepped onto the threshold of the mansion behind the reunited family, the estate gates shut softly behind them, sealing the moment away.

Inside, light spilled from the chandeliered foyer — warm, welcoming, and real.

Whatever came next would not be a perfect fairytale.

But it would be theirs.

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The living room had barely settled into a fragile calm when Shi Min, still standing at full attention with arms rigidly crossed, spoke with cutting precision.

"Mom, tell me. Since when do you know that Nina was alive?"

The temperature in the room dropped by degrees.

Ling Li, seated in the high-backed armchair with Chin Chin in her arms, didn't flinch. She tilted her head slowly and met her son's eyes — cool, unreadable, calm as still water in a sealed jar.

Shi Min took a step forward. "Don't look at me like that. I could tell the moment that woman walked into the cathedral — you already knew who she was. Now, tell me."

Pharsa, seated by the window, went still. Ren and Lily glanced between their brother and mother like a storm was beginning to gather. El Padre and El Capitan shifted subtly where they stood at the far side of the room, arms crossed, saying nothing, not wanting to be caught in the middle of crossfire — yet watching everything.

Ling Li sighed as if they were discussing the weather.

"Oh, that." Ling Li leaned back casually, eyes flicking to the ceiling as though trying to remember whether she had left the stove on. "I saw her in a medical cabin at Camp Phoenix. Hooked to life-support machines. Unconscious. Breathing, barely. Didn't expect her to wake up again."

The room didn't breathe.

"You what?!" Shi Min's voice sharpened, a note of disbelief laced in steel. "You saw Nina. Alive. And you didn't tell us?"

Ling Li lifted her teacup, sipped.

"Sorry," she said flatly. "I forgot." Not only did she forget, but she also omitted the part where she had seen Nina awake, pretending to be unconscious.

The silence cracked under the weight of that.

Shi Min's eye twitched as he pressed his hand to his forehead, a soundless exhale hissing between his teeth. He turned slightly, just enough to keep from saying something harsh, his entire body tense with the effort of reining in emotion. His knuckles had gone white.

"Mom..." he said slowly, voice tight. "You forgot that Nina, whom we all assumed to have been dead, was alive in a lab, and you just — what? Skipped over that fact while planning your wedding?"

Chapter 248: END THE DAY RIGHT

"Nina was clinically dormant," Ling Li replied with casual chill. "You know how many people I've seen on that edge? I didn't think she'd wake up. I had other battles to fight."

El Capitan looked away with a grunt. El Padre raised an eyebrow, but remained still. Lily bit her lip, clearly unsure whether to speak.

Shi Min held his mother's gaze. "You do realize the trauma that one moment caused everyone today? You could've prevented all of it."

Ling Li finally set the teacup down, eyes narrowing faintly.

"I wasn't expecting a resurrection and an ambush," Ling Li said. "But had I told you, what would you have done? Wasted workforce watching a corpse? Or worse, alerted the people behind her. I put a tracker on her, but I completely forgot about her, to be honest."

Shi Min opened his mouth to protest — and hesitated.

Ling Li's tone softened, but only slightly. "I've lived my entire life choosing the lesser price between truths that cost me everything. This time... maybe I miscalculated. I'm sorry."

Shi Min stared at his mother, a mix of frustration, admiration, and that helplessness reserved only for children who realized their mother would never stop being one step ahead... even when she was wrong.

"..."

'Yeah, even when she is wrong,' Shi Min shook his head, breath catching with something just shy of laughter.

"You drive me insane," he muttered.

Ling Li smiled a little. "It keeps you sharp."

The silence in the parlor was thick, the air still ringing faintly from the heated discussion between mother and son. But now, that tension had softened, cut by exhaustion, swallowed by the remnants of relief still lingering on everyone's shoulders.

Shi Min leaned against the marble column near the center of the room, arms crossed over his chest. He gave the ornate wall clock a brief glance and exhaled, shaking his head with a breath of dry humor.

"It's only three in the afternoon," he said, tapping the dial on his watch twice. "The twins' birthday celebration was supposed to start at seven, remember? We still have time to salvage today. Why don't we push through with it — end this day right?"

Everyone looked up. Even the chandelier seemed to pause its subtle sway, as if unsure whether to believe joy could find a place again today.

Pharsa was the first to nod, her elegant posture relaxing as she rose from the settee with a small smile. "I agree. We still have time to inform the guests. I'll take care of the logistics."

Just then, a rustle of movement snapped their attention back—El Padre, stretching his shoulders like a man preparing to recite war history, cleared his throat. "And the wedding?" he offered grandly, raising one thick brow. "We can conduct a proper Chinese ritual. Nothing too elaborate. We keep it clean, simple, and sacred. I'll preside."

The statement hadn't even landed before El Capitan scoffed so hard his arms practically flew off the back of the armchair. "Excuse me?" he barked, leaning forward like a wronged general. "Why would you preside? Let me do it!"

"You?" El Padre growled, shooting him a look of incredulous offense. "You can't even recite the tea blessing without mixing up the incantation! I was trained by Master Guo personally!"

El Capitan narrowed his eyes. "You say that like the man didn't fall asleep halfway through your lecture. At least I don't put half the crowd to sleep!"

"Ahem." El Padre squared his shoulders, straightened his lapel, and sniffed haughtily. "I am your senior, you arrogant storm drain."

"Tch — You're just proud that you're already old." El Capitan snorted, arms crossed.

Laughter burst through the room like wind cracking open a window.

Ren and Lily, who the staircase had quietly perched, now doubled over with wheezing giggles. Even Pharsa cracked a smirk, one perfectly arched brow lifting toward the heavens as she muttered under her breath, "Here they go again."

From where he stood by the window with Kim Kim, Four Eyes gave a soft laugh, shaking his head. The small smile tugging at his lips held warmth, gentleness, and — most notably — relief.

His eyes drifted to Ling Li, who sat poised and quiet beside Chin Chin, a teacup balanced perfectly in her palm.

Ling Li had been silent through the exchange, watching — measuring — and letting the storm swirl around her like silk in the wind.

And then, she glanced at Shi Min.

The flicker in her gaze was unmistakable now: affection.

Resolve.

Peace.

"Then," Ling Li said finally, her voice smooth and certain, "let's follow your arrangement, Shi Min. Let's end this day in celebration."

Everyone turned.

Shi Min smiled faintly, the tension finally cracking away from his shoulders like old armor flaking off.

"Then I'll handle the guests," he said with a nod. "And Mom?"

"Yes?"

"You'll wear red tonight."

Ling Li's brow arched, teasing. "And what if I don't feel like red?"

Four Eyes grinned from behind her, eyes sparkling. "Then I'll wear enough of it for both of us."

Laughter again — louder this time, unchained and bright.

It wasn't just a celebration.

It was a choice.

To rebuild. Together.

And this time... with no ghosts left lurking between the cracks.

Everyone got busy and went on with their task.

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The Arrival at the Grand Phoenix Imperial Hotel

As dusk settled over the city, the streets near the Grand Phoenix Imperial Hotel turned into a living mosaic of glinting headlights, velvet ropes, and velvet power.

A convoy of sleek machines lined the avenue in a queue that shimmered like a moving constellation of steel and chrome. Lamborghinis wrapped in obsidian matte, Rolls-Royces customized in imperial jade, and vintage Bugattis with silk tassels fluttering on their hood ornaments purred one by one toward the circular driveway. Each car bore a crest — either of corporate prestige, old martial bloodlines, or political dynasties too discreet to name.

Valets in ceremonial gold-trimmed uniforms opened doors with synchronized bows. The security detail was well-selected from Ling Li's various camps, coordinated subtly behind the scenes, and received nods of respect from elder council members and high-society nobles alike. A power parade — subtle as a thunderstorm behind silk—marched into the hotel's gilt-glass doors.

Inside, the hotel lobby gleamed under hanging crystal lotuses and walls lined with silk-paneled mural screens depicting ancient battles and celestial feasts.

This wasn't just a banquet.

It was a return to order.

Chapter 249: THE TWINS BIRTHDAY BANQUET

Kim Kim and Chin Chin's Birthday Banquet – Orchid Pavilion

The transformation of the Orchid Pavilion that evening was nothing short of celestial. As the last rays of sunset kissed the sky in strokes of peach and indigo, the banquet hall came alive with enchanted splendor.

Golden lanterns floated midair like tiny suns held by threads of magic, choreographed to move in a slow, elegant ballet across the ceiling. Beneath them, floral arrangements spilled from crystal towers like waterfalls — snow peonies, baby's breath, and sakura blooms cascading in soft pinks and whites, woven with strands of starlight. The scent of wild osmanthus mingled with sugared vanilla and cherry blossom mist, carried by hidden aromatic vents in the marble columns.

At the far end of the hall stood a raised, whimsical forest stage, built just for the occasion. Glowing trees — crafted with fiber-optic vines and sapphire-crystal leaves — framed the background. Mechanical butterflies with translucent wings fluttered gently around a silken throne shaped like a crescent moon, waiting for the birthday queens to ascend.

Then, the chatter softened.

The crowd, young and old, turned.

Hand in hand, Kim Kim and Chin Chin emerged through a veil of falling petals at the top of the stairs. They were radiant, beaming with wide, unguarded delight.

Their matching red organza dresses flared like poppy blossoms in spring, the skirts layered with delicate petal tulle. Rose gold butterflies danced across the fabric, catching every glint of light as they twirled. Moonstone lotus clips adorned their sleek side buns, catching the subtle highlights in their hair.

"Welcome, everyone!" Chin Chin blurted excitedly, gripping the child-sized microphone with white-knuckled ferocity before freezing mid-breath. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes darted to the sea of staring faces, children, diplomats, generals, entertainers, and ancestral elders — all glimmering in silks and power.

Chin Chin leaned in, whispered, "I forgot what to say..."

Kim Kim, not missing a beat, stepped forward with the poise of a tiny empress. "Thank you for coming to our party! Our wish is for more cake and no bedtime!"

The room broke into spontaneous applause and laughter, the tension dissolving like spun sugar.

Ren gave her sister an exaggerated thumbs-up behind her back. "Nice save."

Ballerinas, dressed in glimmering chiffon, spun onto the stage with silken fans. They leapt like wind spirits beneath the lantern glow, accompanied by a quartet playing enchanted music boxes in glass domes. In the eastern corner, acrobats in cloud-white robes balanced porcelain tea sets on swords and fans — each movement a whisper of martial artistry.

Near the buffet line, a transparent koi pool rippled softly under the floor. Robotic koi — programmed with synchronized pattern swimming — glided under guests' feet, their iridescent scales casting fractured rainbows across the marble. Of course, these were all Mushu's efforts, and he had been bragging about them for days, like a broken record.

Children ran between crystal flower hedges playing augmented-reality treasure hunts. Adults whispered praises of the spectacle, but their eyes occasionally drifted to the woman seated quietly at the edge of it all.

At the heart of the Orchid Pavilion, perched atop a crystal turntable beneath a floating ring of lanterns, stood the twins' birthday cake: a three-tiered masterpiece sculpted with breathtaking artistry, specially crafted by Chef Leon.

Bottom tier: A cascading forest of edible cherry blossoms in soft blush and ivory, with sugar-carved butterflies "landing" delicately on each petal. A shimmer of pearl dust made the florals seem as if dew-kissed under morning light.

Middle tier: Crafted to resemble a moonlit koi pond, this layer's translucent pale-blue fondant reflected like rippling water, complete with hand-painted lily pads, koi fish in metallic orange and gold, and even miniature glowing lanterns that pulsed softly beneath a sugar-glass dome.

Top tier: Shaped like a storybook tower, the twins' fairytale castle stood proud, turrets spiraling into spun-sugar spires, each window aglow with edible LED lights. Their names were scripted in golden sugar ribbon curling around the base, beside two miniature fondant figurines of Kim Kim and Chin Chin, one with a red bow, the other with a moonstone clip.

And crowning the entire cake?

A butterfly carousel spun slowly, suspended above by clear wires—crafted from wafer paper and brushed in iridescent hues, the wings flapping ever so slightly as if magic held them aloft.

When the lights dimmed and the candles were lit, the entire cake seemed to glow from within, casting dancing shadows across the giggling faces of the twins.

Chin Chin gasped. "It's our whole dream!"

Kim Kim leaned in, wide-eyed. "Is it too pretty to eat?"

"..."

Spoiler: it wasn't.

And every slice carried the sweetness of wonder, celebration, and a day that turned from ruin... to magic.

As Chef Leon said, for Kim Kim and Chin Chin, it couldn't be just any birthday cake. It had to be a centerpiece of enchantment, a confection so fantastical it looked as though it were whisked straight out of a dream.

*** Would you like a taste of the twins' favorite layer? I can describe the flavor as if I were right there.

After the twins blew out the flickering candles on their birthday cake, a burst of laughter and excitement rippled through the garden. They dove into a lively playtime with a vibrant group of friends who had

come along with their parents from Ling Li's circle. Everyone hoped their little ones would bond and leave a delightful impression on Ling Li's twins.

Among the children, Chatty stood out like a star, his charisma shining bright. With a fluffy Enfield draped around his neck, he exuded an air of smugness as the other children gathered around him, enchanted.

Children circled Chatty like stars around a proud little sun.

Chatty puffed up his chest, adjusting the Enfield around his neck as if it were a superhero's cape.

The children's hands reached out to pet the soft fur of the Enfield, which responded with gentle affection, making it even more irresistible.

"Careful," Chatty said with exaggerated importance. "He only lets cool people pet him."

A wide-eyed boy named Basti clutched a half-eaten donut. "Is he a dog or a tiger? Or, wait — does he talk?"

"No, silly," said Kim Kim in a very childish voice. "He's an Enfield. That's like a unicorn, but fuzzier and smarter."

Chatty nodded sagely.

Chapter 250: A PARADE OF POWER AND PECULIARITY

To Old Master Li, Chu Yan knelt with her head bowed as he offered tea. The old master took the porcelain slowly, sipped from it, and placed it down with reverent silence.

Old Master Li then reached forward and gripped Chu Yan's forearm.

"You are her anchor now. Never forget who she is... even when she forgets herself."

Chu Yan nodded, voice breaking as he said-

"I won't. Not again."

To Madam Li, Ling Li handed her mother the cup with quiet grace. The older woman smiled, eyes glistening, and tucked a moonstone pin into Ling Li's sleeve before whispering-

"A daughter returns to us only once. This time... you brought us a son too."

The Final Blessing

As the tea cups emptied, both sets of elders rose and presented the couple with red silk pouches — each embroidered with gold dragons and cranes, tied with mystic knots. Inside were heirloom rings, imperial bonds of land, and handwritten blessings from three generations past.

El Padre stepped forward again, unrolling a red silk cord between his palms.

He circled it lightly around the couple's wrists, binding their hands together.

The red silk cord draped between their wrists fluttered as the last words of the blessing rang through the courtyard, solemn and eternal.

"By Heaven, Earth, and the ancestors as witness... this union is now blessed!"

In the distance, drums rumbled like distant thunder, followed by the lilting resonance of zithers trailing across the evening breeze. The sounds layered over each other — ancient, sacred, and soothing — as if even the heavens themselves paused to bear witness.

All around them, guests rose to their feet in a wave of reverent applause. Silk sleeves rustled, jade bracelets chimed, and voices murmured soft praises and toasts in a dozen languages.

Ling Li and Chu Yan stood in the center of it all, their hands still tied, their eyes locked. They weren't smiling — they were glowing. Not with giddiness, but with something ferocious and rare: a promise no storm could unravel.

There was no altar behind them.

No signatures.

No performance.

Only conviction—and the echo of a vow that the world had no power to undo.

Then—

One by one, the line of guests began to move forward.

First came the Russian President, who bounded forward with theatrical flair. His gruff laughter filled the space before he even reached them.

"Ah! You finally marry her, Chu Yan!" he bellowed, giving Four Eyes a hearty slap on the back that made the jade dragons on his robe tremble. Then he turned to Ling Li and made an exaggerated bow, nearly tripping over his boots. "Madame Ling, you have more patience than an army of monks."

"Only for him," Ling Li said smoothly, lips curving.

"Ha! I knew it!" He raised a crystal goblet. "To patience, vodka, and survival!"

He toasted, drained it in one gulp, and promptly knocked the empty glass against his forehead with a satisfied grunt before staggering off, swaying to the music.

Next came the Cuban President, striking in white linen robes and sunglasses that he wore indoors, of course. He sauntered forward like a man in a music video, flanked by two silent attendants in turquoise uniforms.

He didn't offer a smile. Instead, he eyed Chu Yan from head to toe, then turned to Ling Li with a dramatic sigh.

"You really went through with it, querida?" The Cuban President asked in slow, stylized Mandarin.

Ling Li gave a patient nod. "Without hesitation."

"Hmm," he clicked his tongue, handing her a tiny carved box wrapped in cigar leaves.

"Then may you both burn bright... but not burn out."

Ling Li "...."

'Should I receive his gift or not?'

The Cuban President snapped his fingers and glided away, trailing cologne and mystery in equal measure.

Then came the Chinese President — the man who had once stammered through a speech in Ling Li's presence after mistaking her silk fan for a coded diplomatic weapon.

This time, though, he walked with more grace, though his cheeks still glowed a shade too red.

"Madame Ling," he greeted, his hands tight around a delicate cup of rose tea. "And... esteemed husband. Congratulations. The country rejoices with you."

"Even the Ministry of Protocol?" Ling Li teased, tilting her head.

The Chinese President laughed nervously. "Even them. Especially them."

He handed over a scroll embossed with imperial lacquer. He fled with the elegance of a man who'd practiced this exact interaction in a mirror.

The next to arrive walked more slowly, but with equal reverence.

Tutor Chen and Tutor Ma.

Tutor Chen had aged — his back slightly hunched, hair a storm of winter white. But his eyes burned sharp behind his round spectacles. He bowed low to Ling Li, then straightened with effort, nodding proudly.

"It took a phoenix some time to choose her sky," he murmured, voice rich with emotion.

"But I've never seen one fly so boldly."

Tutor Ma — quiet as ever — stood behind him, her expression unreadable until he stepped forward and placed a folded page of poetry in Ling Li's hand.

It was her favorite verse from childhood, copied by hand.

"Take your sky," Tutor Ma said simply. "And share it."

Ling Li pressed the poem to her chest for a beat, then tucked it into her sleeve.

El Padre and El Capitan approached together, arm in arm like bickering sentinels disguised in celebration.

"I told you this day would come," El Padre said, thumping Chu Yan on the chest. "And I told you it would hurt if you fumbled it. You're lucky I didn't follow through."

El Capitan raised a brow. "Tsk. He still deserves one kick in the ribs, just to balance the narrative."

"Try it," Chu Yan muttered under his breath with a half-smile.

Ling Li sighed fondly. "Not during our wedding."

"Oh fine," El Capitan relented, then slipped a miniature blacksmith's token into her palm.

"For the battles ahead."

A Tide of Love Across the World

After that, came a parade of colors and cultures:

A desert queen from the Middle East, who gifted a sandglass with enchanted time to protect their household.

A Scandinavian tech lord, who offered two rings infused with micro-chips to track each other's vitals — "Just in case of more drama," he winked.

Cousin Mei and Uncle Chen, who wept openly while handing over a scroll of the Ling family tree, updated with gold ink.

And dozens more — friends, warriors, diplomats, eccentrics — each bringing a thread to stitch this day into forever.

Some offered quiet nods. Some clasped hands. Some smiled and stood aside, watching the couple like one might watch the sea at sunrise, not needing to speak to feel moved by it.