

## PROTEGE 256

### Chapter 256: FOUR EYES' INNER SPIRAL

Early the next morning, light streamed through the latticework windows of the bridal chamber, bathing the silk-covered bed in soft gold. Ling Li stirred slightly, her lashes fluttering like butterfly wings — slow, delicate, and hesitant — only to find Four Eyes already awake, lying beside her with an unyielding gaze.

His glasses had slipped to the tip of his nose, yet he hadn't moved. He was studying Ling Li's face as if trying to memorize every curve of it.

"Do you like what you see?" he asked, his voice playful yet husky with warmth.

Ling Li blinked, then snorted. "Aren't you the one staring at me while I was sleeping?"

"Oh, I loved what I was looking at," he replied unabashedly, slipping an arm around her waist and tugging her into him. "So I kept staring. I may have fallen in love for the twentieth time."

Ling Li chuckled, burrowing briefly into his chest before pulling away. She sat up, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, her expression shifting to something more contemplative. "Honey... I have something to tell you."

Four Eyes' heartbeat thudded. The sudden shift in tone made his breath hitch. His fingers subtly clenched the blanket, knuckles pale. His mind was already running wild. 'We just reconciled yesterday. Did I do something wrong? Did I miss anything? Did I not perform well?'

"Tell me," he said, struggling to keep his voice even. His eyes, however, betrayed the creeping anxiety.

Ling Li tilted her head, eyes mischievous. She saw how anxious Four Eyes was and couldn't resist the urge to tease him.

"Um... Let me think... what was it again?"

"You—!" Four Eyes narrowed his eyes in mock annoyance. "Don't toy with me, wife. Spit it out."

Ling Li broke into laughter. "Alright, alright, you're way too impatient."

"I'm desperate. Don't make me wield the information out of you." His smirk deepened. "Five rounds of morning exercise. Your choice."

Ling Li's face lit up with alarm. "No, no, no! I'll tell you now," she said quickly, giggling as she dodged his playful reach.

He leaned in, eyebrows arched with anticipation.

"Chu Yan," she said, her tone shifting into gentle gravity.

"Um..." he said, already sensing something life-altering.

"I'm pregnant."

Silence.

"OK."

Then Four Eyes blinked — once, twice — before springing forward, grabbing her shoulders. "Say it again!"

Ling Li "..."

Ling Li let out an amused sigh. "I said I'm pregnant!"

Four Eyes' breath left him in a rush. He surged in, planting a quick, fervent kiss on her cheek before enveloping her in an embrace that nearly knocked her backward.

"Honey! Thank you! I'm so happy! I'm going to be a father again!" His voice cracked with elation, and his grip tightened as though he feared she might vanish if he let go.

Ling Li gently peeled herself from his embrace. "Chu Yan... I'm not done yet."

His brow furrowed. Giving Ling Li a questioning look.

Ling Li grinned, a dimple curling at the corner of her mouth. "I'm pregnant — not with one baby, but three. It's triplets."

Four Eyes froze.

"!!!!"

His mouth opened slightly, but no sound escaped.

As Ling Li's words echoed through the chamber, Four Eyes remained perfectly still. His eyes twitched slightly, his mouth hung open with no sound, and his brain began firing warning signals like temple bells in the middle of a storm.

For the first time since their wedding, Four Eyes — ever articulate, ever dramatic in front of Ling Li — was stunned into complete speechlessness.

Ling Li tilted her head. "Cat got your tongue?"

Still no reply.

Then Ling Li burst out laughing, the sound echoing through the morning-lit chamber like wind chimes in spring.

Four Eyes' Inner Spiral:

'Triplets.'

'Three. Not one. Not two. Three.'

'Triplets. Not trip-wristlets, not trip-sips of morning tea. TRIPLETS.

Three baby diapers at once. Three sleepless cries. Three sets of shoes. Will I ever sleep again? Will my hair survive this?'

Four Eyes blinked slowly, his entire brain grinding to a halt like an ancient abacus trying to calculate nursery expenses. He stared at Ling Li, who looked entirely too calm for someone who had just dropped a life-changing bomb made of three tiny humans.

'First, we had twins... now triplets!'

His mind played it back in slow motion: diapers, bottles, crying at three different pitches, simultaneous midnight wails... 'What was next? A whole basketball team?'

"..."

'Why do our babies arrive in bulk? Are we subscribing to some kind of premium package?'

Four Eyes inhaled sharply.

'Breathe, Chu Yan. You're a smart businessman. You defeated many companies using only your pinky toe. You can handle three babies.'

He blinked again.

Then he felt something... strange.

'Wait. Why am I smiling? Why do I feel like my lungs are full of cherry blossoms?'

Because beneath the panic and the mental crisis, he was already planning, there was a pure, unfiltered joy.

Four Eyes looked at Ling Li, radiant and calm, and felt it hit him square in the chest.

'I need to call the bank. And a spiritual consultant. Possibly both at the same time.'

Four Eyes blinked one more time.

'We made three whole people. Together. My wife is amazing. She's a goddess. And I... I'm a sleep-deprived legend-in-progress.'

Then his gaze settled back on Ling Li, glowing with mischief and joy, and all his spiraling thoughts settled into one truth:

'I wouldn't trade this for anything. Not even silence. Or naps. Or personal freedom.'

Four Eyes gave Ling Li a dazed but devoted grin, eyes glassy with shock and love.

"We're going to need a bigger rice cooker," he muttered to himself.

Ling Li, who has sharp ears "...."

He grinned slowly, still clutching her hands. "Three little dumplings," he whispered reverently, before dramatically collapsing back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling as if trying to negotiate peace with the gods of parenting.

Then Four Eyes realized something, "Wife, did I hurt you last night? I was too rough! Will the babies be alright? Should we go for a check-up?"

His questions amused Ling Li. She doesn't know which to answer first.

"The babies are fine, and there's nothing to worry about. I can always protect them with my internal energy."

"Ah! Really! That's great! Honey, you are truly awesome! That means there's no need for the three-month abstinence!" Four Eyes happily said.

Ling Li "...."

'Did I shoot myself in the foot?'

#### Chapter 257: BREAKFAST BURST OF JOY

Later that morning, the dining hall buzzed with clattering plates and chattering voices. The long mahogany table was cluttered with steamed buns, fried eggs, mango slices, and the occasional spilled tea.

Ren and Shi Min were locked in a chopsticks duel over the last piece of taro cake.

Lily, demure as ever, sipped her milk and tried to ignore the flying crumbs.

Fatty beside her was already on his third helping, occasionally pausing to give food reviews out loud: "The congee this morning — tender, silky, perfection. But the scallion pancakes? A little aggressive."

Chatty chimed in between bites: "You said the same thing yesterday."

"I stand by it," Fatty said solemnly, stuffing his mouth again.

Shun, dressed in a crisp white shirt that was entirely inappropriate for a family breakfast, sat beside Ren, clearly nervous, flinching every time one of her siblings threw food or launched teasing attacks.

Ling Li and Four Eyes entered together, hand-in-hand.

Everyone turned.

Before anyone could speak, Four Eyes cleared his throat with theatrical flair. They announced, "Everyone... I am now a warrior of destiny. My wife and I—" he gestured toward Ling Li grandly and smugly, "—are expecting not one, not two... but three babies!"

Silence.

Ling Li was quite amused by Four Eyes. Known as a man of few words to others, he nonetheless made the announcement.

Ren dropped his chopsticks.

Shi Min choked on his soy milk, despite knowing about his Mother's pregnancy beforehand.

Fatty stopped chewing mid-bite.

Chatty yelped, "Triplets?! We're being overrun!"

Lily gasped softly, eyes round as mooncakes.

Shun blinked slowly and mumbled, "Congratulations, Uncle..." then leaned toward Ren and whispered, "If this runs your family, we might need a bigger house. Remember, my mom also has a twin sister."

Ren recovered first. "It's not us who have the genes, it's Paps." The Ren turned to her Mother, "I want naming rights to one!"

Shi Min stood up dramatically. "I'm going to start training as a babysitter. I heard babies respect discipline."

Everyone "...."

Fatty's eyes sparkled. "More mouths to feed... we'd better increase our cooking capacity by fifty percent!"

Chatty began making a list of possible names in his head: 'Steam Bun, Noodle, and Dumpling?'

Ling Li laughed until tears brimmed in her eyes, and even Four Eyes had to hold his sides as he joined in.

Breakfast Burst of Joy:

"Mom, two more and we're a basketball team!" Lily yelped.

Shi Min couldn't help but 'cough, cough, cough...' when he heard Lily.

"You! You and your big brother are truly blood-related! That's exactly what he said to me when he found I'm pregnant with triplets." Ling Li said with a loud snort.

"Ha ha ha ha! Mom, it's not that we are complaining! We just think you're amazing! Multiple babies, two sets in a row!" Shi Min sheepishly said while scratching his nose.

"Heh!" Ling Li gave Shi Min another playful snort.

Just as Fatty tried to defend his seventh pancake from Chatty's unsolicited critiques, two small figures skidded around the dining room corner with the velocity of spinning tops, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, identical in mismatched socks and morning-bedhead glory, with a nanny following behind.

"Sorry, we're late!" Kim Kim called out breathlessly.

"We were chasing butterflies!" Chin Chin added proudly, even though one sock was hanging off her foot and the other had a mysterious smear of mango on it.

The twins paused at the threshold, blinking at the scene before them.

Plates were half-empty, adults were grinning, and there was a palpable buzz of joy hanging in the air.

Kim Kim tilted her head, perceptive even through groggy eyes. "Why is everybody so happy?" she asked with genuine curiosity.

Ren, already puffed up with pride as the newly self-appointed Herald of Big News, shot up from his seat and dramatically pointed his chopsticks toward the heavens. "Kim Kim, you're about to level up! Mom is pregnant!"

There was a collective pause. Then—

"Woah!" Kim Kim gasped, hopping on one foot. "I'm going to be a big sister! Yes!" She threw her arms into the air like she'd won a festival game.

"Me too! Me too!" Chin Chin echoed, jumping up and down beside her in synchrony.

"We should call them Bubble or Sparkle!" Kim Kim declared.

Four Eyes, who had just refilled his tea, choked.

"Bubble? Sparkle?" Chatty blinked. "Are you naming siblings or snack flavors?"

'Heh! Chatty! Weren't you thinking of Steam Bun, Noodle, and Dumpling earlier?!' Snort. Snort. Snort.

Fatty tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. I could live with a niece named Dumpling."

Shi Min pointed at the twins. "You two will have to share your toys now. And your crayons. And maybe your favorite hiding places."

"I'm ready!" Kim Kim said, puffing her chest. "I'll teach them how to hide in Grandma's rice bin!"

"..."

"And how to steal cookies!" Chin Chin added proudly, earning a horrified gasp from Ren and a coughing fit from Shun.

"!!!!"

Ling Li laughed so hard she had to set down her teacup.

Four Eyes looked at the chaos he had helped create — two sets of twins, a table full of honorary troublemakers, and a whirlwind of joy — and thought:

'First, we had twins; now we have triplets. The universe is testing me.'

And yet, as he looked around the table, where dumplings were traded like currency and laughter flew like confetti, he couldn't help but think he'd never felt richer.

And amid the laughter, clatter, and wild proclamations, the family braced themselves — joyfully, chaotically — for the newest members of their dynasty.

Before the joyful breakfast could fully dissolve into laughter and clinking cups, Ling Li cleared her throat softly but firmly. "Ehem," she said, her voice slicing through the hum of morning chatter. Every gaze shifted toward her, the warmth of the moment replaced by still, attentive quiet.

"I have an important announcement to make," she began, her eyes scanning each familiar face with quiet intensity. "Much has unfolded over the past weeks. The two-year deadline Otako set for us to assume control of the Chinese government is looming fast. And on top of that, we face the threat of Solaris... not to mention Lily's International Dance Sports Competition and the Asian Gymnastics showdown."

A hush settled over the table as the weight of her words sank in.

#### Chapter 258: ORDERS BEFORE THE STORM

"First things first," Ling Li continued, her voice gentler now, "tomorrow, Chu Yan and I will return home to serve tea to my parents. It's a tradition I won't neglect, even amid chaos." Her gaze flicked to the twins. "You'll come with us with your grandparents."

She turned to Shi Min with a steadied breath. "Shi Min, continue your training with Lily. I know your long absence from work troubles you, but this moment requires full focus. Otako has recalled the Samurai from Heavenly Valley. That means Solaris will strike, likely on the day of the competition. You must be prepared."

Shi Min nodded firmly, his eyes dark with resolve. "I'll resume my training today. Lily and I will push beyond the choreography. It won't just be dancing — it'll be a diversion."

Lily gave a quiet nod of agreement. "I can make it look convincing."

"Good," Ling Li replied. "That's what I need."

Ling Li inclined her head in gratitude, then looked to the rest of the group. "We must enter Chinese territory discreetly. Moving as a large unit will draw too much attention."

Her gaze settled on Ren and Shun. "You two will continue your training in Beijing. I've arranged everything. Reginald will accompany you, along with Nicu and Ailun, who have both been training with Otako. One of Otako's Samurai will oversee your martial arts training and act as your shadow guard, and Dr. Norman, one of the androids, will be assigned to stay by your side."

Ren leaned forward, voice tight with urgency. "Mom... when do we leave? And... when will you come join us?"

Ling Li turned toward Ren, her gaze calm yet heavy with the weight of strategy. The morning sunlight glinted off her earrings as she folded her hands with deliberate poise, an empress-like composure.

"Soon," she said gently, but her voice carried the gravity of thunder just beyond the hills.

"You will leave by the end of the week. The timing is critical. I will join you in stages, once the tea ceremony is complete and the tides around Solaris begin to shift."

Shun leaned forward, nodding respectfully but unable to hide the spark of adrenaline surging in his veins. "What should we prepare, Auntie?"

Ling Li's eyes flicked toward him, measuring. "You will continue your espionage studies, master the Chinese government and constitution. And enhance your martial arts the furthest you can."

Shun nodded as he gave Ren's hand a reassuring squeeze.

Ling Li remained composed, her tone unwavering as she turned toward Quan Ye. "You have one week to prepare," she said, her words deliberate. "Then you'll depart for Belgium. The transfer of your business has been complete for over a year — it's thriving."

Fatty's lips parted, but nothing came out.

Ling Li continued without pause. "Your parents have already settled there, thanks to Mushu's arrangements. They're waiting for you. It's time to solidify your image, not just as an entrepreneur, but as a European businessman. A symbol of our global reach."

Fatty swallowed hard. The room had grown quieter still.

Ling Li's gaze sharpened as she concluded, "Goldie will be at your side. He will assist and train you. Do not slack, Quan Ye."

There was no room for protest, no thread of leniency in her voice. Her words rang like a verdict.

Fatty blinked slowly, his usual bravado muted by the weight of responsibility suddenly thrust upon him. He turned helplessly toward Lily, his eyes searching hers for comfort, assurance — perhaps even a lifeline. But she only gave him a soft, encouraging nod, her fingers brushing his beneath the table.

Fatty "...." He truly wants to cry, but no tears come.

Ling Li leaned slightly forward, her tone lower now, confidential. "Shi Min, I want your opinion," she said. "I'm considering transferring Camp Phoenix to Myanmar — gradually, of course. Suppose we're going to confront the Chinese government head-on. In that case, it's only a matter of time before the President tightens his grip and accuses us of violating the law. El Padre agrees with this course."

Shi Min narrowed his eyes, thoughtful. His fingers found his chin as he scratched absently, a quiet gesture that betrayed the swirl of calculations behind his composed exterior.

"It's a good idea," he said finally. "We should move all firearms and specialized equipment first, and discreetly. If we wait too long, we risk losing everything in a crackdown. There's no room for hesitation."

Ling Li nodded, her expression steely. A flicker of resolve passed between them — leaders and strategists bound by a shared sense of impending risk.

"Mushu," Ling Li said, her tone crisp and deliberate, "make all the necessary arrangements. Coordinate thoroughly with Dane and El Padre—no missteps."

She shifted her gaze to the window, where the dusk shimmered with quiet promise.

"El Padre has secured everything in Myanmar. The location is ready; it's waiting for us."

There was a weight behind her words, the kind that carried history and expectations.

Ling Li turned back to Mushu, her expression unreadable.

"You don't need to accompany me tomorrow. This operation is now your domain. Make it airtight."

A subtle nod followed, barely perceptible.

"Pharsa and Rockie will come with me."

Mushu straightened, already recalibrating.

"Yes, Madam. I understand," he replied, the faintest edge of urgency undercutting his measured voice.

"Eh, what about me? What about me?" Chatty's hand shot up like a schoolboy desperate not to be overlooked. His voice was laced with mock distress.

Ling Li's lips curved into a soft chuckle just as Pharsa leaned in and pinched his side.

"Ouch! Honey, I'm just saying — I got worried the Madam forgot me," Chatty whined, rubbing his waist with theatrical flair.

Ling Li crossed her arms, amusement twinkling in her eyes.

"Murphy, I never forget my people. You and Pharsa are coming with me tomorrow."

She let the weight of her next words settle around them.

"After that, you'll focus on your training at the race track. With Pharsa keeping you sharp, it's time to carve your name into the racing circuit. I expect you on the starting line before year's end."

Chatty puffed up instantly, pride lighting his face.

"Ah, yes! Rest assured, Madam!" he chirped with infectious cheer.

Pharsa snorted beside him, half amused, half exasperated, already bracing for the whirlwind her partner promised to be.

Ling Li's voice carried a quiet finality as she addressed the room.

Chapter 259: APOLOGY OR SELF-SABOTAGE?

Ling Li continued, "Everyone has their destination and their task to fulfill. No loose ends."

She paused, letting her gaze sweep across the group — one part command, one part reassurance.

We regroup in Vienna, two days before Lily and Shi Min's dance competition. That's the rendezvous. A month after that will be Lily's gymnastics competition. Afterward, everyone will head to Hidden Valley. The 'Eye' should be opening by then.

"Eye? Is it like the eye you open when you call the heavens?" Lily asked.

"No," Shi Min interjected. "The 'Eye' in Hidden Valley only opens every four years. All cultivation practitioners who don't yet have cultivation techniques come to try to grab one. The luckier you are to get a higher grade or a rare cultivation technique, the better. The 'Eye' will only be open for three days, and many of you will be participating in this event from different sects around the world."

Everyone needs to be careful, vigilant, but also aggressive. It's important not to be targeted by other sect members. We can discuss more about this when the time comes," Shi Min said.

A breath of silence hung in the air, taut with purpose.

"Any questions?" Ling Li asked, though her tone suggested there should be none.

When no one responded, she nodded once.

"Good. Then keep to your day's plans. Stay sharp."

The dining hall had finally quieted, the echo of laughter and chopsticks fading into the golden morning light. Only Ling Li and Four Eyes remained, seated at opposite ends of the long table that had just hosted what felt like both a family breakfast and a covert operations briefing.

Four Eyes leaned forward. Brow furrowed with a seriousness that didn't quite match his tousled hair and tea-stained sleeve. "Wife," he said solemnly, "we're going back to your parents' place tomorrow, and I can't go empty-handed."

Ling Li, brushing crumbs from her lap, paused mid-motion. Her expression was calm, but her eyes flickered with subtle amusement. "I already asked Butler Peng to prepare everything. You don't need to worry about it."

Four Eyes looked affronted, as though she had just robbed him of a sacred rite. "How can that be?" he exclaimed, waving a hand. "A man should show effort. I can't just walk in with polished shoes and marital titles."

Ling Li studied him, lips twitching with reluctant affection. She knew this side of him — the stubborn sense of honor. There was no persuading him out of it.

With a sigh, she gave in. "Alright. Take Mushu with you — he knows what to buy for my parents."

Before she could finish the sentence, Four Eyes leapt from his seat, planted a quick kiss on her cheek, and darted out of the hall with the speed of someone fleeing domestic imprisonment.

"Mushu!" he hollered down the corridor.

Ling Li called after him, half amused, half exasperated. "Don't buy anything weird!"

The Gift Mission Begins:

Four Eyes found Mushu in the courtyard, mid-bite of a bun stuffed with taro. Mushu nearly choked when Four Eyes breathlessly explained his urgent need for culturally respectful, parent-approved gifts.

"Ah!" Mushu exclaimed, eyes wide as he wiped his mouth.

"Old Master Li loves chess — especially carved stone sets. He's a connoisseur of aged teas. Doesn't smoke, but he collects cigars like they're jade relics."

"Got it... got it..." Four Eyes muttered, trying to compose a shopping list mentally. "Tea. Chess. Collectible cigars."

"And Old Madam," Mushu continued, adjusting his sleeves, "adores painting and calligraphy. Nothing mass-produced. Think scrolls that whisper poetry."

Four Eyes scratched his head, looking suddenly like a student who'd just failed the entrance exam. "Where do I even find this stuff? I can't show up with a gift basket of regrets."

Seeing his panic mount, Mushu smirked. "There's one solution. El Capitan."

Four Eyes froze. "!!!!"

Just the name sent a chill down his spine. El Capitan — the enigmatic underground boss with military precision and the aura of an ancient warlord — was no casual vendor. His tea came with origin stories, his cigars with unspoken threats.

Four Eyes remembered the encounter last night vividly at their wedding: El Capitan sipping green tea brewed with glacial water, staring at him as if assessing his entire ancestry.

"He still deserves one kick in the ribs," El Capitan had said.

The words echoed again.

"Don't embarrass her..."

"I'll call," Four Eyes said at last, voice resigned but noble. 'Even if he makes me play chess blindfolded first.'

Four Eyes paced the veranda, the morning mist curling around his ankles as if trying to stall him. His phone felt unusually heavy in his hand.

He took a deep breath and dialed the number.

One ring.

Two.

The line clicked. No greeting. Only a low exhale followed by the faint sound of classical guzheng strings.

"Is this a call of apology," came El Capitan's voice, "or self-sabotage?"

Four Eyes froze mid-step, his free hand instinctively patting his chest like armor.

"Neither. It's a call of tribute and trade, Sir."

A pause. Then the unmistakable sound of a porcelain teacup being set down.

"I see. You are seeking supplies... for the Madam and the Tea Day Ceremony."

"Yes." Four Eyes tried to steady his voice. "Gifts for Old Master Li and Madam Li. Tea, cigars. Perhaps a painting scrolls if your vault hasn't sealed itself shut."

Another pause.

"I have a set of Da Hong Pao that's older than your lineage. A batch of cigars was once offered to the Premier of Romania and declined for fear of addiction. As for scrolls... a Tang dynasty original."

Four Eyes gulped. "Any chance I could pay in banknotes?"

El Capitan snorted. "You married Ling Li. You pay with respect. I'll decide the rest."

Then, as if fate needed drama, El Capitan's voice dropped a note lower.

"But there will be one condition."

Four Eyes tensed. "...Chess?"

"No. I'm done humiliating you on that board. This time, you will deliver the gifts personally, wearing ceremonial robes, to the elder Li at sunrise."

Four Eyes blinked. "Sunrise? That's in, like, sixteen hours."

"And you will not complain. Or I will resume chess. Blindfolded. With firecrackers."

There was a clicking sound — perhaps the sharpening of a calligraphy brush. Four Eyes stood straighter.

"I accept the terms," he said with noble dread.

"Good," El Capitan said. "All the gifts will be waiting for you at the airport. Then don't embarrass her."

Click.

The line went dead.

Four Eyes stared at his phone, then sighed deeply.

'Sunrise. Robes. Diplomacy by antique cigar. I need help.'

#### Chapter 260: LOVE IN THE GARDEN, PAIN IN THE DUNGEON

Four Eyes burst into their room like a whirlwind. Ling Li, who had just begun organizing suitcases, turned at the commotion.

"I did it," he announced breathlessly. "I called El Capitan."

Ling Li raised one elegant brow. "You... what?"

Four Eyes nodded, face a mix of pride and hauntedness. "I agreed to El Capitan's conditions. We serve tea at sunrise. Robes are mandatory. Gifts are to be delivered directly to the airport. And no complaints, or I face firecracker chess."

Ling Li blinked, then snorted, then held her face in one hand as if trying not to burst out laughing. "Honey, you've changed. You've become talkative and funny. Is it the effect of our wedding or my pregnancy?"

And you even agreed to these conditions. Did El Capitan make these conditions for you?"

Four Eyes gave a solemn nod, arms folded like a martyr awaiting judgment.

Ling Li's eyes narrowed. Her lips curled. "That brat," she said with a dangerous smile. "I'll beat him to death."

"Wife, not yet!" Four Eyes yelped. "Let me get the gifts first. Then — by all means — he's all yours. He he he."

Ling Li sighed dramatically. "Fine. But tomorrow morning, you are wearing a robe. Full ceremonial set. No shortcuts."

Four Eyes grimaced. "Do I have to wear the hairpiece too?"

Ling Li smirked. "Absolutely."

Then she spun toward the dresser and whipped out her phone. "Pharsa," she said into the receiver, already shifting into command mode, "we're leaving now. Tell Mr. and Mrs. Xu to pack immediately. And no delays — we serve tea at six sharp tomorrow morning. Ask Mushu to prepare all travel provisions."

Four Eyes blinked as Ling Li pivoted into battle logistics.

She's terrifying when she's focused, he thought. Beautiful. Efficient. Slightly terrifying.

Ling Li turned back to him, one brow lifted. "You're still standing there. Go. Pack. Now."

Four Eyes saluted. "Yes, General Wife."

Not long after, they were already on the private plane.

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Otako's Dungeon

At this time.

In the depths of one of Otako's foreboding dungeons, Nina finds herself thrown into a dimly lit cell, her hair a tangled mess. Her clothing tattered, cast aside like a broken doll — a testament to the turmoil she endures.

She is wracked with agonizing pain that grips her body like a merciless vice, attacking her with relentless ferocity twice a week. Each wave of suffering is so excruciating that it paints her thoughts with a dark longing — she often wishes for the sweet release of death to escape this unending torment. The cold stone walls seem to echo her silent agony, amplifying her despair as she fights to cling to even a flicker of hope amid the shadows that surround her.

Before her stood Butler Oda, a stoic figure clad in dark formal attire, flanked by five of Otako's fierce Samurai, their armor glinting menacingly under the dim light. The atmosphere was tense, charged with an unspoken anticipation as they prepared to interrogate her. Yet, as their eyes fell upon her, they were met not with defiance, but with a sight that spoke of vulnerability and weariness, a stark contrast to the formidable presence of her captors.

They watched as Nina winced and flinched, each wave of pain causing her to cry out in anguish. Desperately, she curled into herself, collapsing onto the cold floor. Her body trembled uncontrollably, a violent shiver that radiated from deep within. In a fierce grip, her fingers clenched, the sharp edges of her nails biting into her palm, drawing droplets of blood that trickled down her skin.

The clock ticked on, dragging time into an excruciating two-hour stretch, and Nina found herself teetering on the edge of consciousness. Each moment felt like a heavy weight pressing down on her, suffocating her spirit. In the depths of her mind, she often yearned for a way to escape, wishing

desperately to vanish or simply fade away whenever she found herself entangled in this relentless torment. A solitary tear slipped down her cheek, a silent testament to her struggle, reflecting the pain she couldn't quite articulate.

Realizing that questioning Nina was out of the question at this moment, Butler Oda turned to one of the guards with a firm yet compassionate expression.

"Go find a servant in the household," he instructed, his voice steady, "and have her assist Nina with washing up. She must be given water and food; after all, she is still Master Chu Yan's sister."

The guard nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. As Butler Oda and the five Samurai departed, their presence radiated authority, leaving a weighty silence in the air — a stark contrast to the warmth of the familial ties they were momentarily upholding. They planned to return that night, determined to revisit the fragile thread of connection between Nina and her past.

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Meanwhile

Late Afternoon, Garden Veranda of the Mansion

The light was soft, the kind that gently melted gold into the edges of clouds. Fatty sat in his wheelchair near the koi pond. His arms crossed, lips pressed into a flat line. His usual gleam of charm was gone, replaced by a shadowy sulk that had settled over him like a storm cloud since morning.

Lily approached, her practice shoes slung casually over one shoulder, hair damp from training. She paused beside him, one hand on her hip.

"You've been glaring at the lilies like they insulted your ancestors," she teased.

Fatty didn't reply. He shifted his gaze away, pretending to adjust his wheelchair as if it had wronged him, too.

Lily sighed and knelt beside him, lifting a gentle finger to poke his cheek. "You're not even hiding the sulk anymore. Your whole face is darker than my soy sauce bottle."

"Not sulking," he muttered.

"You are."

Fatty finally looked at her, and the intensity in his eyes nearly startled her. "They're sending me to Belgium," he said, each word heavy. "In a week. A week. That's... seven sunsets away from you."

"I know," Lily said softly.

Fatty's fingers clenched the armrests. "I want to be here. With you. Through every rehearsal, every turn, every fall. You shouldn't be alone out there."

"I won't be," Lily said gently. "Shi Min's training with me. And the others will be around. I have a team. You have a future."