

PROTEGE 261

Chapter 261: FATTY'S COUNTDOWN

"But you're my present." Fatty declared.

Lily blinked, taken aback, then touched his hand. "That's the sweetest protest I've ever heard."

Fatty leaned forward slightly, voice low and raw. "You're always so calm. So collected. Like it doesn't hurt. Like it's just another item on a schedule."

"It does hurt," Lily admitted. "I just choose to carry it differently."

Fatty searched Lily's face for a crack, any sign that she'd break her resolve — but she was steady. Not unfeeling, just enduring.

"We don't have to be beside each other every second to walk the same path, Ye," she said. "We both have things to build. Yours is in Belgium. Mine's on the stage. But we'll meet again — stronger. Not apart. Just... apart for now."

"Can't I just cancel everything and live in your suitcase?" Fatty whined.

Lily laughed — finally — and pressed her forehead to his. "You're ridiculous."

"I'd even wear leotards if it meant being close," Fatty said with a pout.

"Please don't," Lily teased, her nose crinkling.

He sighed dramatically. "So this is how it ends... heartbreak and gym socks."

"It's not the end," she whispered. "It's a stretch. Like a perfect extension. Hold it for a while... and we'll be back in sync."

Quan Ye held her gaze, then finally sighed with reluctant acceptance.

"Still gonna sulk, though."

"Allowed," Lily said. "Just not while I'm trying to balance on one leg."

Lingering Affection

Fatty pulled Lily gently into his arms, holding her as if shielding her from the breeze curling through the corridors of the estate. His breath slowed as he rested his forehead near her shoulder, inhaling the lavender notes still clinging to her from rehearsal — the scent grounded him more than he expected.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The garden around them was alive but hushed: wind stirring plum blossoms, koi rippling through the pond like liquid brushstrokes.

"I wish time bent for moments like this," Fatty murmured, voice low and wrapped in quiet awe.

Lily tilted her head, eyes searching his face. "But it doesn't. Which means we have to make them count."

She brushed a strand of hair from his cheek, her fingers lingering just long enough for him to close his eyes. "You're always so calm when things shift. It makes it easier for me to breathe."

Fatty opened his eyes, his smile soft but sincere. "Because when I look at you, I forget the world is spinning too fast."

They sat together beneath the bamboo archway, wrapped in sun-dappled shadows, speaking little — but saying everything. The hours didn't rush. They folded around them gently, like old friends allowing space to dream.

And as the sky melted toward gold and the estate began its quiet descent into the evening, the two stayed there. Just lovers, just time, just breath.

Fatty couldn't help but count the remaining days he could spend with Lily, and his heart truly ached.

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Back at Otako's Dungeon

Under the cloak of darkness, Butler Oda and the five Samurai made their way back to the damp, stone-walled dungeon, the flickering torches casting elongated shadows that danced ominously along the corridor. Their mission was clear: to unravel the mystery surrounding Nina, who had inadvertently become a pawn in a game of deceit.

As they descended into the chilling depths, the stale air was thick with anticipation. Memories of the night she had been cast into the ravenous pack of wolves haunted their thoughts. They were determined to uncover the identity of the enigmatic savior who had intervened that fateful evening.

Their inquiry would lead them to uncover the truth behind Nina's shocking appearance at Ling Li's wedding, where she had orchestrated chaos by masquerading as Chu Yan's ex-lover, hidden behind a lifelike silicone mask. The stakes were high, and the truth lay shrouded in the shadows of the dungeon, waiting to be unveiled.

"Wake her up!" Butler Oda commanded, his voice sharp and urgent.

A guard approached Nina's cell, shaking her gently at first, then more forcefully as she stirred from her restless slumber, her dreams invaded by the harsh reality of her confinement.

As her eyes fluttered open, Nina's heart raced when she saw the imposing figures surrounding her. Instinctively, she pressed herself into the cold, damp corner of her cell, seeking refuge in its shadows.

"We are not here to harm you," Butler Oda reassured, his tone a mix of authority and gentleness. He took a step closer, his expression softening. "We only want you to answer a few important questions."

Fear surged through her as she narrowed her gaze, suspicion creeping into her voice. "Who are you? I don't know anything! Just let me out of here!" Nina shouted, her desperation echoing off the stone walls.

Butler Oda remained calm, his demeanor unwavering. "If you cooperate," he proposed with a hint of promise, "I can help ease the pain that haunts you, that attacks you with the darkness. What do you think?"

Nina blinked, the memories flooding back like a sudden storm. She recognized the group standing before her, the very people who had snatched her from the sanctuary of the church. Their leader, a figure of authority and intensity, had been particularly harsh, mercilessly chastising her brother, Four Eyes, with a scowl that could freeze fire moments earlier at the altar.

A flicker of hope ignited in Nina's gaze. 'Could they be on my side? Might they assist me in exacting revenge on Ling Li and my brother?'

Butler Oda, with his kind demeanor, attempted to be gentle with her, knowing the bonds of family that tied him to Four Eyes. Yet, here she was, her thoughts swirling with treacherous fantasies of retribution against those she once thought to trust.

"Who are you?" Nina demanded, masking the tumult within her with an air of indifference. Her voice was steady, but a spark of defiance simmered beneath the surface. "What do you want from me?"

Butler Oda spoke with an air of calm authority, his voice steady as he addressed Nina, "Nina, we have no intentions of asking anything from you, and the specifics of our identities hold little significance. What truly matters is your story — the night you were rescued from that menacing pack of wolves. We seek to uncover who came to your aid and the sequence of events that unfolded afterward." His gaze pierced through the dim light, urging her to reveal the truth hidden within her memories.

Chapter 262: NINA'S AGONY

"I don't know them. I never saw them." Nina answered.

"I can assure you, I have no connection to them and I never saw any of them throughout," Nina added firmly, her voice steady and compelling. She locked eyes with Butler Oda, projecting an undeniable confidence that left no room for doubt in her assertion.

"Then, please share with me any memories that linger in your mind. Relate to me the time, the location you found yourself in, and the sights that you grasped." Butler Oda said.

"I don't recall a single thing," Nina murmured, her voice barely breaking the heavy silence. She fixed her gaze on the worn wooden floor, its surface marred by countless scuffs and scratches, as if the very ground beneath her was a canvas of forgotten memories.

"Nina, understand this," Butler Oda said, his voice cool and measured, yet laced with an unmistakable undercurrent of intimidation. "You have the option to respond to these straightforward questions and cooperate with us willingly, or we can make you comply. The decision rests in your hands."

Nina sat frozen, a chill coursing through her as icy tendrils of fear wrapped around her spine. She parted her lips, desperation flickering in her eyes, yet the words she so desperately wished to voice remained trapped in the depths of her throat, silenced by an overwhelming sense of dread.

"I... I vaguely remember waking up in that dim cabin," Nina whispered, her voice trembling. "It felt surreal, as if I were trapped in a dream. I couldn't shake the disbelief — how was I alive when I had been so sure I was dead?"

"A cabin? Did you manage to figure out where it was? What did you see inside the cabin, and who was with you when you woke up there? Can you tell me more about it?"

"The cabin felt tiny and cramped, and I couldn't tell where it was located. There was complete silence, and I was all alone. The only thing I remember was being connected to several medical machines that beeped and blinked around me," Nina recalled, her voice a bit shaky. "Then, one day, I opened my eyes again, and suddenly I found myself in a bright, sterile lab instead."

"What was inside the lab? Were there other people around? Did you hear them talking?"

"They spoke in rapid Chinese, their voices weaving through the air, while a few of them switched to English with a thick accent. I couldn't see their faces; they were obscured by dark hoods that cast shadows over their features. They shared their plan with me — a scheme to pretend to be my brother's ex-lover and destroy their wedding," Nina said, her voice trembling.

"I felt a surge of temptation to participate because I genuinely loathe my brother and his wife. But the searing pain that grips me twice a week for two unbearable hours is more than I can endure. I blamed them for pulling me back from the brink, and I screamed at them to just let me die. I refuse to be a pawn in their twisted game," Nina explained, tears glistening in her eyes as they fell onto her cheeks, reflecting her anguish.

"Butler Oda's brow furrowed with curiosity as he leaned forward, his voice steady yet probing. 'What made you change your mind?' he inquired, the dim light casting shadows across his thoughtful expression.

Nina's gaze flickered, a mixture of fear and resignation dancing in her eyes. "They told me I've been poisoned," she confessed softly, the weight of her words hanging heavy in the air. "The pain coursing through me was nothing short of unbearable. They offered me an antidote — promised to administer it weekly — but only under one condition: that I remain obedient to their demands. It's a chilling bargain, but the pain... It's a darkness I can't endure alone."

"Is there anything else you remember?" Butler Oda inquired, his voice steady and calm.

Nina slowly shook her head, the weight of her situation evident in her weary eyes.

"I understand," Butler Oda continued, his tone shifting to one of gravity.

"Let me explain something crucial, Nina. You are not suffering from poison. When they found you, your body was in ruins — worn and battered. They fought relentlessly to bring you back, using whatever means they had, even if it meant further damaging your already fragile body. The efforts to revive you came with a heavy price, and that is the source of the pain you're enduring.

Instead of an antidote for poison, they've been administering powerful opioids to help numb the pain. This is the only viable path, and it's what I, too, will be providing for you." Butler Oda's eyes held a mixture of compassion and determination as he spoke, wanting to ensure Nina understood the harsh reality that lay before her.

Nina blinked rapidly, her vision blurring as unshed tears welled in her eyes, threatening to spill over. A heavy realization washed over her like a cold wave. 'So they deceived me until the bitter end, wielding

me as a weapon to stab at my brother and his wife.' The thought cut deeply, igniting a simmering rage within her.

With a shaky breath, Nina turned her gaze to Butler Oda, the weight of her predicament settling heavily on her shoulders. "Do I even have a choice?" she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. She already knew the answer. 'None.'

"Honestly, none. I will arrange for your transfer," Butler Oda replied with a steely resolve, his expression unreadable as he turned on his heel and left the room, flanked by the five stoic Samurai, their armor glinting ominously in the dim light.

Hours later, Nina found herself being ushered into a secluded, high-security facility, its sterile walls looming like giants around her. The air was thick with tension as she was escorted to a solitary chamber, funded by the enigmatic Otako. The door sealed shut with a heavy thud, the sound echoing in the stark silence. Here, she would remain confined, a prisoner in a guarded room, the world outside a mere whisper, forever out of her reach.

Despite Nina's deep-seated reluctance, an overwhelming weariness washed over her, draining her will to fight. The heavy weight of exhaustion settled in her bones, leaving her with no strength to rebel against the tide of circumstances.

Chapter 263: AT FIRST LIGHT WE BOW

Early the next day. The twilight sky was streaked with lavender and fading embers as the convoy of cars departed the airport, cutting through silent roads like a fleet of shadows. Ling Li and Four Eyes sat in the center vehicle, a long stretch Limo, clad in ceremonial robes — hers a cascade of rose gold silk with delicate phoenix embroidery, his a deep indigo brocade that itched in places he refused to admit aloud.

Their private plane landed with just enough time to make it for the six o'clock tea ceremony. Four Eyes was truly grateful to Ling Li, who also wore a ceremonial robe so that he wouldn't feel awkward.

As promised by El Capitan, the gifts were waiting for Four Eyes at the airport, all wrapped majestically.

In the back seat, the twins, Kim Kim, and Chin Chin, played rock-paper-scissors while Mr. and Mrs. Xu murmured quiet blessings and finalized gift details. The atmosphere was part reverent, part chaotic, and undeniably heavy.

Four Eyes adjusted the ceremonial sash around his waist for the fifth time.

"I feel like I'm walking into a test with nine judges and no answer key," he mumbled.

Ling Li arched an eyebrow without turning. "It's not a test. It's a rite. And they already know all your answers."

"That's worse!" Four Eyes whispered.

She smirked but softened. "My parents will appreciate your effort. They may not say much, but every gesture matters to them."

Then her eyes drifted to the horizon, voice lowering. "Especially with so much ahead of us."

The mention of the looming dance competition, the threat of Solaris, and Otako's two-year deadline hung in the air like an unspoken storm. This was not just a tea ceremony—it was a declaration of unity in the face of chaos.

Arrival at the Li Estate

They arrived at the ancestral Li compound just as the sky began to pale into early dawn. Lanterns flickered above the carved gateway, and two elderly stewards bowed low as the convoy rolled in.

Ling Li stepped out first, her movements fluid and grounded. Four Eyes followed, trying not to trip on the hem of the robe or let the gift box tip sideways.

Inside, the house was silent but alive with anticipation. The tea room had been prepared — a sanctified space of polished bamboo mats, antique scrolls, and two elevated cushions where Old Master Li and Madam Li waited.

Ling Li knelt in front of her parents with a grace that made the room still.

Four Eyes joined her, swallowing nerves like fire pills.

Old Master Li's gaze was piercing. He didn't speak, just observed.

Madam Li offered a faint smile, her fingers delicately folding the silk napkin in her lap.

Four Eyes placed the gifts with trembling hands — El Capitan's treasures wrapped in crimson silk and sealed with wax so intimidating it seemed to hum.

Then, with measured precision, Ling Li lifted the teapot and began the ritual. Steam curled into the air like whispered prayers as each cup was poured, presented, and accepted.

"Thank you for allowing me into your family," Four Eyes said respectfully, bowing so low his glasses nearly slipped off.

Old Master Li finally spoke. "You came in robes. You bowed with sincerity. You chose a worthy tea." He sipped, then paused. "Not bad."

Four Eyes nearly passed out from relief.

Madam Li looked at Ling Li and lightly touched her hand. "You are happy?"

Ling Li nodded. "I am."

Madam Li looked at Four Eyes. "Then we are content."

Outside, the wind rustled through the peach blossoms as the morning sun broke through the clouds fully.

After the Tea Ceremony – Family Pleasantries

As the final drops of tea were sipped and silence settled with grace, the twins — Kim Kim and Chin Chin — could no longer contain their excitement. With matching squeals, they bolted forward like twin comets, their little matching ancient robes fluttering around their tiny legs.

"Grandpa! Grandma!" Kim Kim cried, arms outstretched.

"We did it! We served tea!" Chin Chin added, practically flying into Old Madam Li's lap.

Old Master Li, always reserved, allowed a rare softness to ease the sharpness of his gaze. He chuckled low as Kim Kim clung to his neck, and Madam Li embraced Chin Chin with practiced warmth, smoothing the girl's wild hair with one delicate hand.

"You both did very well," Old Master Li said. "Your bows were even deeper than your father's."

Four Eyes protested inwardly from the side, looking scandalized. "I was nearly face-down." He murmured.

Madam Li noticed Four Eyes' aggrieved expression and said, "You were practically lounging," with a faint laugh as she decided to tease him more. "But we're pleased nonetheless."

Four Eyes "...."

Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Xu approached with respectful smiles, offering a quiet bow as Ling Li ushered them forward.

"Father. Mother. These are my in-laws," she said formally, gesturing.

Old Master Li stood, adjusting his robe with stoic dignity. "Welcome," he said, voice low but firm. "We've heard much. You must allow us to host you properly during your visit. Take in the country. The land changes, but the spirit stays loyal."

Madam Li nodded. "It is rare to gather both sides of a family under one roof. It is an auspicious sign — especially as it marks the beginning of a new lineage."

Mrs. Xu blushed with quiet pride while Mr. Xu nodded firmly, eyes gleaming with respect. "We are honored, truly. Ling Li is a daughter worth celebrating."

The Gifts Revealed

As the warmth of reunion flowed around the courtyard, Ling Li gently took her father's arm and leaned in.

"Dad," she said softly, "there's something else. The gifts... Four Eyes went to great effort to prepare them. Please take a look."

She gestured toward the silk-wrapped parcels, each one exuding understated grandeur.

With a gesture of permission from Master Li, Four Eyes stepped forward, carefully unwrapping the first parcel and revealing an aged wooden box lined with velvet. Inside, nestled was a canister carved with ancient motifs.

"Da Hong Pao," Four Eyes said. "This batch... is older than all of us."

Old Master Li's brow rose as he leaned in. The scent of tea leaves—earthy, ancient, reverent—drifted upward. He reached out with two fingers and gently touched the seal.

"This...," he murmured, voice thick with reverence, "this is not just tea. This is history."

Madam Li leaned over, eyes gleaming. "I haven't seen this packaging in decades."

Four Eyes moved to the next gift — a cedar box with burnished brass corners, inside of which sat a collection of cigars, dark as mahogany and wrapped in embossed paper.

"These were once offered to the Premier of Romania. They were refused — not for lack of quality, but because they were considered too tempting."

Old Master Li raised a brow so high it nearly disappeared into his hairline. "Even temptation can be tasteful," he said dryly, inspecting a cigar with near forensic precision.

"And this," Four Eyes said, unwrapping the final package, "is a scroll from the Tang Dynasty. An original."

Madam Li reached out with reverent fingers, unrolling the edge slightly.

The ink was still bold. The brushstrokes are elegant, powerful, yet restrained.

"This... is a national treasure," she whispered, a gasp escaping her lips. "You acquired this... how?"

Four Eyes gave Ling Li a side glance, then bowed. "With desperation. And fear. And ceremony robes."

Old Master Li finally let out a deep laugh, the kind that echoed through the wooden beams like the wind. "You've earned more than our respect. You've earned storytelling rights."

Madam Li patted Four Eyes' hand gently. "Thank you," she said. "This... was a gift of heart."

Ling Li beamed, pride and relief mixing in her eyes.

And beneath the woven history, the brewing of tea, and priceless scrolls, a quiet truth settled: this family was now one — bound by ceremony, laughter, and the rhythm of a legacy passed from hand to hand.

The tea cups had barely settled into their saucers when Madam Li rose with practiced grace. Her voice floated gently across the room, like the first note of an old melody.

"Let us have breakfast," she said, turning to the assembled guests with a warm yet commanding smile. "I asked the kitchen to prepare all of Ling's favorite dishes. She hasn't been home for a long time. I hope everyone won't mind."

Ling Li blinked, taken slightly off guard. She straightened her spine instinctively, the phoenix embroidery on her robe catching the amber light as she turned toward her mother.

"That's good," Mrs. Xu replied, her voice tinged with gentle curiosity. She looked between Ling Li and Madam Li, eyes sparkling. "We'll be able to learn what she truly likes."

Just then, Old Master Li clapped a hand onto Mr. Xu's shoulder — the touch made the man jolt, startled but honored. With a wide grin and an unexpected burst of casual camaraderie, Old Master Li declared:

"Come on, let's not be too formal!"

Without further ado, he took the lead, his robe sweeping through the corridor like an ancestral banner. Mr. Xu scrambled slightly to keep pace, still adjusting to the weight of ceremonial etiquette layered on top of generations of tradition.

From behind, Kim Kim and Chin Chin unleashed a twin burst of energy.

"FOOD! FOOD! FOOD!" they shrieked, bolting ahead with the force of two tiny tornadoes dressed in ancient silk.

Pharsa tried to grab the back of Chin Chin's robe mid-run and missed. She shouted from the rear, "Watch the koi pond!" but it was too late — the twins had already skidded past it, laughing like mischievous spirits.

As the family entered the dining hall, collective gasps rose like birds startled from a tree.

The table stretched the full length of the room, overflowing with at least twenty dazzling dishes. Braised abalone nestled beside lotus root fritters, crispy duck shimmered under a glaze of plum sauce, and a pyramid of steamed buns steamed like miniature mountain peaks. A centerpiece of bamboo-leaf-wrapped sticky rice smoldered gently. Bowls of soup, tender pork belly in caramelized soy, and delicate jellied tofu creations twinkled in porcelain as if laid out for a monarch's coronation.

Even Ling Li — the poised strategist, the empress of command — faltered.

"I—" she began, lips parting. But no words came. Her eyes were wide, scanning the feast. "Mother... you remembered everything."

Madam Li gave a delicate nod, her eyes brimming with pride. "I always do."

Four Eyes looked ready to weep beside her. "Even the stuffed eel rolls," he whispered, peering at a platter as though it contained treasure rather than food.

The twins were halfway onto their seats when Mrs. Xu, composed as ever, stepped forward.

"Everyone, sit. We are family. Don't be so polite."

Something in her voice — gentle, firm, maternal — washed over the room like a gentle tide. Shoulders relaxed. The tension, wound tight from ceremonial formality, eased. Chopsticks clinked softly against ceramic as everyone found their places.

Ling Li took her seat in silence. Her heart was thick with emotion, filled with memories of late-night suppers with her father, kitchen laughter with her mother, and quiet chats under the peach trees. And now, this table — filled not just with delicacies, but with lineage and love, all laid bare.

Chatty nudged his plate nervously. "This rice cake has gold flakes," he muttered.

Pharsa grinned. "Eat it and maybe you'll start making billion-dollar decisions."

Pharsa poked her chopsticks toward a rare fish dish. "Madam, this is the dish you used to make during the Ghost Festival!"

Madam Li chuckled. "It's been ages since I've made that one. But for today, I made everything myself. No servants. And why are you suddenly calling me Madam? It's Mother for you!"

"Eh, sorry Mother," Pharsa timidly said.

"That's more like it," Mrs. Xu lovingly said.

Four Eyes went still. His gaze flicked to Ling Li.

She caught it. She smiled.

Madam Li turned to Ling Li again, her hand lightly brushing her daughter's robe. "You are happy?" she whispered.

Ling Li nodded. "I am."

Ling Li dabbed her lips with a silk napkin, then looked up with deliberate calm, her voice carrying a glint of anticipation as she addressed the room:

"Mom, we have some good news to share with everyone."

Madam Li froze mid-sip, lowering her teacup with theatrical precision. She leaned forward, eyes wide and playful dread dancing across her features.

"Oh, tell us already and don't keep me in suspense," she cried. "My heart can't take it!"

Her hand clutched her chest like a soap opera matriarch awaiting a twist.

Chapter 265: GREAT JOB, CHU YAN!

"Eh... I'm pregnant," Ling Li said, each word gentle but firm, like placing pearls one by one on velvet.

The response was immediate.

"Wow! This is indeed good news!" Old Master Li declared, voice booming with pride. His chopsticks hit the table with a soft clack, and his wrinkled face lit up like sunrise over the family estate. "A grandchild is always a blessing."

Suddenly, Kim Kim shot up from her chair, arms stretched skyward like she'd scored in a game of ancestral charades.

"YES! I'm going to be a big sister!" she squealed.

Then, voice pitching higher, she added breathlessly:

"And I will have three little brothers!"

Laughter rippled around the table—until Chin Chin, never one to be outdone, yanked on her braid and shouted:

"Me too! Me too! I want three brothers, too!"

Ling Li coughed lightly into her napkin, trying not to laugh at their assumptions.

She cleared her throat— "Ehem... cough cough..." and with mock solemnity and a smirk tugging her lips, she dropped the real bombshell.

"I'm pregnant... with triplets."

The entire room froze.

Forks suspended midair. Breaths hitched. Faces turned slowly toward her like marionettes rewired for shock.

The only sound was Chatty, nonchalantly munching on a shrimp dumpling like he hadn't just witnessed the forging of a new bloodline. He shrugged, mouth full.

Mr. Xu blinked once. Then twice. Mrs. Xu covered her mouth, eyes watering with disbelief and joy.

And then, like a gong struck at dawn—

"Good job!" Old Master Li barked, slapping the table. "Five children in two pregnancies! Great job, Chu Yan!"

With a self-satisfied grin, Four Eyes swelled his chest proudly, as if he were a peacock displaying its vibrant plumage for all to admire.

Madam Li gasped aloud, her chopsticks clattering onto the polished porcelain plate. Her hands flew to her cheeks, eyes wide and shimmering.

"Triplets?" she croaked, voice cracking under the avalanche of joy. "You're giving me another three grandbabies at once?!"

She nearly launched herself over the table to embrace Ling Li, who sat still, blinking bashfully under the weight of twenty gazes.

Ling Li, ever the composed strategist, gave an awkward laugh. "I wanted to wait until everyone was here... but it felt right this morning."

Her hands gently cupped her belly, and in that moment, she transformed from empress to mother — a shift so profound that even Pharsa paused mid-chew, tears edging her liner.

Kim Kim stood on her chair. "Mama has three babies inside, and I have three sisters and a brother, and now another three brothers!" She counted on her fingers, confused, but beaming.

Chin Chin tugged on Chatty's sleeve. "Uncle Chatty, that's a LOT of diapers."

Chatty nearly choked on his rice dumpling. "They're your siblings, not a factory inventory!"

Old Master Li stood, lifting a sake bottle with unmatched flair. "Five grandchildren in two pregnancies? That's what I call efficiency! Someone pour me something strong!"

Mr. Xu, still stunned, reached for a wine cup and blinked twice before muttering, "Triplets. Like... plural. That's three. At once. Incredible."

Mrs. Xu clapped her hands in elation. "You'll need a stronger back!"

Chatty, unfazed, popped a lotus bun into his mouth. "Called it," he mumbled through the pastry. "Madam was eating pickled dragonfruit with soy vinegar at 2 a.m. last week. I knew it."

Ling Li shot him a playful glare. "You did not call it. You accused me of hoarding midnight snacks."

Madam Li burst into movement, rising from her seat and gently ushering Ling Li to stand. She cradled her daughter's face with reverence.

"My daughter," she whispered, as if blessing an heir. "You bring lineage, legacy, and joy all in one breath. We shall prepare a proper celebration. Not this instant — after breakfast."

"Mom, no need. I'm still in my first trimester. It's too soon to celebrate," Ling Li declined.

Pharsa, seated nearby, leaned back in awe. "I trained for battle all week. Now I must prepare for baby showers."

Mushu nudged her. "You'll be choreographing lullabies next."

Everyone laughed, the sound echoing through the elegant dining hall and drifting into the morning air. Peach blossoms danced just beyond the window, their petals like confetti from the heavens.

And as Ling Li sat again, hand still on her belly, she smiled at Four Eyes — wide-eyed, stunned, already calculating strollers and martial arts tuition — and murmured:

"We're not just starting a family. We're starting a dynasty."

Four Eyes "...."

The estate softened into mid-morning quiet, the golden hush settling over its ancient corridors and blooming courtyards like a silk veil.

After breakfast, as sunlight filtered through the carved wooden latticework, Old Master Li and Madam Li exchanged a glance — a wordless agreement born from decades of partnership.

"You two should rest," Old Master Li said with paternal gravity, his gaze landing on Ling Li and Four Eyes. "She's pregnant now. No more running about like a commander-in-chief."

Ling Li hesitated, the battlefield tactician in her wanting to refute. But Madam Li was faster — she walked over and gently but firmly took Ling Li's wrist.

"Rest is preparation, darling. You'll need your strength."

Four Eyes bowed his head solemnly.

Madam Li chuckled and gave his cheek a light pat. "Go. Don't make me carry you."

Mr. and Mrs. Xu also departed for their guest quarters, fatigue beginning to show in the softened lines of their faces — the long overnight flight now tugging at their limbs. They left with quiet nods and grateful smiles, still processing the whirlwind of revelations and reunion.

Meanwhile, Kim Kim and Chin Chin were the epitome of kinetic chaos.

They ran across the pebbled paths with reckless joy, spinning like enchanted tops, their laughter bouncing off walls and echoing through the peach orchard. They dashed beneath the hanging lanterns and climbed the low stone benches, turning the ancestral estate into a royal playground.

"Faster!" Kim Kim shrieked. "I'm winning!"

"Nooo! That was MY turn!" Chin Chin countered, tugging on her sister's sleeve mid-spin.

Mushu and Pharsa followed at a respectful distance, their eyes never straying from the twins. Mushu adjusted his sunglasses with solemn flair, muttering battle-grade observations.

"Target one is circling the koi pond. Target two approaching rock formations. Possible collision in five... four..."

Pharsa rolled her eyes. "They're children, not drones. Relax."