

PROTEGE 266

Chapter 266: IS NINA ALIVE

Old Master Li and Madam Li sat beneath the shaded pavilion, sipping cooling tea and exchanging quiet stories from their own youth. Watching their granddaughters spin like wild petals under spring wind, a rare lightness settled into their chests.

Just before noon, the upstairs hallway stirred with motion.

Ling Li and Four Eyes appeared at the top of the staircase, freshly showered, dressed in crisp casual wear — Ling Li in soft satin trousers and an embroidered top, her hair cascading in loose waves, and Four Eyes in pressed navy slacks and a mandarin-collared shirt that barely hid his nerves.

His eyes darted toward Madam Li. "Am I dressed enough?"

Ling Li nudged him with her elbow. "Relax. It's lunch, not trial."

Old Master Li set down his teacup and stood with sudden decisiveness.

"We'll dine out today. Take Mr. Xu and Mrs. Xu around the city. Let them feel the pulse of our streets, not just the formality of our gates."

Madam Li gave an approving nod. "Yes. A good idea. Let Naga show them why we are proud."

The twins shrieked from across the courtyard, chasing each other with cloth fans.

Mushu muttered into his wrist comm. "Operation Lunch Parade... initiated."

Pharsa groaned. "Someone tell Chatty he's not allowed to wear his dragon sunglasses in public again."

And so, the Li family's day continued — laughter mixing with tradition, strategy entwined with joy — building momentum toward something vast and unpredictable. The city awaited them like a stage, and every step they took threaded another stitch into the unfolding tapestry.

The moon hung low over the Li estate like a polished pearl, bathing the veranda in cool silver light. The garden swayed gently under the breeze — a harmony of rustling leaves, distant wind chimes, and the soft patter of tiny feet.

That night, after dinner had quieted into memory, Mrs. Xu stepped softly onto the veranda, drawn by the sight of Ling Li, seated quietly with her robe pulled tightly around her, eyes distant and luminous as she watched the twins play.

"Ling, you should cover yourself more. It's chilly at night," Mrs. Xu said with maternal concern, her voice soft and smooth like aged silk.

Ling Li turned, surprised but warmed by the gesture. Her lips lifted in a tired smile.

"Mother-in-law, why are you still up? Would you like to sit and have some tea with me?" she asked, gesturing to the porcelain set beside her. A light mist swirled from the teapot as if the night had steeped itself in the fragrance of jasmine.

"Sure," Mrs. Xu replied, lowering herself into the chair opposite with the grace of someone who rarely sat without purpose. Ling Li carefully poured her a cup, the motions deliberate, as if honoring the silence between them.

"Thank you," Mrs. Xu said, accepting the cup with both hands before her eyes drifted toward the garden.

There, Kim Kim and Chin Chin chased one another around the peach tree, giggling with wild freedom. Their fluffy dresses fluttered like petals caught in the wind, their laughter piercing the cool evening with life.

"The twins are truly exceptional," Mrs. Xu murmured. "They can speak and run around at just one year old."

Her voice held a sense of awe, mingled with the tender ache of watching time move faster than expected.

Ling Li's gaze remained fixed on her daughters, but something inside her stirred — a wave of emotion that rose slow and aching through her chest.

"They are indeed special," she said softly. Her fingers curled loosely around her teacup. "From the moment they were born, it was as if they came knowing things. Their eyes... they already recognized me. And Four Eyes. As though they had been waiting."

Mrs. Xu leaned in slightly, her expression shifting — no longer just admiration, but understanding. "They're not just smart, Ling. They're connected. It's rare. It means something."

Ling Li looked down, then out toward the moonlit garden again. Her voice came as a whisper:

"Sometimes I worry I won't be able to protect them from everything. From what's coming."

Mrs. Xu's hand reached out, touching Ling Li's knuckles with a feather-like tenderness. "You're not alone. You're surrounded by people who love them. And love you. And you're strong, Ling. Even when you forget that."

Ling Li didn't reply right away. She watched Kim Kim trip and roll onto the grass, then pop up laughing as Chin Chin helped her up — their bond already like steel wrapped in sunshine.

And in that moment, Ling Li's smile returned, steadier this time.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Mrs. Xu nodded, sipping her tea as they sat together, two women linked by fate, watching the next generation race through moonlight.

The moonlight spilled like quiet silk over the veranda, casting gentle shadows as Mrs. Xu stepped closer to where Ling Li sat watching the twins play in the lantern-lit garden. There was a gentle steam of tea curling upward, and the chime of laughter from Kim Kim and Chin Chin, still running like wind spirits around the peach trees, added a soft contrast to the chill that hung in the air.

"Ling... can I ask you something?" Mrs. Xu asked, her voice low and hesitant, as though unsure if she had the right.

Ling Li turned from her quiet vigil, her gaze patient and steady. She noticed the way Mrs. Xu looked down, fingers slightly curled with nerves, and answered with gentle assurance.

"Mother-in-law, don't be so polite with me," Ling Li said, her voice calm but warm. "Just ask me anytime, and I will try my best to answer you and help you."

Mrs. Xu sighed, the breath releasing years of restraint. She nodded slowly, then looked up — her eyes vulnerable, searching.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Then I'll directly ask," Mrs. Xu said, her voice trembling ever so slightly. "Ling... is Nina alive?"

She exhaled deeply, the question escaping like a long-held burden finally let go.

Ling Li, who had been calmly sipping her tea, paused mid-movement. The cup hovered near her lips. Her eyes blinked once, then slowly met Mrs. Xu's.

Ling Li nodded. The answer hung in the air like a bell toll that only those with heartache could hear.

Chapter 267: WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE HER?

"Would you like to see her?" Ling Li asked, voice so even that it startled Mrs. Xu.

The question struck like lightning. Mrs. Xu's lips parted, but no words followed. She sat frozen, the possibility crashing against her guarded composure. Then, she realized her eyes were wet, not with a tear or two, but completely blurred.

"I don't know how she would feel... if we see each other," Mrs. Xu finally whispered. Her voice wavered, cracking on each syllable. "We only have Chu Yan and Nina. And Chu Yan has always been the silent and responsible child, while we spoiled Nina since she was a girl."

Her fingers trembled as she adjusted her scarf. The memory flooded her, vivid and raw.

"When Nina started high school, Chu Yan kept warning us. He said that if we kept spoiling her, she would end up miserable because of the troubles she constantly makes."

A soft sob escaped her throat. "We thought it was just a phase. Just rebellion. But..." Her voice dropped to a hush. "We never thought she could be so vicious."

And now, she couldn't stop crying. Her shoulders trembled as the guilt poured out like broken dam water. Her grief made the air heavier.

"I'm sorry I got carried away," she whispered, wiping her tears with haste but failing to hide the depth of her pain.

Ling Li gently placed her hand on her mother-in-law's shoulder, her touch providing a grounding presence.

"Mother-in-law, you don't have to say sorry," she said, steady and unwavering.

"I sent Nina to a private medical institution that I fund. She needs medical care. If you want to see her, you can anytime. Just let me know and I'll have it arranged."

Mrs. Xu's brows furrowed, her heart thundering.

"Is Nina sick?" she asked, voice hollow with fear.

Ling Li took a breath before answering. She did not rush. She knew every word needed to land with clarity.

"Nina is not sick. But her body... was deeply destroyed," Ling Li said. Her voice darkened with the weight of truth. "When the people who captured her tried to revive her repeatedly, it pushed her limits too far. Twice a week, she experiences excruciating pain that lasts two hours. The only relief comes from powerful medication. It's... relentless."

The silence on the veranda deepened, broken only by the faint chirping of cicadas and the twins' distant laughter, which threaded through the cool night air. The garden's soft glow barely masked the sudden weight that now draped over the space like a shroud of mourning silk.

Mrs. Xu gasped quietly, her fingers trembling as she instinctively set her teacup aside. She leaned forward, eyes wide but clouded — the shock made her forget to breathe, and when she finally did, it came in short, uneven bursts.

"Destroyed?" she echoed in a whisper, as though saying it aloud made it more unbearable. "Revived?"

Her voice cracked on the last syllable. Her hand flew to her chest again, grasping as if trying to calm a heart that had just been pierced.

Ling Li watched her closely, her expression composed but softened with empathy. She had not sugar-coated the truth — she knew it would hurt, but she also knew this pain had to be faced. Gently, she placed her hand on her mother-in-law's.

"She endured what no child should ever have to," Ling said quietly, her thumb grazing the back of Mrs. Xu's hand. "But she's receiving care now. A place where her body is tended to and where no one can hurt her again."

Tears streamed freely down Mrs. Xu's cheeks now, no longer hesitant. They felt like rain breaking after a long drought.

"I failed her," she murmured, almost inaudibly. "I thought discipline could wait. I thought she would grow out of it... But she grew into something broken instead."

The wind rustled through the peach blossoms behind them, a soft sound like nature quietly grieving beside her.

Ling Li reached for the kettle, refilled Mrs. Xu's cup wordlessly, and then spoke again, gentle but unwavering:

"She still has family. She still has a mother and a father. That bond hasn't broken, even if it's buried deep right now. If you wish to see her — not to explain, not to justify—but just to let her know you're still here... I'll make the arrangements. She has the right to feel your presence."

Mrs. Xu closed her eyes tightly and nodded slowly, each movement laced with decades of regret and love.

"Thank you," she said hoarsely, reaching out now to grip Ling Li's hand with firm intensity, needing that anchor.

Mrs. Xu sat completely still now, her hands clenched in her lap. Her breath came in short, gasping sobs as she processed the horror.

She tried to speak—once, then again—but no sound came. Her mind spiraled with guilt, fear, and helplessness.

And beside her, Ling Li sat, a quiet guardian of both daughters and truth. No judgment. No blame.

And for a few long moments, they sat there — two women bound by grief, responsibility, and fierce maternal love — listening to the twins laugh in the garden, an echo of hope against the backdrop of painful truths.

Just a stillness that said: You're not alone anymore.

Early the next day, the dining hall buzzed with quiet anticipation. Silverware clinked, chairs scraped gently across polished tiles, and the scent of morning jasmine tea lingered in the air. Just as Old Master

Li gestured for everyone to sit, Ling Li's sharp gaze locked onto Pharsa — her posture stiffened like a taut string, eyes narrowing with something close to panic.

Without a word, she surged forward.

"Pharsa!" she barked, snatching Pharsa up from her seat with such force that her teacup spilled, splashing across the tablecloth. Gasps fluttered through the hall. Pharsa reeled, wide-eyed, one hand clutching her chest, the other fumbling to regain balance.

"What happened to you?" Ling Li demanded, each syllable like a strike. "Where did you go? What did you do? Who did you meet?"

Her voice — typically composed, even serene — now cracked with urgency and fury.

"Ling, what's wrong?" Old Master Li interjected, his brows furrowed deeply, voice low and tremulous. But Ling Li didn't flinch; her father's concern was swept aside.

Chapter 268: YOUR ENTIRE BEING IS SHOUTING DEATH

"Pharsa, answer me," Ling Li hissed, stepping closer, her breath quickened, her palms trembling.

Pharsa blinked rapidly, her lips parted in confusion. "Ling, I was... I was only here. I didn't go anywhere. Just home after we went out for lunch yesterday—" she stammered, her voice edged with unease.

"Ling, what is happening?" she added, voice shaking. Her words hung suspended in the air, thick with tension.

Everyone had gone still. Eyes darted between Ling Li and Pharsa. Even the servants stood frozen, halfway between pouring tea and clearing plates.

Ling Li's chest rose and fell rapidly. Her jaw clenched.

"Pharsa, not just your face..." she said, her voice quiet but slicing through the silence, "Your entire being... is screaming death. You're fully wrapped in death aura — it's clinging to your skin like smoke, crawling along your spine like a shadow with claws."

The hall imploded in shock.

Someone dropped a porcelain dish, and it shattered like punctuation to her words.

Pharsa staggered back, her hand involuntarily clutching her forearm as if the death Ling Li spoke of might suddenly erupt from within.

Old Master Li stood, pale as ash. Chatty clutched the edge of Pharsa's sleeve, eyes wide with helpless panic.

"Madam... then what should we do?" Chatty asked, voice trembling like a leaf caught in a storm.

Ling Li stared past them all, pupils dilated, lips slightly parted. She muttered almost inaudibly, "This... this cannot wait. I must consult the heavens."

She turned on her heel, her movements mechanical, stunned — not with fear, but with disbelief. She had consulted the heavens just three days ago. Nothing, no signs, no warnings. How had she missed this?

Pharsa remained rooted, breath shallow, eyes glossy as her gaze followed Ling Li's retreating figure. No one dared speak. The air crackled with invisible dread.

Ling Li's footsteps echoed in the corridor like warning drums.

Whatever was written in the stars, it had already begun unfolding.

Ling Li was halfway down the marble corridor, her mind racing through celestial symbols and lingering doubts, when her phone buzzed sharply in her hand. The sound made her flinch. She checked the screen: Butler Oda.

She answered briskly. "Master, I have an important matter to report," Butler Oda said, voice clipped and laced with unease.

Ling Li's gaze darted toward the gilded doors of her meditation chamber. "I have an urgent matter to attend to. Is this something that couldn't wait?" she replied curtly, already debating whether to dismiss the call.

Butler Oda hesitated a fraction before replying, his voice dropping. "Master... It's about Pharsa."

Ling Li stopped dead in her tracks.

A rush of cold swept through her as she turned slowly, as if gravity itself were reacting to Oda's words.

"Tell me."

"I just received a confidential alert from First Shah," Butler Oda continued, his voice steady but tight. "Pharsa has been targeted by someone known as... Enchanted Dale."

Ling Li's eyes narrowed. Her grip on the phone tightened. "Enchanted Dale? Who is that?" she asked, suspicion curling in her voice.

"He's a mixed-race martial arts practitioner with a history of ritualistic obsession," Butler Oda began. "Recently, we uncovered that he's been seeking three specific women, each forty-two years old, born in the year of the dragon, bearing both wind and water elemental attributes at level five... and most critically, virgins. These criteria align perfectly with Pharsa's profile, Master."

Ling Li's breath caught for half a second. Her heartbeat doubled.

'Indeed, Pharsa perfectly fits all the criteria, and finding one is not an effortless task.' Ling Li silently thought.

"Why is he looking for these women?" She asked.

"The man was advised, by whom we still don't know, that consummating with all three women in a single night and sacrificing them afterward would amplify his elemental gifts beyond mortal limits. His wind and water attributes would become unstoppable and lethal. The ritual is said to unravel celestial bindings and draw divine favor. It's pure madness." Butler Oda explained with a sigh.

A heavy silence fell between them.

Ling Li's expression hardened her face, now a study in fury restrained by control. She exhaled sharply through her nose and snorted. "Gather everything. I want full dossiers —habits, hideouts, associates, anything and everything. I want to know what he eats, when he breathes, and how he intends to die. He's courting death!"

"On it, Master."

She hung up without another word.

Ling Li stared at the dark screen of her phone for a moment longer, her knuckles white around its edges. Her eyes lifted toward the ancestral shrine tucked discreetly in the corner of the corridor — the heavens had remained silent. But now... their silence felt complicit.

'No need to consult the heavens. Evil shows its hand plainly enough.'

She dialed another number. After a single ring, the call was answered. "Mushu, something urgent has come up. Fly over immediately. Delegate what you can to Dane and the five androids. I'll explain the situation once you arrive," Ling Li said.

"Understood, Madam. I'll be on my way."

She turned and strode back toward the dining hall, her steps swift and heavy, her expression unreadable.

Meanwhile, back in the dining hall, the atmosphere remained suffocating. Pharsa hadn't moved, her hands trembling in her lap. Chatty whispered prayers under her breath. Old Master Li stared toward the doorway as if hoping Ling Li's return would somehow rewind time.

But the storm was coming.

And this time, it had a name.

When Ling Li reentered the dining hall, it was as if she'd stepped into a room suspended in time. No one had touched their food. The steam from the congee had long evaporated, and every pair of eyes turned toward her, hearts clenched and throats dry.

She said nothing at first.

Ling Li walked to her seat with measured grace, poured herself a glass of water, and took a slow sip. Her silence was a blade sharpened by tension.

"Ling," Old Master Li asked, his voice gentler now, the corners of his mouth tight with concern. "Have you found anything?"

He and Madam Li watched Pharsa grow up. Though Pharsa wasn't their biological child, the love and anxiety radiating from their expressions made it clear she was family in every way that mattered.

Ling Li set her glass down, fingers lingering on its rim.

Chapter 269: PHARSA HAS BEEN TARGETED BY ENCHANTED DALE

"Otako called just before I could consult the heavens," she said evenly, though her tone carried a barely masked urgency. "He reported disturbing news." She paused, her eyes sweeping the table.

"Pharsa has been targeted by an individual known as 'Enchanted Dale.' He's a martial arts practitioner obsessed with mastering the elements.

According to intelligence from Otako's First Shah, 'Enchanted Dale' believes that by consummating and sacrificing three women who meet specific mystical criteria — forty-two years of age, born in the Year of the Dragon, possessing wind and water attributes at level five, and remaining virgin — he can unlock unparalleled power."

Everyone

"!!!!"

Gasps stirred at the table. Even the eldest servant bowed his head in alarm.

Pharsa's face had gone pale. Her lips trembled, and she lowered her gaze as though shame and fear had suddenly become tangible weights.

Chatty, sitting beside her, clenched his fists, eyes locked protectively on her profile.

"What should we do?" Madam Li asked, her voice thin and desperate, fingers wringing the edge of her silk scarf.

Ling Li closed her eyes briefly, as though reviewing every spiritual calculation, every risk and route across the tapestry of fate. When she opened them, her gaze had hardened.

"Let Chatty and Pharsa marry immediately," she declared, voice resolute.

"They must consummate their bond tonight."

The words landed like thunder.

Pharsa blinked in shock. Her brows furrowed, and her lips opened to object, but she couldn't speak, only showing disbelief and a slight recoil of her shoulders. Though she was beginning to accept Chatty, her feelings hadn't reached the point of marriage, nor had they moved toward consummation. Her mind whirled, and she almost felt dizzy about the case.

Chatty, however, brightened visibly. His hand instinctively reached for Pharsa's, though he paused when he felt her hesitation.

"I think that's the only way, too," Old Master Li said gravely, his voice thick with decades of wisdom and the quiet power of a man who'd seen fate twist too many times to trust it. "We must seal her elemental balance. If she is no longer untouched, this 'Enchanted Dale'—and his vile ritual—will collapse before it can ever begin."

His words were more than a decision; they were a decree carved from ancestral stone. The weight of lineage pulsed behind them, echoing through the generations he carried.

He paused, eyes darkening as he leaned forward, fingers tightening around his porcelain cup.

"It's not every generation that produces someone who fits such cursed criteria," he muttered, voice low but burning with intensity. "If we cannot stop him outright, then we must at least delay him—hinder his madness long enough to trap him like the predator he is. We'll drag him out from whatever shadows he's skulking in."

Then, like a sudden flame surging through calm wind, Old Master Li struck the table with his palm—not violently, but firmly, a heartbeat of fury behind restrained composure.

"How dare he touch my people!" he declared, eyes blazing. "Let him come seeking power... we will meet him with legacy and wrath."

"Call Shinsei," he added. "We need his guidance on how to protect Pharsa further. After all, he is Pharsa's adoptive father, and we must hear his opinion on this."

"I'll contact Shinsei," Mushu said, already standing and pulling out his phone, thumbs flying across the screen.

Ling Li exhaled softly, finally allowing the tension in her shoulders to ease. "Alright. Let's at least try to eat. We'll need our strength for what's ahead."

The clinking of plates resumed, though half-heartedly. Pharsa sat silently, the pressure of destiny thick around her. She felt trapped between survival and sacrifice, agency and ancient law.

Across the table, Chatty leaned in, whispering, "I'll make it gentle, Pharsa, only if you say yes. We can't let your life be in danger."

"..."

Pharsa didn't reply — but her grip tightened around the spoon, as if grounding herself for what came next.

A heavy silence had settled over the dining hall like an unwelcome fog. The stirrings of breakfast had long been forgotten, replaced by an invisible weight that pressed into every shoulder and heart.

Old Master Li finally broke the silence, his voice gravelly and uncertain.

"Shouldn't we also inform Murphy's parents? This is an important matter."

The words hung in the air, hollow and haunting. Several heads turned, but one pair of eyes moved with unmistakable intensity — Ling Li's.

She raised her gaze slowly and looked toward Four Eyes, her expression laced with a genuine question and a faint trace of regret. Her brows knit together.

Why hadn't she heard anything about Murphy's parents? That absence echoed louder now, a void wrapped in implications.

Four Eyes, already feeling the heat of Ling Li's unspoken question, hesitated. The room watched him closely. He tensed, his shoulders slightly stiffening. His lips pursed — not in annoyance, but with the delicate restraint of someone shouldering an invisible burden.

There was pain there. A story unsaid. And it is not his story to tell.

Ling Li shifted in her seat, suddenly unsure. Had she overlooked something? Had she asked too carelessly? The uncertainty rippled through her composure like a stone dropped into still water.

Chatty also opened his mouth, but no words came out. He doesn't know how to say it.

The silence threatened to fracture until Mrs. Xu spoke, her voice composed but tinged with sorrow.

"In-laws..." she began gently, clasping her hands together on the table.

"Murphy is an only child. His parents passed away long ago — long before you arrived in our lives. The grief left deep marks, ones that never quite healed. Chu Yan and Quan Ye... they have been his only family since. And so are we."

Her gaze drifted toward Chatty and Four Eyes as she spoke, as if offering silent comfort, and then to Ling Li, firm and kind.

A breath passed through the hall, bittersweet and weighted. Ling Li lowered her eyes briefly, nodding once, not in apology, but in acknowledgment.

The air shifted slightly. It didn't lighten, but it settled, like a tapestry being smoothed after a tear.

From his seat, Chatty reached for Pharsa's hand beneath the table. She accepted it this time, her grip tentative but warm.

Chapter 270: WE ARE YOUR FAMILY

Old Master Li's voice rang with paternal sincerity.

"Ehem... then Murphy, rest assured —from now on, we are your family." His words felt ceremonial, as though sealing an invisible pact.

Madam Li leaned forward slightly, her hands folded tightly. Tears shimmered at the corners of her eyes, but she smiled, a fragile smile blooming like spring's first flower.

"Yes," she added, her voice trembling with tenderness, "You and Pharsa are a match made in heaven. Call us Mom and Dad... just like she does."

Chatty blinked rapidly, overwhelmed. Emotion surged through his throat so fast he barely stood without tipping his chair. He bowed deeply, almost knocking into the edge of the table.

"Thank you... Mom... Dad," he said, nearly choking on the words. His voice cracked as gratitude spilled from his chest.

Old Master Li chuckled with delight, eyes crinkling.

"Good son. Good, good." His hearty tone filled the room, softening the tension just enough for a breath of relief.

Chatty sat down again, cheeks flushed, still stunned by the unexpected warmth.

He turned toward Pharsa, his voice laced with quiet nervousness.

"You have such a loving family. You... you don't mind me being an orphan, do you?"

Pharsa stared at him with searching eyes —eyes that had learned to measure people carefully. Then she shook her head slowly.

"What about you?" Pharsa asked. Her tone was gentle, but steel lay hidden beneath.

"You don't mind me being tossed aside like a mistake... thrown to a temple by parents who didn't want me?"

The question fell like a stone into a still pond, its ripples stretching across the room.

Chatty's response was immediate, firm, and full of conviction.

"No way. Definitely not." Then, softer, more intimate:

"Honestly... when I learned that about you, it made me love you even more. You endured. You didn't just survive —you became you."

Pharsa's eyes flickered with surprise. She looked away, nodding faintly, lips pressed into a line. She didn't speak again, but something in her posture shifted —less guarded, more quietly open.

Just then, the door opened and Mushu walked back in, brushing dust from his sleeve. His expression bore news.

"Old Master," he announced, "Shinsei has confirmed. He'll come in person —I've already arranged for his plane."

The room stirred.

Old Master Li exhaled, nodded, then reached for his cup with both hands.

"Then let us wait for Shinsei. He should arrive by lunchtime."

There was movement again. Servants began clearing dishes, and refreshed tea was poured. Although much of the food remained untouched, the atmosphere had subtly changed. Between grief and danger, kinship had bloomed unexpectedly.

Outside, the wind carried the scent of rain.

Inside, destinies were aligning.

The breeze in the courtyard whispered through the bamboo leaves, casting flickering shadows across the koi pond. Pharsa sat quietly on the carved stone bench beneath the magnolia tree, her fingers tracing the embroidery on her sleeve without focus, which says 'Chief Li.'

Chatty appeared in the doorway, hesitant at first, then stepped forward with gentle deliberation.

"Everyone's busy preparing for Shinsei's arrival," he said, voice low. "I thought... maybe we could talk. Just us."

Pharsa looked up, her expression unreadable, but she didn't object. She simply nodded once.

Chatty sat beside her, leaving just enough space to respect the silence between them. His eyes drifted to the koi pond, then back to her.

"You were quiet earlier," he said softly. "When we talked about our pasts."

Pharsa let out a shallow breath. "I was thinking about how strange it feels... to be claimed by family I didn't ask for, and by fate I didn't choose. But showered me with all the love one needs."

Chatty tilted his head. "Do you feel trapped?"

Pharsa hesitated. "Not exactly. It's more like... I've lived so long under silence and survival, I don't know what freedom feels like. I love the Li family and I'm truly grateful to each one of them, and I couldn't ask for more," Her voice cracked just slightly, but she steadied herself.

Chatty listened, tension rising in his throat.

"When I was younger," he began, "I used to imagine a family that never forgot me. But in truth, I always felt like a ghost in my own story. Even before I knew the meaning of loss."

Pharsa turned to him, eyes glimmering not with tears, but with clarity. "So when they called me a perfect match for you," she said slowly, "it scared me. Not because I doubted us, but because I'm still figuring out who I am. What I want."

Chatty nodded, accepting her truth without flinching.

"Pharsa, you don't owe me anything —not even love. But I'll never turn away from you. Not for your past, not for your pain. Not for your power." His voice grew firmer. "If all I am to you is someone who can stand beside you in the storm, then I'll stand."

Pharsa's lips twitched —almost a smile. She reached out slowly, her fingers brushing against his. She couldn't believe Chatty could speak in such a serious manner. "You're not just someone standing beside me. You're the first person who made me believe I could rewrite what was written."

The wind rustled again. A petal dropped between them.

Chatty clasped her hand, and this time, she didn't let go.

At that exact moment, the bedroom door creaked open and in tumbled Kim Kim, her tiny feet padding across the floor as she climbed uninvited onto the bed where Ling Li and Four Eyes lounged with books in hand.

Without hesitation, she leaned her weight onto her mother's side, nearly toppling over. Ling Li instinctively looped an arm around her, shielding her belly protectively, the maternal reflex swift and unshakable.

"Kim Kim, why are you here? Where is your sister?" Ling Li asked, eyebrows raised in quiet concern as she pulled the child closer.

"Chin Chin's with Uncle Mushu," Kim Kim chirped, settling into the folds of her mother's robe. "She wants to learn how to use slingshots, and Uncle Mushu is making her one!"

Ling Li blinked. "And what about you? Wouldn't you like to learn too?"

"Of course I do!" Kim Kim exclaimed with a proud puff of her chest.

"Uncle Mushu promised to make me one... but I'd much rather learn how to use swords!" Her one-year-old voice was so bold it sounded almost royal.