

## **PROTEGE 271**

Chapter 271: I WANT A CRYSTAL SWORD

Ling Li jolted in surprise. "You want to learn swordsmanship?"

"Yes!" Kim Kim said with conviction, her expression folding into a pout. "I found a book in Brother's office about sword techniques... but all the swords are too long for me! I can't even lift them!"

Ling Li chuckled, amused by the girl's puffed-up frustration. She stroked her silky black hair with gentle fingers.

"Alright then, I'll think of a way to forge a sword perfectly sized for you."

"Mom, you can't go back on your words," Kim Kim warned, eyes narrowing with theatrical sternness.

"Don't worry, I won't," Ling Li said, pressing a soft kiss to her daughter's temple. "A promise forged between warrior women can't be broken."

Kim Kim shifted, her solemn tone giving way to curiosity.

"Mom... I came here to ask you something."

Ling Li leaned in. "Oh, let me hear it then."

"How could you see the death aura around Aunt Pharsa? Why can't I see it?" Kim Kim asked, her eyes wide with anticipation.

Ling Li blinked, taken aback by the depth of the question. She answered slowly, carefully measuring her words.

"Your cultivation is still in its earliest stage," she explained tenderly. "Once you reach a higher realm — and if you're blessed with the right spiritual attribute —you may be able to see it. But not everyone is gifted in that way."

"Ohhh," Kim Kim said, nodding with exaggerated seriousness. "That's why." A pause. "Can Dad see it?"

From across the bed, Four Eyes stirred, tilting his head from behind his book with a faint smirk. He had been pretending not to eavesdrop, but the intrigue got the better of him.

Ling Li smiled faintly.

"I think your father can see traces of it. His dark magic gives him that edge... but he needs to cultivate more if he wants to reach the clarity I have."

Kim Kim nodded again, clearly proud of her parents' mysterious talents. Then, with the same abrupt energy she arrived with, she wriggled off the bed.

"I'm going to find Chin Chin now!" she announced, already halfway to the door.

But just before disappearing, she turned and shouted:

"Mom! Can you make me a crystal sword? I want a crystal sword!"

Ling Li blinked. "A crystal sword?" she asked, amused.

"Yes! I heard it can kill ghosts! And especially witches!" Kim Kim said, her eyes gleaming like sunlight on polished jade.

"..."

Ling Li's lips twitched at the sheer theatricality.

Before she could answer, the door slammed behind Kim Kim's retreating form.

"Bye!" floated faintly from the hallway.

Four Eyes set his book down, brow furrowed.

"Are you truly giving her a sword? Isn't she too young?"

He was loyal to a fault when it came to their daughters —his hesitation thick with paternal fear. This kind imagines every bruise before it ever happens.

Ling Li laughed softly, warmth spreading from her chest.

"Don't forget, our daughters aren't ordinary. Look at her —she's already preparing to battle ghosts and witches before she even finishes her morning snack."

Four Eyes snorted, rolling his eyes affectionately. "You spoil our children too much."

Ling Li turned a page in her book. "She's a dragon. I'm just sharpening her scales."

In the southern courtyard, the twins were in full motion, giddy with anticipation. Mushu had crafted two slingshots from freshly polished tamarind wood — sturdy, smooth, and sized perfectly for their tiny hands. Chin Chin adjusted her grip like a seasoned marksman, her eyes narrowed in determination. At the same time, Kim Kim tugged her elastic band with a grin that promised mischief.

Without Mushu's knowledge, these slingshots will play an essential role in the Twins' cultivation journey. Of course, it's for the future.

"Aim for the hanging gourd, not my head!" Mushu called, laughing nervously as he backed away toward a safer distance.

The courtyard rang with the twins' laughter.

Chin Chin fired first — her pebble shot whizzed through the air and missed entirely, clinking against a stone lantern. Kim Kim tried next and hit the edge of the gourd, causing it to swing wildly.

"I hit it! Did you see?" she shouted triumphantly.

"Half-hit doesn't count!" Chin Chin argued. "Uncle Mushu, who won?"

Mushu scratched the back of his head, unwilling to take sides.

Before he could answer, the air shifted.

A breeze stirred without wind. The silk prayer flags strung overhead trembled, and birds quieted as a peaceful, commanding presence drifted into the courtyard.

A silver van pulled up by the side gate. From it stepped Shinsei, dressed in layered robes of muted saffron and twilight blue, his long prayer beads draped over one shoulder like a sash. His shaved head gleamed beneath the midday sun, and a tranquil smile softened the sharp edges of his ascetic features.

The twins froze mid-battle.

Chin Chin's slingshot dropped from her hand. Kim Kim blinked three times and clutched Mushu's sleeve.

"Is that... the monk?" she whispered in awe.

Shinsei stepped forward, each footfall graceful, as though he walked not on stone but through mist.

"Blessings upon your household," he said, bowing slightly.

Pharsa, Chatty, Ling Li, and Four Eyes appeared on the steps above, joined by Old Master Li and Madam Li. The adults bowed respectfully, but the twins couldn't help but laugh.

They rushed forward without hesitation.

"Hello!" Chin Chin cried. "Are you really a master monk?"

"Are you here to teach ghost fighting?" Kim Kim added excitedly, eyes sparkling.

Shinsei's smile widened as he crouched to their level, beads swaying like water.

"I fight ghosts with peace, little one. But if you wish to wield swords of truth and crystal slingshots of wisdom, I shall show you the way."

Kim Kim gasped. Chin Chin stared at him as if he were a living legend.

"He's cooler than Uncle Mushu," Chin Chin whispered.

Mushu "...."

"Hey!" Mushu exclaimed. "I made your slingshots!"

The adults laughed, tension dissolving like morning mist. Shinsei rose, his gaze finding Ling Li's.

"Let us talk," he said solemnly. "Before the stars shift again."

Ling Li nodded, her hand brushing Kim Kim's shoulder as she passed.

Inside the ancestral meeting chamber, the light dimmed beneath carved eaves and red hanging lanterns. Incense smoke curled in the corners, stirred by a low breeze that didn't come from any open window. Shinsei sat in the main seat, facing Ling Li Four Eyes, Old Master Li, Madam Li, Mushu, Chatty, and Pharsa.

The others remained respectfully standing, their expressions heavy with anticipation.

#### Chapter 272: BINDING RITUAL

Shinsei's voice carried the serenity of waterfalls in winter.

"The aura surrounding Pharsa is not accidental. She has become a spiritual beacon, unintentionally resonating with forces drawn toward imbalance. This... Enchanted Dale, as Otako said, is tapping into an ancient rite — corrupt and deeply elemental."

Ling Li leaned forward. Her knuckles pressed against the lacquered table.

"What exactly does he want from Pharsa?"

Shinsei reached into his ceremonial pouch and produced a parchment painted with circular seals, each one vibrating faintly. "Not just her virginity. Not just her birth sign. He wants convergence — a rare triune of elements, virtue, and timing. She is a vessel for amplification. If he succeeds in sacrificing such vessels, he won't merely gain strength — he'll disrupt the elemental balance."

The room fell into stunned silence.

"Then she cannot fall into his hands," Old Master Li said, voice grim.

"She must be protected physically and spiritually," Shinsei continued.

"The wedding will help. But even consummation alone won't break the resonance. We must perform a binding ritual, one that folds Pharsa's elemental essence inward, cloaking it from being seen."

Chatty squeezed Pharsa's hand beneath the table. She didn't look up.

Suddenly, from just outside the paper-screen doors, a small whisper:

"Did he say ghosts?"

A beat, then another voice, louder:

"And rituals? Let us in! We know how to be quiet!"

The adults turned toward the sound.

The screen slid open, revealing Kim Kim and Chin Chin, their eyes wide, determined, and utterly failing to look apologetic.

"We followed you!" Chin Chin announced proudly.

"We want to help Aunt Pharsa. We saw her scary aura too — a little!" Kim added, puffing her cheeks.

Shinsei offered a chuckle as light as falling ash.

"Curious hearts see more than cultivated eyes," he said. "Come in, young dragons."

Madam Li started to rise, but Ling Li gestured for her to stay.

"Let them witness," she said softly. "They may not be ordinary children, but their innocence may guard us better than our wards."

Shinsei nodded in agreement.

Kim Kim settled between Four Eyes and Ling Li, her slingshot still tucked in her sash like a warrior's talisman. Chin Chin sat beside Chatty, eyes fixed on Shinsei like a student awaiting a master's secret.

"We begin the preparation for the ritual tonight," Shinsei declared, unfolding the final seal onto the table.

The twins leaned in together and whispered, their eyes dancing with wonder:

"Do you think it'll glow?"

"Wait until the ritual tonight," Ling Li said with amusement.

"Oh," both twins replied.

Later, as dusk approached, the estate's northern wing was transformed into a sacred space. Silken drapes in deep midnight blue and ash-white were hung from the ceiling beams, inscribed with protective runes in silver ink.

A wide copper basin sat at the center of the ceremonial chamber, filled with crystalline water freshly drawn from the spirit-fed spring near the cliffs. Pharsa's reflection shimmered in it like something barely clinging to this realm.

Ling Li stood beside Shinsei, now dressed in ceremonial robes threaded with cloud patterns and bone-colored cuffs—a manifestation of the harmony between water and wind.

Shinsei traced circles around the basin with powdered moonstone while softly chanting in an ancient dialect that only Ling Li fully understood.

"Every element must respond," he said quietly. "Tonight, we fold Pharsa's essence into stillness, masking her vibration from the echoes Enchanted Dale seeks."

On the outer ring, Chatty placed three small ceremonial blades — not for harm, but as symbolic cutters of tethered fate. Each was embedded with different stones: obsidian for truth, rose quartz for choice, and aquamarine for clarity.

Pharsa stepped forward, her garments now white with midnight trim, symbolizing neutralization. Her pulse was rapid, yet her steps were steady.

Madam Li adjusted her veil, tears quietly running down her cheeks as Old Master Li laid a protective charm of woven threads across Pharsa's shoulders — an ancestral blessing passed through bloodlines.

"Pharsa must speak her rejection of the curse aloud," Shinsei explained to the gathering. "Words carry power — especially those forged in fear."

Pharsa's voice shook, but she stood tall.

"I reject the claim made upon me. I refuse to be a vessel of blasphemy. I belong not to ritual, but to my choosing."

A gust of wind flared through the windows despite their being shut. The basin pulsed once, the water rippling in defiance.

Shinsei nodded. He began marking Pharsa's forehead with crushed starlotus sap and ash from moon-blessed cedar — the binding seal, an ancient and deeply spiritual symbol.

Suddenly, the chamber door creaked open and two small heads peeked inside.

"Mom said we could watch!" Chin Chin stage-whispered.

"Is it glowing yet?" Kim asked, clutching her slingshot as though ready to strike invisible enemies.

Mushu attempted to shush them, but Shinsei raised his hand and smiled.

"Let them witness." His eyes gleamed. "Even the smallest hearts can fortify a barrier."

"..."

Ling Li's mouth twitched — part fondness, part awe.

As the final sigil was drawn in light across Pharsa's chest, the air turned electric. Candle flames flattened, then twirled upright with unnatural precision. Everyone held their breath.

"The seal is complete," Shinsei said solemnly. "Her elemental signature has been woven into concealment."

Pharsa exhaled deeply, her knees trembling slightly before Chatty caught her, steady as a pillar.

Outside, thunder rolled low beneath the horizon. Somewhere, the world twitched in irritation — as if a predator had sensed its quarry slipping from view.

Kim Kim leaned over to Chin Chin.

"So... she can't be ghost-snatched now, right?"

Chin Chin crossed her arms. "Not unless the ghost is REALLY dumb."

The room erupted with soft laughter — weary, hopeful, human.

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Elsewhere, as moonlight deepened the shadows of the southern mountain...

Inside a remote chamber drenched in pungent incense and layered spells, Enchanted Dale stood bare-chested before a scrying mirror. Around him, arcane markings pulsed along the stone floor — each rune drawn in mixtures of blood and powdered silver.

His eyes were narrowed in concentration, lips moving in guttural recitation.

For days, Pharsa's spiritual thread had pulsed clearly — fragile, luminous, ripe. But tonight...

The air around the mirror warped.

The image flickered. Pharsa's outline dimmed. Her aura, once like a beacon, collapsed into mist and vanished.

Dale snapped upright, fingers twitching.

"No!" he muttered, stepping forward. "Where is she?"

He struck the mirror with his palm.

#### Chapter 273: PHARSA'S RECKONING AND RITUAL PREPARATIONS

The glass hissed but did not crack. Instead, ripples formed — not in the surface, but in the air around him. Dale's eyes flared with unnatural brightness. His hands clenched.

"She was masked..." he growled. "Someone folded her essence. A powerful cultivator."

He turned, storming to his altar. His breath came faster, fury laced with desperation.

"That girl was the key. The first convergence." Enchanted Dale's voice trembled now, rage barely restrained. "I waited twenty years... she fit every thread..."

He threw a porcelain charm against the wall. It shattered, and a black puff of smoke slithered toward the rafters.

His remaining offerings began to decay — flower petals browned instantly, and the spirits he'd bound writhed in agitation.

Then... silence.

Dale froze, a cruel smile inching across his face.

"So be it. If I cannot see her..." His voice grew dark, almost possessed. "...then I will make them see me."

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Back at the Li Estate, beneath the jade eaves of the meditation pavilion...

Ling Li sat across from Shinsei, both cloaked in twilight robes. The candle between them sputtered, though the air was still.

Pharsa's sealing ritual had ended only hours ago, but the spiritual atmosphere still crackled with energy.

Shinsei's brow remained furrowed as he sifted through omens inscribed on the parchment scrolls he'd drawn earlier. His fingers hovered above one —then hesitated.

Ling Li watched him closely.

"You're unsettled," she said. Her voice was quiet, but the edge in it was unmistakable.

Shinsei nodded. "The spell was effective. Her aura is masked. She's safe... for now."

"But?" Ling Li asked.

Shinsei looked up. His eyes, normally serene, glinted like deep river stones under moonlight.

"But he felt it. Dale may not know what happened, but he knows something shifted. Rituals like his are not built only on energy —they're built on obsession. And obsession does not die quietly."

Ling Li's jaw tightened. She reached for the scroll, brushing his fingertips. Her own spiritual sense surged beneath her skin.

She closed her eyes.

The symbols pulsed faintly — then surged, glowing not red but violet.

Her eyes opened in alarm. "A celestial backlash?"

Shinsei nodded gravely.

"It means the stars are resisting Dale's desires. But also... they've awakened to him."

Ling Li leaned back, her mind spinning.

"We've prevented the first sacrifice. But we've triggered the next Chapter."

A rustle stirred behind them — bamboo leaves shifting, though no wind blew. Shinsei turned toward the sound, eyes sharp.

Ling Li rose slowly. "We'll need more than rituals now."

Shinsei stood, his robes settling like mist around his feet.

"We need alliances. We need warriors. And we need to prepare your daughters." He nodded toward the courtyard where Kim Kim and Chin Chin slept beneath protective charms, unaware of the storm brewing.

Ling Li's lips parted — soft, uncertain.

"They're still so young."

Shinsei met her gaze.

"Then teach them fast."

The ceremonial chamber was dim now, bathed in candlelight and the scent of camphor and cedar. Shadows danced along the stone walls like ancestral spirits bearing witness.

"We should proceed with the wedding and the consummation," Shinsei said, his tone firm but gentle, like a monk instructing fate itself.

Pharsa stood frozen for a beat, then stepped closer.

Her small hands reached for the worn folds of his robe, clutching the sleeves with desperation — the same way she had gripped them as a child during cold monsoon nights, fearing the thunder.

"Father..." Her voice cracked, barely above a whisper.

Shinsei turned to her fully now. His gaze softened as he looked into the frightened eyes of the girl he had found in a basket wrapped in temple cloth, her cries echoing beneath dragon bells. He had raised her, protected her, and taught her mantras before she could walk. She still called him "Father" even after her adoption into the Li family — a name he bore with quiet pride.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his tone almost paternal.

Pharsa's grip tightened. She couldn't mask the tremble in her fingers.

"Is there no other way... other than the wedding and consummation?" she asked, each word dragging a weight behind it — fear, confusion, longing.

For a moment, Shinsei didn't answer. Instead, he raised one hand and lovingly flicked a fingertip across her forehead.

"You are still as stubborn as before." His voice was filled with bittersweet affection. "But you must understand — the death aura wrapped around you isn't just a bad omen. It's a signal. A flag to those who walk between dimensions and rites. It means you're being watched... studied... hung in spiritual stasis. The person who targeted you is not simple."

Pharsa blinked.

Her lips parted as if to speak, but no words came. Her breath hitched. Her chest rose and fell quickly, shallow from the sudden revelation.

She had always feared the dreams — the cold hands in them, the invisible eyes. But now, she knew they weren't just shadows of trauma... they were warnings.

"They're only waiting for the right moment, child," Shinsei continued softly. "One misstep. One second of isolation. And they'll strike."

Pharsa swallowed hard. Her body remained still, but her mind raced. Her gaze drifted toward the copper seals etched into the floor. Toward the whispering winds outside the temple walls. Toward Chatty's voice earlier, promising gentleness, promising safety.

And suddenly, the silence wasn't suffocating. It was anchoring.

Later that night, Pharsa sat alone beneath the ceremonial banyan tree, moonlight filtering through its leaves like silver lace across her skin. The evening wind carried distant chants from the courtyard, where

monks prepared the altar with careful urgency. Incense smoke curled in the air, but all she could smell was uncertainty.

She rubbed her palms slowly together, fingertips tingling with a heat she couldn't shake —whether from spiritual pressure or emotional unrest, she couldn't tell.

Footsteps approached softly. Ling Li entered, dressed in sapphire ritual robes lined with protective talismans that had been stitched by hand. Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes held centuries of wisdom and maternal ache.

Pharsa didn't turn. She whispered, "Do I really have to give away everything just to survive?"

Ling Li lowered herself beside her, letting the silence hold weight.

"It's not about giving away," she said gently. "It's about taking control of what others would steal. Your body, your essence —it's yours. You choose how to protect it. No ceremony will change that unless you let it."

Chapter 274: ENCHANTED DALES REATALIATION: SHADOWS UNBOUND

Pharsa's throat tightened. "I'm scared," she admitted. "Not just of Dale. Of... becoming something I don't recognize."

Ling Li reached out, placing one hand on Pharsa's chest, just above her heart.

"Then recognize yourself here. Not in the ritual. In the fight. In the choice."

The words settled deep into Pharsa's bones.

Moments later, Shinsei approached with Chatty in tow. The latter looked nervous but resolute, his ceremonial tunic fastened with trembling fingers.

Pharsa stood slowly, chest rising and falling as if trying to balance two worlds.

She met Shinsei's gaze.

"I'm ready. Not for what they want from me... but for what I want to deny them." Pharsa said.

The monk nodded solemnly. "Then let us begin."

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In a remote chamber carved into obsidian cliffs, Enchanted Dale sat within a pentagram laced with bone ash and red sap. His breath was slow, deliberate, as he reached into a brass urn beside him.

Inside, three bloodstones pulsed faintly —each linked to his targeted vessels.

Only two remained intact. The third, Pharsa's, had turned cloudy, faded, and sealed.

Enchanted Dale snarled.

"They cloaked her. Severed the thread!"

He pressed his palm into the ash and began to chant in a dead tongue that made the walls tremble. Around him, the spirits he had bound writhed violently. One snapped free, shrieking into the chamber and shattering the ceiling's protective sigils.

The ritual candle flickered. Then turned pitch black.

A mirrored basin beside him hissed as an illusion formed: Ling Li and Shinsei, mid-ritual, encircling Pharsa in elemental seals.

"You think this will protect her?" Enchanted Dale snarled. "I have walked beyond veils. I will not be denied."

He reached for a twisted dagger carved from firestone, dipped it into serpent venom, and sliced his palm. Blood fell into the basin, and the image distorted — shimmering violently.

"Tonight... let their ceremony be a beacon. If I cannot reach her spirit, I will burn through the flesh of those who shelter her!"

Outside, ravens scattered from the cliffs. The wind shifted unnaturally.

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And far away, Ling Li's spiritual wards flared —something was pressing against them, clawing like teeth into silk.

Shinsei paused mid-incantation, brows furrowed. He turned to Ling Li.

"He's coming through the \*ether now. He knows."

Pharsa trembled. Chatty stepped closer, gripping her hand with solemn resolve.

"Let him try," Ling Li whispered, eyes gleaming with stormlight. "We'll carve his defiance into the stars."

Wedding Climax: Sacred Vows and Spiritual Bond

The ceremony had shifted into a realm beyond time.

Silken incense veils floated in the air like ancestral spirits. Pharsa stood beneath the celestial arch, her ceremonial robe layered in flowing silver and water-blue silk, embroidered with protective dragons and phoenixes.

Pharsa's eyes shimmered —not with fear now, but with conscious devotion. Chatty waited, his tunic midnight-dark, clasped with elemental sigils gifted by Shinsei himself. Though his fingers twitched slightly, his expression was open, reverent.

Shinsei stepped forward, drawing a sacred circle of powdered pearl around them.

"With this binding," he intoned, "you reclaim your essence. Not as sacrifice —but as sanctuary. The union must be more than flesh; it must awaken purpose."

As vows were spoken, the ritual flames flared with each syllable —Pharsa's words drawing heat from the air, and Chatty's grounding them in stone.

Then came the sealing kiss.

Chatty was grinning from ear to ear. He can't hide his excitement.

Pharsa "...."

It was hesitant at first —a brushing of lips trembling with mutual weight.

But the moment it happened, the elemental circle ignited in pale blue and ivory light, winding around their bodies like dancing ribbons. A low hum echoed from the heavens, as if approving the match.

They were led into the sanctuary chamber under a canopy of charms and river blossoms. The room was lit with moonstone lanterns, each casting soft light and protective warmth.

In their union, Pharsa felt her breath sync with Chatty's heartbeat. His fingertips trembled as they traced her cheek, her collarbone, her soul's edge. She closed her eyes —no longer hiding, no longer resisting. She let the energy bloom, wrapping around them like silk and storm.

Their joining was gentle, patient, sacred.

Pharsa's aura pulsed once —then sank deep beneath her skin, sealed not in secrecy, but in shared spiritual convergence.

Elemental winds rustled outside the chamber.

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But something darker stirred within them.

Dale's Breach: Assault on Li Estate

Miles away, the scrying mirror shattered. Enchanted Dale's scream cracked stone, and he stepped from his lair into the night with fury wrapped around him like fire.

"They've sealed her. I'll rip it open myself!"

Using a soul-bound amulet stolen from a fallen monk, Enchanted Dale tore a rift in the ether —a shortcut into forbidden sanctums. The air around him screamed, twisting in pain as he folded through shadows, bypassing wards not meant for his breed of magic.

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Back at the Li estate, the protective talismans above the ceremonial hall burst into flames.

Shinsei, mid-chant beside the outer altar, froze.

"Something's ripping through."

A tremor shook the ground. Ling Li leapt to her feet just as fire cracked through the western wall —a spiraling eruption of dark wind and acidic energy. Servants screamed.

A protective dragon glyph shattered mid-air.

"He's here!" Mushu shouted, already forming shield sigils with his blood.

Enchanted Dale emerged from the flame, half-shrouded in smoke, his eyes glowing sickly green. His aura was distorted —powerful, rabid, unnatural.

"Give her to me," he roared, voice booming like collapsing temples.

Ling Li didn't answer. She blasted him with a gust of pure wind magic, forcing him back half a step. Shinsei dropped a containment seal —but Dale twisted it mid-air, sending it ricocheting into the roof beams.

Inside the chamber, Pharsa jolted upright. Her eyes flared.

Chatty clutched her hand. "Stay behind me."

But Pharsa rose, robe trailing with activated sigils. Her hair floated around her face, lifted by elemental force. Her skin glowed faintly — not with fear, but with AWAKENED LINEAGE.

"He wants power," she whispered. "He'll choke on mine." Pharsa snorted. A new, unfamiliar expression appeared on her face, catching Chatty off guard.

The chamber doors burst open.

"We fight as one." Pharsa declared as she met with Ling Li and Shinsei. Chatty followed closely behind.

### Battle Unfolds: When Shadows Meet Light

Outside the ceremonial chamber, the sky fractured.

Storm clouds did not roll —they tore apart. Celestial wind howled as Enchanted Dale stepped through the breach he had carved in ether, his body trailing smoke laced with distorted runes. His eyes glowed like molten jade, and his aura —once serpentine— had twisted into something rabid, unstable. His skin cracked with energy, as if containing forces too great for flesh.

----- Ether means The Stratosphere, the air, or the sky. -----

### Chapter 275: PHARSA'S AWAKENED POWER

"Pharsa!" Enchanted Dale bellowed, voice reverberating through the estate.

The outer garden exploded in a cyclone of corrupted wind, sending tiles, leaves, and sacred charms flying. Servants who were working outdoors were scattered, some tossed into the air.

Mushu slammed his staff into the ground and raised a defensive barrier just in time, barely shielding the western wing from collapse.

In the ceremonial sanctuary, Ling Li's sigils ignited mid-air —spiraling into crystalline shields around the chamber. She stepped into the courtyard, robes snapping in the wind, eyes like frost kissed by lightning.

"You breach sacred earth and expect her to submit? You are a child throwing stones at stars!"

Enchanted Dale grinned, unhinged. "Then I'll snatch the stars one by one."

He lunged forward, hurling a barrage of spectral chains —black and bone-white, twisting to bind Pharsa's soul from afar. Ling Li countered with a spinning blade of pure air energy, slicing through the first wave with a roar. Her feet barely touched the ground.

Shinsei emerged beside her, beads glowing, chants rising in forbidden dialects. He threw lightward incantations like lightning bolts —two striking Enchanted Dale's torso and staggering him half a step.

But Enchanted Dale was not ordinary anymore.

Pharsa's sealing ritual had enraged him, and the thwarted convergence made him desperate.

Inside the chamber, Pharsa jolted. Her sealed aura pulsed beneath her skin, now responding to the Battle outside. Her fingers glowed faintly as a forgotten fragment of power reawakened —one her birth parents had tried to cast away when they abandoned her at the temple.

Chatty rose beside her. "You don't have to go out there."

Pharsa gripped his hand once. "Yes, I do. Because I can." She said and started to get dressed.

Her ceremonial robes shifted as she stepped into the open, hair billowing around her like storm-born silk. She raised her hands, channeling the sealed elemental energy —wind and water colliding into spirals of sharp mist.

Enchanted Dale turned, locking eyes with her.

"You belong to my ascension —your blood is written in prophecy."

Pharsa stepped forward. "Then rewrite your prophecy."

With a surge, she released her energy.

A tidal spiral burst forward —wind whipped into shards, water sharpened into spears, striking Enchanted Dale with the force of generations denied. He screamed, the sound ripping open talismans, shattering nearby wards, and dropping him to his knees.

Shinsei reinforced the seals. Mushu launched binding charms. Ling Li summoned a divine gust so strong it fractured the garden wall behind Enchanted Dale.

But Enchanted Dale wasn't finished.

He rose, blood streaming from his nose, lips cracking with fury.

"If I can't claim her..." he wheezed, raising both arms, "... I'll collapse the ether itself!"

The breach behind him widened. Spirits shrieked within it —twisted souls he'd harvested over the years —rising in a spiral to consume everything.

Pharsa stepped forward again, eyes full of tears and power.

She whispered the incantation taught only in secret by Shinsei —the seal of inheritance.

A radiant storm spiraled from her chest, bursting outward in blinding waves.

Time slowed.

The spirits halted mid-flight, then shattered into silver dust.

Enchanted Dale froze.

The last thing he saw was Pharsa's eyes glowing the color of moonstone thunder.

Then everything went silent.

## Aftermath Beneath the Cracked Sky

Smoke swirled low across the Li Estate as the final echoes of Battle fell into silence.

Broken tiles littered the garden paths, scorched wards fluttered like torn flags, and the scent of incense now mingled with scorched cedar. Moonlight pierced the lingering mist, casting silver over every wound.

In the center of it all, Pharsa stood motionless, arms slack at her sides, her breath ragged but steady. Her robe clung to her like a second skin, damp from sweat and elemental release. Chatty remained nearby, his hand hovering just above her back as if shielding her with reverence rather than touch.

A few steps away, Ling Li's chest heaved slowly, the last traces of her summoned wind dispelling. Shinsei knelt at the smudged edge of the elemental circle, his fingers gliding over cracked seals, tracing their new patterns.

"We altered fate tonight," Shinsei murmured, eyes scanning the fading energy streams. "But nothing ends cleanly. Prophecies don't die —they shift."

Pharsa said nothing.

She turned her head slightly toward the main hall, where soft rustling echoed behind the curtain window.

## The Twins' Secret Watch

While Old Master Li and his wife, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Xu, were ordered by Ling Li to remain in their rooms, regardless of what happened. The mischievous twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, crouched behind the heavy ceremonial curtain, their eyes wide and sparkling. Their cheeks were pressed against the cool stone windowsill, fingers curled into the silk folds.

"Did you see her hair?" Kim Kim whispered, awed. "It floated like a ghost thread!"

"She glowed like lightning," Chin Chin replied. "Like a storm princess!"

Kim nodded solemnly, gripping her slingshot tighter. "Aunt Pharsa is... awesome." She looked sideways. "Do you think Mom used that move she taught us last night?"

Chin Chin shrugged. "I think she used ten secret moves. Maybe even dragon ones."

From beyond the curtain, the grownups began to gather —their faces pulled tight with fatigue and awe. But to the twins, it wasn't just survival on display.

It was myth in motion.

"And Aunt Pharsa had become something more than a bride in a crisis —she had become a legend."

Ling Li, who had discovered them, shook her head.

Ling Li and Shinsei: Reading the Ripples

Later, beneath the cracked garden arch, Ling Li stood alone with Shinsei, both gazing at the fractured seal etched across the earth —Enchanted Dale's final imprint. It pulsed faintly still, resisting fade.

"He's not gone," Ling Li said quietly.

Shinsei nodded. "No. We severed the thread, but the claw remains. He'll reweave his path. And next time, he may not walk alone."

Ling Li turned toward the stars now peeking through dispersing clouds. Her expression was unreadable —but her soul stirred.

"We'll be ready," she said. Then, as if remembering something layered in prophecy:

"And our children will rise with us."

A breeze whispered past, curling the edge of her robe.

Behind them, Pharsa —resting but awake —clutched Chatty's hand. Her body trembled from exertion, but her heart throbbed with quiet clarity.

In the shadows, Kim Kim drew an imaginary sword from her sash.