

## **PROTEGE 281**

### Chapter 281: BLOODLINE DISSECTION

The puzzles escalated — not just riddles, but memory triggers, elemental forgeries, even an illusion of their mother crying in battle that Kim Kim had to identify as false.

At one point, Chin Chin had to climb into a narrow crack filled with frozen feathers and retrieve a scroll without disturbing the frost wolves watching from the shadows — not real wolves, but spiritual constructs made to test instinct and silence.

She succeeded.

Kim Kim nearly slipped on her final sigil — a slingshot-shaped emblem that launched an icy gust when incorrectly touched. She winced, her fingers red.

Ling Li stepped forward, eyes calm. "Do not fear damage. Shape it."

Kim Kim steadied her breath, invoked a wind glyph, and used it to redirect the cold, heating the stone from inside.

The puzzle opened.

The snow around the altar melted slightly.

Above, carved in ancient elemental dialect, the trial seal shimmered with approval:

"Those who see truth in illusion and resolve in chill are worthy to walk the frost path."

Shi Min bowed toward the twins.

"You pass. Not for knowledge. For clarity."

That same night, the soft glow of lanterns cast shadows across the polished wooden floors of Ling Li's study, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere. Ling Li, with a look of determination in her eyes, looked up as her son, Shi Min, stepped through the door.

"Mom, you called for me?" Shi Min asked, a hint of curiosity lacing his voice as he settled into the chair opposite her. He brushed a few strands of hair away from his forehead, eager to hear what was on her mind.

"Yes, with everything happening around us, the danger of Enchanted Dale targeting your sisters, and the ongoing search for Solaris, we need to act swiftly," Ling Li began, her tone firm but filled with maternal concern. "I need you to ascend to immortality as soon as possible."

Shi Min "..."

Shi Min's brows furrowed slightly, caught off guard by the gravity of her request.

'Mom makes it sound so easy, like eating peanuts,' he thought, a mixture of admiration and nerves bubbling within him.

"I understand, Mom. I've been stuck at this bottleneck for several years now," he replied, taking a deep breath. "I'll go into seclusion after the opening of the 'Eye.' I want to be there for my sisters to guide them. I don't want them to get carried away by the adrenaline and run riot and end up stupidly trapped in there for two years."

"Hey, hey, who are you calling stupid and wild?" Ling Li said in protest.

"Whoever reacted is," Shi Min replied with a smirk.

Ling Li "..."

Ling Li fell silent, thinking, 'I shouldn't have reacted.' She let out a loud snort to regain her composure.

"That wasn't my fault for getting trapped there! Hmph!" she exclaimed, trying to change the subject to avoid any further embarrassment. She knew she couldn't win against Shi Min when it came to reasoning. 'This kid is too smart!'

"Alright, just remember not to stress too much this time on your ascension," Ling Li reassured him, a gentle smile softening her features. "With the azure bone I have, I'm confident you will succeed. And this time, I truly believe you'll be able to help protect our family."

"Mom, I realized that Paps is now reaching the middle of the fifth level," Shi Min said, his eyes wide with astonishment. "Once he hits the sixth level, he'll be only one step away from immortality! He's ascending faster than Mushu!"

Ling Li chuckled, the sound like music in the cozy room. "Yes, Shinsei always pushes him to practice harder when we're in Naga. I remember how tired your Paps would be at night, often asking for a herbal bath to soothe his muscles."

"Anyway," she continued, leaning forward and focusing on her son, "let's put our attention back to training the twins. Shinsei will arrive the day after tomorrow; he needs to go back to check on the temple's situation."

"Absolutely, I'd be happy to help while Shinsei is still away," Shi Min replied, a sense of resolve igniting within him.

"Alright then," Ling Li said, affectionately waving her hand toward him as a signal to rest. "Go to bed and get some well-deserved rest."

"Mom, what about you?" Shi Min asked, concern lacing his voice as he stood up from the chair. "You should take a break too."

"I've fallen behind on my work these past few days," Ling Li replied, still focused on the papers spread out before her. "I need to sign important documents and catch up on emails. You go to bed first, sweetheart."

Knowing he couldn't change her mind, Shi Min shook his head, a smile playing on his lips as he turned to leave. The warmth of their conversation lingered in the air, and as he exited, he felt a new resolve building within him.

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Meanwhile: Enchanted Dale's Ritual of Bloodline Dissection

In the depths of his newly constructed sanctum, fortified with carved soulstone and veined with cursed glass, Enchanted Dale stood shirtless before a sprawl of ancestral glyphs painted in blood. A stone slab dominated the chamber, its surface covered in a single thread of glowing silver — pulled from a ruined seal left behind during Pharsa's spiritual purge.

Enchanted Dale had begun a darker sequence. Severed from aura and discarded by ancestral spirits, he now sought essence in reverse — not through lineage, but through bloodline dissection.

He was dissecting her lineage.

Three skeletal birds circled overhead, each blinking with a different historical echo. As he chanted, the glyphs responded, forming an unholy tapestry of names, origins, and spiritual capabilities. Pharsa's soul had been traced through temple, monk, foster blood — and beneath it all, something still hidden.

But something else sparked beneath his fingers.

A second pulse.

The twins.

Enchanted Dale captured a spiritual imprint fragment left in the ritual space — a thread connected to the twin seal they activated in Russia.

He placed it beneath a dissecting lens stitched from echo shards and soulsteel.

Runes unfolded.

Two names pulsed — not spoken, but felt.

“First Storm... Second Flame...”

He smiled despite the wound on his side.

"We'll see how strong the fire holds when ash clouds form."

He reached for the final ritual blade.

Chapter 282: THE SEED OF THOUGHT

The Twins' dragon-bonded essence flickered like distant suns. Enchanted Dale hissed through his teeth, hunched over the thread.

"Come to me," Enchanted Dale growled, directing the ritual blade across the silver glyph, preparing to pierce the junction point between Pharsa's seal and the twins' ancestral vein.

Just as the blade touched the glyph—

Ling Li's Interception: Wrath of the Matron

Wind shrieked.

The entire sanctum rattled, sigils bleeding from the walls as a cold pressure spread like ink in water. The blade shattered mid-motion. Glyphs exploded in bursts of blinding light.

A spiritual projection carved from air and divine fire manifested at the threshold — Ling Li, her form cloaked in stormwoven robes, her eyes gleaming white and wrathful.

She hovered above the shattered threshold, her voice rising like thunder.

Ling Li shouted angrily, "You are really courting death!"

Enchanted Dale scrambled backward, arm scorched, voice caught in a half-scream.

His barriers, layered and reinforced over days of channeling, crumpled like paper before her presence.

"You cast eyes upon my daughters. You thread sorcery through my blood. You desecrate my lineage through ritual theft." Ling Li raised her hand.

Every broken ward responded, reforming under her control and binding Enchanted Dale in a net of air and molten sigils. They didn't just immobilize him — they erased the ritual language he used, word by word, from spiritual memory.

"I let you crawl last time." Ling Li's tone froze the air. "This time, I sever."

She touched her palm to the final seal, and Enchanted Dale screamed as the ancestral conduit fractured.

Bloodline access: revoked.

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The Next Day: Training Psychic Fortresses

The courtyard in Russia was layered in fog as dawn broke through frost-lined trees. Kim Kim and Chin Chin stood barefoot in concentric circles painted with dream-ink and wrapped in defensive mantras.

Shinsei gently adjusted their wrist sigils while Four Eyes, unusually solemn, sat beside Ling Li, his hand bracing a carved instruction scroll, eyes vigilant.

Ling Li stepped between her daughters and knelt.

"Last night, your blood was traced." She spoke without ceremony.

"Through Pharsa. Through me. Enchanted Dale sought not your aura — he sought your past."

Kim Kim stiffened.

Chin Chin furrowed her brow.

"So he wants our memories?"

"He wants to rewrite them." Ling Li said.

The twins' expressions darkened.

Ling Li placed a glimmering orb between them — the Seed of Thought, a device used to focus identity within layered dreaming. She began the Psychic Fortress Rite, her voice steady:

"Build with emotion. Guard with truth. Anchor with memory."

Under her guidance, the twins summoned personalized defenses:

Kim Kim invoked corridors of wind-carved cliffs and slingshot echoes — she built high walls but left open gates for her family.

Chin Chin constructed layered temples, mirrors with fire sigils, and a silent watchtower where she herself stood guard — her fortress was quiet, but impenetrable.

As each girl finished, the Seed of Thought pulsed. Their psychic signatures solidified.

Ling Li smiled faintly.

"Good. Now you cannot be entered without an invitation."

Pharsa's Unease and Confession

That evening, Pharsa sat quietly on the balcony overlooking the outer grove. Her tea had gone cold in her hands. The ceremony weeks ago had sealed her aura — but something pressed against her thoughts again, faint and oily.

Ling Li joined her in silence.

Pharsa didn't greet her. She said:

"Someone used my spirit imprint. Again."

Ling Li remained still.

"Not in a ritual. In search. As if testing keys against locks that never belonged to them." She said.

Ling Li took the cup from her and set it down gently.

"Enchanted Dale tried to bind your lineage to my daughters'."

Pharsa's breath caught.

"Enchanted Dale won't stop. He'll go deeper. Sometimes I wonder if this person is a machoist." Ling Li chuckled. "He just won't stop. It's his obsession to alter the world and become his."

Ling Li leaned forward.

"We'll anchor you. Re-inscribe your aura through elemental protection rites and identity mantra. Your blood is not his to rewrite."

Pharsa nodded, but her eyes were distant. She wasn't afraid — but she was changing.

And somewhere, Enchanted Dale lay bruised and stifled beneath broken sigils — eyes open, plotting again.

Pharsa's Re-inscription Ceremony: Claiming the Spirit Back

Upon his arrival in the vast, snow-kissed expanse of Russia, Shinsei quickly became aware of Pharsa's troubling plight. The weight of her predicament hung in the air like a thick fog, shrouded in uncertainty and despair. Deeply moved by her struggle, he resolved to orchestrate the Re-inscription Ceremony, an ancient and mystical rite designed to summon forth her spirit once more. With determination burning in his heart, Shinsei set about rallying the energies needed to reclaim what was lost, knowing that the ceremony would intertwine their fates in the most profound and transformative way.

Moonlight slanted through the open atrium above the sacred pool, its reflection broken only by the ripple of mineral water drawn from the frozen spring beneath the Russian mountain.

Pharsa stood at the edge, robe soaked in protective ink and threaded silver, her aura faint but stabilizing. The glow around her dimmed, waiting to be rekindled.

Ling Li, cloaked in stormwoven ceremonial robes, adjusted the altar stones ringed the pool. Each was etched with an element — wind, flame, river, and sky. Her expression held both tenderness and iron will.

At her left stood Shinsei, cloaked in layered ritual garments, the ends of his prayer beads trailing like starlight smoke. He carried the Phoenix Scroll, a relic used to verify soul alignment across temporal ruptures. His energy was calm but piercing — the quiet strength of a mountain after thunder.

As Pharsa stepped into the water, Shinsei extended his hand toward the sky and whispered a mantra under his breath. With it, the ancestral wind stirred, weaving through Ling Li's fire glyphs and wrapping around Pharsa's shoulders.

"Begin," Shinsei said softly.

Ling Li raised her hand and spoke aloud:

"Pharsa, your name has been borrowed, masked, traded. Tonight, it returns to you."

Shinsei echoed:

"Your spirit has endured fracture. Let the soul re-sound. Let the light re-thread."

Pharsa inhaled deeply. The water tingled against her skin, cool and charged. Her voice trembled as she spoke:

"My imprint was scattered. My aura was stolen. But my will remains. I reclaim my being, not as inheritance — but as choice."

At her words, the glyphs burned white-hot.

Chapter 283: QUITE SENTINEL: MASTER JIROU'S INTEGRATION

Ling Li knelt beside the pool, extended both palms, and summoned windfire threads from her own aura. They wrapped around Pharsa like silk and heat, sinking into her skin where old seals had faded.

Shinsei, solemn and focused, chanted from the Phoenix Scroll, verifying each strand of soul filament, watching as her energy realigned in clean spirals. His gaze softened — a rare shift in his usually austere demeanor.

The water pulsed once.

Then twice.

Then stilled.

Pharsa's breath slowed. Her aura crystallized — no longer leaking, no longer vulnerable.

Ling Li pressed one palm to Pharsa's heart.

"You are yours again."

Shinsei closed the scroll and bowed his head in affirmation.

From the tree line, Chatty exhaled, hands still clenched in prayer.

And somewhere beyond the veil, the spirit that had once watched her weep — the mother who had sealed her for safety — paused, and wept in peace.

A New Presence: The Seer Who Fell from Light

Later that night, while the family slept beneath reinforced dream veils and Pharsa rested in ceremonial silence, the gate alarm pulsed.

Outside the estate, through curtains of mist and pine, a figure appeared.

He was cloaked in tattered monk robes, his prayer beads scorched, eyes veiled in glass. His name was once Master Jirou — a disciple of Shinsei.

Thought dead after vanishing during a Void Spiral, now twisted from contact with Dale's corrupted ether.

Ren drew her blade.

Shi Min raised a flame ward.

Ling Li stepped forward confidently, amused by her children's decisiveness. She wondered when her daughter Ren had first learned to wield a sword. However, she set those thoughts aside for the moment.

The man bowed low, trembling.

"I do not come to fight," he said hoarsely. "But to warn. Enchanted Dale is using our old rites. He has found the Codex of Ancestor Binding — the one we swore never to use."

Shinsei emerged, eyes tight.

"Then you've walked too close to silence."

Master Jirou nodded in admission.

"Presently, he no longer wants to claim Pharsa. Or the twins. He knew he had already failed on this. So he wants to rewrite blood instead — remove them from the line of protectors and insert his own. That kind of ritual... it turns truth into myth."

Ling Li's aura flared faintly.

"And what do you seek?" Ling Li asked.

A pause.

"Redemption," the man whispered. "Or at least permission to die beside the gate that guards what I failed to protect. Not to be forgiven. Only to be useful before my thread is cut. Let me serve the gate I once betrayed. Let me sense his next move through the fragments he left in me."

Ling Li studied him for a long breath.

Her eyes flicked briefly to Shinsei. No words passed, but the elder gave a minute nod.

Ling Li watched Master Jirou for a long moment.

"You may stay. But mark this: if your shadow stretches longer than your soul—"

Her voice dropped into a whisper laced with elemental finality:

"—I will unmake it myself."

The mist recoiled.

Shi Min lowered his flame ward. Ren sheathed his blade.

Jirou bowed low once more and stepped back, not into comfort, but into captivity.

After Master Jirou had been escorted to the east meditation hall, the corridor fell into a hush, broken only by the soft flicker of lanterns and the distant hum of protective wards.

Shi Min, arms crossed and brow furrowed, turned to his mother with a skeptical grunt.

"Mom... who exactly is this guy?"

Ling Li paused mid-step, her gaze lingering on the closed doors behind them. Her voice was calm, but laced with the weight of old memory.

"Jirou was Shinsei's disciple. We believed he died during the Void Spiral. But it seems Enchanted Dale found him first."

Shi Min's eyes narrowed.

"So Dale learned from him?"

Ling Li nodded slowly.

"Yes. But from what I understand, Enchanted Dale's obsession with conquering the world grew beyond anything Jirou could contain. He learned the Codex. Twisted it. Jirou couldn't stop him— and eventually came to Shinsei to confess."

Shi Min scoffed, voice sharp.

"So, in short, this man is the root of Enchanted Dale's madness. How could he not see Dale's character before training him? Hmph."

Ling Li chuckled softly, the sound like wind brushing silk.

"Let's see how he helps. He knows Enchanted Dale's mind better than any of us. If he's sincere, he might be the key to unraveling what Dale left behind."

Ling Li turned, then paused, her eyes flicking toward the training grounds beyond the courtyard.

"By the way... since when did Ren learn sword skills?" She asked.

Shi Min blinked, then smirked, the tension in his shoulders easing.

"That brat snuck into my room and found my old spiritual sword. Ever since, she's been pestering me to teach her. It turns out she has talent — real instinct. She's been training with me at dawn; if I'm not around, she trains with Reginald."

He chuckled, a rare warmth in his voice.

"Tutor Chen's teaching her sword dance, too. She's picking it up fast. Even started improvising her own steps."

Ling Li's eyes softened.

"Then all is well. I was worried about your sister. But it sounds like she's finding her path."

Shi Min nodded, pride flickering behind his usual stoicism.

Ling Li reached out and gently touched his arm.

"Come. The night's long enough. Let's rest."

"Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight, Shi Min."

They walked together down the lantern-lit corridor, the quiet between them no longer heavy — just shared.

And high above, wrapped in dream veils, the twins stirred for a brief moment — sensing not the man... but the shifting tides he carried

Master Jirou had not entered through the estate's ceremonial hall, nor was he offered a guest room. At Ling Li's command, he was given quarters beneath the east wing shrine, nestled between frost-tempered stone and shelves of ancestral scrolls — where moonlight barely reached, and silence clung to everything.

He spent the first two nights re-aligning his fractured perception: fasting on pine ashes, tracing breath across cracked prayer beads, reciting incomplete mantras Shinsei had once taught him under waterfall mist. He slept little. But what he listened to was not sleep — it was the estate's heartbeat.

He had become a living sensor, attuned to anything that pulsed against natural flow.

Even Ling Li, perceptive and immortal, had noted it.

#### Chapter 284: ANOMALY AT THE VAULT

"He's a soul wound," Ling Li murmured privately to Shinsei. "But the pain makes him sensitive to falsity."

It came on the third night.

Just past midnight, as snow hushed the grounds, Master Jirou jolted awake, eyes wide, chest rattling. Not from cold — but from rupture. Something had tapped the boundary of the ancestral vault beneath the estate, not with brute force, but with mirrored memory.

He staggered from his shrine and ran through the torchlit halls.

Shi Min intercepted him halfway to the vault. "What did you sense?"

"A decoy," Master Jirou gasped. "Not Enchanted Dale. A fragment. A puppet built from corrupted ritual ash, shaped to resemble Lady Yue Qiren's aura signature."

Shi Min froze, lips parting in stunned disbelief.

They reached the vault's perimeter — sealed by flame-silk threads and dragonbone insignia. The seal glowed incorrectly, bending unnaturally inward as its skin stretched over its bone.

Ren and Shun, who were supposed to be in Beijing by now, wouldn't leave due to Ren's concern about the whole family being currently in. She was already there, sword drawn, eyebrows knotted.

Lily arrived shortly after.

Master Jirou stepped forward, eyes closed.

He reached toward the seal with shaking fingers.

It shivered.

Then cracked open — just slightly — enough to reveal the spiritual decoy inside: a hollow silhouette wearing Yue Qiren's face, eyes blank, emitting a corrupted version of her original aura.

Master Jirou recoiled instantly.

"He's baiting the guardians," he whispered. "Trying to fracture ancestral memory — make us doubt who is real."

Ling Li's Arrival: Flame and Clarity

From above, wind whipped through the vaulted atrium as Ling Li descended, her robes snapping in celestial resistance. Her aura flared wide — no warning, no patience.

She stepped directly toward the fractured vault and reached within.

The decoy trembled.

Ling Li spoke only once:

"You mimic our guardian's light, but you understand nothing of her silence."

Her hand ignited with windfire.

She released a single pulse.

The puppet evaporated — no scream, no resistance, just ash trailing into the air, whispering Enchanted Dale's name.

Ling Li turned to Master Jirou.

"Stay sharp. The next fragment may arrive wearing someone closer."

Master Jirou bowed low, sweat bleeding down his temple.

"I am watching."

The Path Beneath the Pines: Searching for the Puppet Forge

Snow fell lightly and thinly over the Russian forest, like ash stripped of its heat.

Just before dawn, Master Jirou stood outside the east-wing shrine, fingers trembling, his scorched prayer beads glowing faintly in response to a disturbance underground. He had spent the night meditating near an altar stone, sensing fragments of aura stitched with ancestral mimicry. The same

residue that had lingered on the puppet bearing Yue Qiren's face was now moving — not toward the estate, but deeper into the ley lines beneath it.

He called Shi Min and Shinsei, their robes drawn tight against the cold, faces already grim.

"I found it," Master Jirou rasped. "The forge. It isn't far from the protective tunnels — just past the old burial vaults. He built it on top of spiritual faultlines."

Shi Min grunted. "That's how he hides the pulses — masking them with ancestral memory."

Sinsei's gaze sharpened, calm but fierce. "Lead us."

Master Jirou perform a hand gesture to activate an array.

### Entry Into the Forge of Echoes

The three men arrived at the family's ancestral shrine; they descended through a concealed staircase behind the fire shrine, which had long been sealed by frost and overgrown with glyphs. As Master Jirou chanted the unlocking rite, each sigil cracked open with reluctance, revealing a pathway lined in black stone and spectral moss — a tunnel not dug, but shaped by cursed breath.

The air thickened as they entered the subterranean sanctum, where Enchanted Dale had once burned ancestral scrolls to mix their ash into puppet vessels.

At the center, an altar glowed.

Faint, unstable silhouettes swayed inside twisted glass tubes — unfinished soul puppets, each flickering with stolen strands. One bore a half-formed copy of Ling Li's childhood aura, while the other carried the disjointed essence of Shi Min's fire guardian.

Shinsei stepped forward, face grave. "This forge violates the Eightfold Lineage Law. It's not just mimicry — it's memory dissection."

Master Jirou knelt, tracing the symbols scrawled in blood beneath one of the tubes.

"He's blending truth and projection. That's why the puppet fooled the vault ward. These aren't clones. They're... convincing scars."

Shi Min shattered one tube with a gust of flame.

The liquid inside hissed — not boiling, but screaming.

"He was going to send these to shrine sites," Shinsei murmured. "Let them sit in sacred places and whisper corrupted memories until even the spirits turned against us."

Master Jirou placed his palm over the central runic hub — an embedded obsidian disc marked with Enchanted Dale's personal sigil, warped at its edges.

It trembled.

"This forge isn't dead yet. There's a heartbeat."

Dismantling the Curse: Shinsei's Judgment

Shinsei closed his eyes.

He began to chant — low, ancient, with rhythm drawn from the Temple of Threads, where spirit and shadow once coexisted without war. The pipes shivered. The tubes cracked. The corrupted altar recoiled.

Shi Min formed a flame barrier while Master Jirou fed purification ink into the disc.

As the forge started to collapse, a single voice echoed through the room — not Enchanted Dale's, but one of his early experiments, a puppet that mimicked Old Master Li's voice, whispering:

"SHE MUST NEVER KNOW WHAT SHE IS."

Shinsei's eyes snapped open.

"Too late."

He cast the final glyph.

The forge exploded — not violently, but quietly, like breath returning to lungs that had forgotten air.

Echoes Between Father and Daughter

The moon hung low over the snow-laced balcony of the Russian estate.

The air was hushed, save for the faint hum of protective wards threaded into the wind. Inside the temple alcove, Pharsa sat cross-legged on a woven mat, still cloaked in the silver-threaded robe from her re-inscription ritual. Steam curled from a nearby teacup, untouched.

Across from her, Shinsei lowered himself slowly, his ceremonial robes whispering against stone. His expression was thoughtful, lined with centuries of restraint.

Pharsa didn't look at him at first.

"Do you remember the prayer bells at the temple?" she asked, voice quiet. "The ones that never rang unless someone cried?"

Shinsei's brow twitched slightly.

"They rang the morning I found you."

Pharsa turned, eyes reflecting candlelight and exhaustion.

"The spirits knew I would cry later." A faint smile touched her lips — bitter, soft.

Shinsei exhaled, folding his hands.

"You were always meant to awaken. I only hoped it would be later — after joy, not during war."

A silence settled.

Then, Pharsa leaned forward.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice cracked. "That's what I carried could invert fate. That it could burn not only enemies... but bonds."

Shinsei met her gaze directly.

Chapter 285: TWIN TRAINING: LEGACY HANDED WITH CARE

"Because for years, your aura was dormant. Asleep. Sealed beyond mortal reach. And I thought — perhaps foolishly — that letting you live as someone ordinary was the safest kindness." Shinsei said with a sigh.

Pharsa's hands clenched. "I've killed with it."

"You've saved with it." Shinsei retorted.

Pharsa stared at Shinsei. "It's too much."

Shinsei's voice softened.

"It is not a weapon. It is memory wrapped in blood. You inherited not just magic — but choice."

A gust of wind curled through the alcove, flaring the lantern.

Pharsa lowered her head.

"Enchanted Dale wants to rewrite me. Erase me from the line of protectors. If he succeeds — what happens to everything I reclaimed?"

Shinsei reached out slowly and tapped a finger to her brow — where the last glyph of her ritual had been drawn.

"Then we will fight memory with memory. Blood with will. And you, child, must remember not just what you are... but what you became to everyone who now carries your name in protection."

Pharsa closed her eyes. Tears welled but didn't fall.

She whispered:

"I'll carry it."

Shinsei didn't smile.

But his silence felt warm.

Twin Training: Legacy Handed with Care

Beside the frozen pine grove, Kim Kim and Chin Chin stood poised within twin flame-and-wind sigil circles. The air was thick with mana, frost crackling at the edges of protective wards.

Pharsa, robed in pearl-gold ceremonial cloth stitched with elemental silk, knelt between them. Her aura no longer spilled uncontrollably — now it moved with intention, coiling softly like river smoke under her skin.

Ling Li watched from the upper steps, arms folded, expression unreadable but proud.

Pharsa extended her palms, and from them emerged a soft pulse of spiritual wind, tinged with flickers of blue fire. The twins instinctively mirrored her stance.

"You don't need control," Pharsa murmured. "You need conviction. You're not channeling power to impress — you're shaping it to protect."

Chin Chin furrowed her brow. "But what if I shape it wrong?"

Pharsa leaned closer. Her voice dropped to a near whisper.

"Then break it. And start again. You don't protect with perfection. You protect with purpose."

Kim Kim summoned a gust of air and accidentally flipped a charm bowl into the snow. Chin Chin giggled. Pharsa grinned and snapped her fingers — the bowl soared back into place, carried by a swirl of fire-kissed wind.

"Not bad. But tomorrow, let's try not to set the pine trees on fire."

The twins groaned in unison. Ling Li allowed herself the faintest smile.

Pharsa's presence wasn't just instructive; it was also inspiring. It was calming — the kind of power that held tension in one palm and grace in the other.

## Return to the Forge: Tracing the Unraveled Thread

Ling Li formed a hand seal and created an array for her and Pharsa. They both arrived at the old family ancestral shrine. The torches flickered low. The ruined forge lay silent, its ritual tubes shattered, its sigils faded into stone.

Pharsa and Ling Li descended together, footsteps echoing. They were not with Shinsei, Shi Min, and Master Jirou when they came, so Ling Li and Pharsa decided to see the place themselves.

The air still carried a metallic bite — scorched memory, twisted intent.

Pharsa reached out toward the cracked obsidian disc that had once manipulated her ancestral imprint. As her fingers brushed the edge, her aura pulsed instinctively, repelled, then drawn inward. She gasped.

Ling Li steadied her.

"It still holds fragments. Let me anchor you."

Together, they pressed palms to the disc. A ripple of spirit storm surged outward. The forge responded — not violently, but as if exhaling trauma.

A voice crackled faintly from the remnants.

"SHE MUST NEVER KNOW WHAT SHE IS."

Pharsa flinched. "He tried to rip me from my own history."

Ling Li closed her eyes. Her immortal thread moved through the echo, sifting through time-layered secrets.

"Not rip. Reassign. Enchanted Dale aimed to twist the recorded origin of your soul — to replace your bloodline in the Codex with something malleable. Corrupted."

Pharsa's eyes widened.

"Erase my lineage from the protector's line?"

Ling Li nodded solemnly.

"He wasn't just after your power. He wanted you forgotten. So he could rewrite the prophecy with his own vessels."

Pharsa stepped back, hand clutching her chest. Her breath hitched — not from fear, but from clarity.

"Then everything they wrote about me — everything sealed away — wasn't just myth. It was protection."

Ling Li turned to her, fierce and focused.

"And now it must be remembered. We'll retrieve the original Codex."

Pharsa's voice dropped, brittle and determined.

"I'll re-enter my own story. And this time... I'll be the one who writes it."

Twin Awakening: Questions Written in Smoke

Moonlight curved across the sleeping quarters, casting silver veins through the protective silk canopy overhead. The dream veils woven by Ling Li shimmered faintly, pulsing in rhythm with the heartbeat of the estate.

Then — it snapped.

An invisible ripple surged through the air, subtle yet seismic. Deep underground, the echo of the destroyed forge whispered through the ley lines.

At the exact moment Pharsa and Ling Li shattered Enchanted Dale's puppet chamber, the twins stirred.

Kim Kim bolted upright, eyes wide and glowing faintly with residual wind aura.

Chin Chin gasped and sat up more slowly, one hand clutching the edge of her spirit blanket, her other pressed to her chest.

"Did you feel that?" Kim Kim asked, voice shaking with awe.

"Like something... broke," Chin Chin said. "Like a door we didn't know we had just closed."

For a long moment, they said nothing.

Then Kim Kim climbed out of bed and fetched the scroll Ling Li had gifted them for training. She opened it to the crest their joined powers had summoned during the Frost Sigil trial — the dragon seal of wind and flame.

It had changed.

A new sigil had appeared below it — small, crooked, unfinished.

Chin Chin traced it gently.

"It's from our mother's side," she whispered. "But not Mom. Not Ling Li. Someone else."

Kim Kim tilted her head.

"Is it... from Aunt Pharsa?"

The moment the name was spoken, the veil above them rippled.

No reply came.

But deep inside, both twins felt something stir — not fear, but a call. Not threat, but invitation.

Something in their blood was echoing with the forge's death. Something Enchanted Dale had tried to rewrite. And now, the twins were hearing what had once been silenced.