

PROTEGE 286

Chapter 286: ECHOES OF ANCESTRAL FURY

By mid-morning, the twins found Pharsa sitting beneath a frost-kissed cherry tree in the inner courtyard. Though her ceremonial robes had been traded for a lighter cloak, the traces of silver ink on her wrists still glowed faintly — her re-inscription was fresh, her spirit steady.

Kim Kim approached first, scroll clutched to her chest.

"Aunt Pharsa," she said softly. "During our sleep... after the forge collapsed..."

Chin Chin stepped closer.

"A new sigil appeared under our crest. It feels... like it's watching us."

Pharsa's eyes widened subtly. She held out her hand. Kim Kim passed her the scroll.

The moment her fingers touched the paper, her aura flared — brief, gentle, but unmistakable. Her breath caught.

"This mark," Pharsa whispered, "is part of my lost seal. The one Enchanted Dale tried to twist."

The twins exchanged glances, stunned.

Ling Li appeared moments later, her stride swift and eyes already scanning the scroll.

"Enchanted Dale tried to bind Pharsa's fragment to your legacy, erase her presence, and insert his own." Ling Li explained to the twins.

Chin Chin frowned.

"But it didn't work, right?"

Ling Li nodded.

"It failed. Because Pharsa's soul resisted — and your bloodline was too strong to overwrite."

Kim Kim whispered:

"So what's the sigil doing here?"

Pharsa looked between them, then at Ling Li.

"It's echoing. The forge's destruction didn't just expose the falsity; it revealed the buried truth. The connection between us wasn't fabricated — it was always there. Enchanted Dale tried to mimic it... But all he did was unearth it."

Ling Li stepped closer to her daughters, kneeling down, voice calm but resolute.

"Pharsa is not only a protector. She is a threadweaver. The blood that shaped her also helped awaken you. It's no longer just ancestral. It's spiritual."

The twins stood silent, awed.

Kim Kim reached forward and placed her fingers over the sigil.

"Then this is hers. And ours."

Dreamwalk Discovery: A Lineage Whispered

That night, under layers of snow-bound clouds, the twins entered a protected dreamwalk session, guided by Ling Li and Pharsa together.

The goal: to explore the origin of the new sigil — to touch the pulse of the memory Enchanted Dale failed to rewrite.

Inside the dreamworld, Kim Kim walked through corridors of wind and carved jade, while Chin Chin stepped through temples stitched with fire and whispers.

At the center, they met an echo of a woman — robed in stormlight and phoenix feathers, her face resembling both Ling Li and Pharsa. She bore no name, but held a scroll with the unfinished sigil.

"You are seeds from branches once severed," the woman said calmly. "The wind remembers you. The fire knows your breath. And what Enchanted Dale forgot... You will remember."

The twins bowed.

Chin Chin asked:

"Are we part of something bigger?"

The woman smiled and said:

"You are the remainder. The resistance. And you are not alone."

The vision faded.

When the twins awoke, Ling Li was waiting at their bedside.

Pharsa stood nearby, silent but proud.

Kim Kim whispered, "The woman looked like all of us."

Ling Li touched their cheeks.

"Because what she carries... belongs to all of us. And tomorrow, we begin shaping what it becomes."

Enchanted Dale's Realization: Echoes of Ancestral Fury

In the shattered sanctum, where Codex pages curled like dried roots and blood glyphs smeared the stone, Enchanted Dale hunched over his fractured mirror, his brow slick with sweat and ritual residue.

His last rite — the forge of ancestral puppets, the memory override attempt — had detonated violently. Pharsa's blood had repelled the rewrite, and Ling Li's immortal strike had collapsed three of his primary scrying links.

But Enchanted Dale didn't yet grasp the full consequence.

Not until the mirror pulsed — once, twice — and cracked outward with a hum he had not programmed.

A seal glimmered inside the glass, flickering in blue and gold.

Then a voice spoke.

Not Pharsa's.

Not Ling Li's.

But High Matron Ji-Ye, elder guardian of the Southern Azure Sect, whose line had remained dormant for decades.

"Memory tampering detected. Thread disturbance activated."

Then came another.

"The House of Autumn Fire recognizes unauthorized Codex breach."

Enchanted Dale staggered backward, breath hitching.

More seals emerged.

Six. Nine. Eleven.

Each one belonged to a different sect — a different ancestral line.

Some burned with forgotten vengeance. Others pulsed with defensive calm. All of them had awakened.

Enchanted Dale screamed, pressing both palms to his mirror to sever the connection. It sparked and imploded, carving spiritual burns across his fingers.

He limped toward his artifact shelf, scanning for containment runes. His voice trembled.

"No. No. They're not supposed to remember. I scrubbed the echoes. I sealed the old names."

But names don't forget.

Especially when they're carved into blood.

And Enchanted Dale's tampering — his attempt to rewrite prophecy, reassign guardianship, and mimic soul origin — had triggered a ripple not only through Pharsa's lineage...

...but through the entire tapestry of protectors.

From mountain temples in Kunlun to frost libraries buried beneath tundra sects, quiet bells rang for the first time in centuries.

Even in the Shadow Crescent Sect — long thought dissolved — a guardian monk rose from dream meditation and whispered:

"The threads are pulling. Prepare the Archive."

Rippling Consequences: The Estate Feels the Shift

At the Russian retreat, the wind howled unnaturally against the northern wall.

Ling Li, mid-meditation, snapped her eyes open and turned to the guardian altar. Twelve ancestral threads shimmered across her ceremonial map — a constellation only visible during full convergence rites.

They pulsed.

"He didn't just fail," she murmured. "He disturbed the entire spirit grid."

Pharsa stepped in silently.

"Then the world knows."

"Yes," Ling Li said. "And now they'll be watching the twins."

Arrival of the Moonwater Emissary

Two days after the ripple reached the spirit grid, the estate's northern alarm rang at sunrise — quiet, clear, resonant.

From the Pinewood Pass emerged a solitary figure, wrapped in sky-colored robes stitched with tidal glyphs. The snow didn't touch her; it parted around her body like water avoiding command. Her eyes shone pale lavender, and her breath left patterns in the air that resembled ancient map sigils.

She bowed once at the gate.

"I am Orin Dai," she said softly, "Sentinel of the Moonwater Sect. We received the echo of a forbidden Codex breach — and the activation of twin seals marked with stormfire convergence."

Ren, Shun, and Reginald, already at the gate, held their sword in one hand, their silence like a held breath. Shi Min appeared from the side path, flame crest glowing under his collar.

From the upper steps, Ling Li descended, robes trailing like clouds caught in the wind.

Chapter 287: FINAL RECKONING: THE UNMAKING OF ENCHANTED DALE

Orin Dai's gaze didn't waver.

"We come not with a blade. We come with a warning," she said.

Behind her, three other figures stood in quiet formation — guardians of the Moonwater lineage, tasked not with warfare but with prophecy preservation.

"The forge Enchanted Dale shattered woke threads buried beneath our archives," Orin Dai continued. "Fragments of Pharsa's origin were found in our dream records; it was cast from temple seals and misfiled intentionally. Someone erased her from our ancestral charts centuries ago. But her awakening re-threaded the gap."

Pharsa, now arriving alongside the twins and her husband Chatty, froze.

Chatty tagged Pharsa's sleeves and gave her a comforting nod.

Kim Kim clutched her scroll tighter.

Chin Chin stepped subtly in front of her sister — protective without knowing why.

Ling Li's expression hardened.

"What do these records say?"

Orin Dai unfurled a scroll.

The ink shimmered.

"That the prophecy of the twin seals was never meant for two children born together, but two legacies joined unnaturally. One through blood. One through stolen silence." Orin Dai explained.

All eyes turned to Pharsa, whose chest rose sharply, fingers curling into her sleeves. "Then I was always one of them."

Orin Dai nodded.

"But someone feared your path — and rewrote it."

Shinsei said as he stepped forward upon his arrival.

Shinsei continues. "The twins awakened Pharsa's seal through spirit resonance. Enchanted Dale tried to fake that event — but all he did was reroute the prophecy back into motion."

A pause.

Orin Dai studied the twins. "We offer protection. And insight. The Moonwater archives are open to you now."

Ling Li glanced at Pharsa.

"We don't need protection. But we welcome truth."

Final Reckoning: The Unmaking of Enchanted Dale

The wind over the Moonwater cliffs howled like ancestral warning — high and thin, echoing across sanctified stone. The convergence ritual had just ended, and the archives whispered aloud truths that had once been locked in silence. They came to this cliff to find the fragments of Pharsa's origin that appeared here, according to Orin Dale.

But Enchanted Dale had not fled.

He stood twisted within a ravine of corrupted ether, his robe torn, his sigils leaking. Shadow-bound birds screeched overhead. His last spiritual anchor — a puppet forged from reanimated soul threads — had failed to take root.

He watched the horizon.

And waited.

Within moments, the sky changed.

A storm surged — not from above, but from everywhere.

Ling Li descended first, her aura vast, braiding wind and thunder across the broken terrain. Her eyes blazed cold, no longer tempered.

Pharsa followed, silent, cloaked in elemental light, her spirit steady.

Behind them came Orin Dai of the Moonwater Sect, Shi Min, Ren, Shun, and Four Eyes, with Shinsei, each flanked by emissaries of awakened guardian lines.

Enchanted Dale staggered to his feet, coughing against the air, eyes ringed in fire.

"You want judgment?" he spat, voice brittle. "I tried to protect legacy. To overwrite the weakness in your sacred bloodlines."

Ling Li stepped forward, voice sharper than steel.

"You abused memory. Manipulated echo. You created false names and called them truth."

Pharsa's gaze never wavered.

"You tried to write me out of my own soul."

Enchanted Dale snarled, raising his hand for one final incantation — a rupture spell designed to tear prophecy fibers from the spirit grid.

But Ling Li moved faster.

Her wind struck first, slicing the sigils from Enchanted Dale's arm.

Shi Min followed, casting a flame ward that locked Enchanted Dale's body in heat, preventing escape.

Then Shinsei whispered the final condemnation:

"You have no tether. No truth. Let memory erase what you've become."

Pharsa stepped forward.

She raised her hands.

The wind and flame around her fused.

From her chest rose the re-inscribed seal — the sigil Enchanted Dale tried to rewrite, now whole and invincible.

"You fear what I carry. But it's not wrath. It's will."

She cast it forward.

The seal struck Enchanted Dale mid-chest.

His body froze.

Then cracked — spiritually, cell by cell.

The earth swallowed the fragments of his aura.

His name — once etched in dark archives — flickered into silence.

He didn't scream.

Enchanted Dales' existence is now dissolved forever. He is dead.

And the wind returned.

"Why is he called Enchanted Dale?" Kim Kim curiously asked.

"Because he is handsome, he named himself Enchanted Dale. This is what Master Jirou told me." Shi Min explained.

Kim Kim innocently replied, "Handsome? I think Uncle Mushu is even more handsome than Enchanted Dale!" while rubbing her chin.

Everyone was amused except her father, Four Eyes. Kim Kim didn't realize that Mushu's score had just fallen significantly in his father's eyes.

Mushu, who was in Myanmar, sneezed. 'Damn! Who is cursing me?!'

Aftermath: Memory Resealed

Ling Li placed a thread of talisman across the cliffs, sealing the site from future use.

Pharsa stood still, breathing deeply, gaze on the horizon.

Shinsei approached her quietly.

"He's truly gone," he said. "And your seal... holds."

Pharsa nodded.

Then, softly:

"Let the next chapter begin."

From above, the clouds parted.

And somewhere behind them, the twins sketched their first prophecy glyph without trembling.

The Archive of Echoes: Opening the Sealed Prophecy

Nestled within the core of the Moonwater Sect, the hidden archive was carved into living stone, veined with whispering light and sealed by ancestral dialect. The chamber hadn't been opened in centuries — not because it was forgotten, but because it chose silence.

Ling Li, Pharsa, Shinsei, and the twins stood at its threshold, flanked by Orin Dai and three archive sentinels. Each carried an orb bound with truth-thread — capable of revealing memory only if inherited resonance aligned. At the same time, the rest waited for them outside.

The entrance responded to the twins first.

Their dragon sigils pulsed faintly.

The stone door opened.

Inside, scrolls floated midair, orbiting around a central altar of wind-soaked glass. Runes shimmered beneath the floor — one name flashed repeatedly, distorted, obscured... then corrected.

Pharsa.

Not erased.

Repressed. Sealed. Feared.

Kim Kim walked carefully to the altar and pointed.

"That's your true name, isn't it?"

Pharsa nodded. Her voice barely rose above the ancestral hum.

"It always was."

Chapter 288: THE RITE OF GUARDIANSHIP

Shinsei placed his palm on the altar, unlocking the scrolls linked to the twin convergence prophecy.

One opened slowly.

Within it, the truth spilled out like oil and fire:

Two seals were never meant to be bound by time.

One bearer would carry ancestral rebirth.

The other, protected by spiritual inversion, would guard the gate to future legacy.

Ling Li read silently, then whispered:

"The twins weren't born together to fulfill a prophecy. They were born to repair it."

Pharsa exhaled.

Outside, snow began to fall gently again.

The silence in the archive no longer felt empty.

It felt full.

Between Storms: Preparing for Guardianship

The courtyard hadn't been this still in weeks.

Snow softened every stone, every step. Moonwater pine trees stood wrapped in silk wards, and soft bells chimed from the upper garden, not as alarm, but as invitation. The estate was breathing again.

Inside the gathering hall, the Li family sat together for the first time since Enchanted Dale's reckoning.

Madam Li and Old Master Li sat closest to the hearth, their fingers entwined over a string of prayer beads, whispering blessings over bowls of root stew and ceremonial rice. They flew in for this ceremony.

Four Eyes crouched beside a scroll rack, scribbling adjustments to the twins' defense sequences with the ferocity of someone who'd watched too many sleepless nights pass without control. His beard had collected a tiny curl of ash, but he didn't notice — he was smiling.

Shi Min and Ren, together with Lily, unpacked the ceremonial boxes sent by the Moonwater Sect, each containing elemental tokens: phoenix feathers, windscale beads, and small jade discs engraved with protective phrases in ancient dialects.

Pharsa, now fully recovered, sat cross-legged with Kim Kim and Chin Chin between her knees, gently weaving gold-threaded dragon crests into their training cloaks. Every needle stroke was a form of memory, every knot a promise. Her husband, Chatty, who has been on tender hooks for the past month, now felt relaxed and proud, looking at her.

Pharsa paused suddenly and looked at Chin Chin.

"Do you remember the dreamwalk?"

Chin Chin nodded solemnly.

"The beautiful woman said we'd repair the prophecy."

Pharsa smiled, her voice quiet.

"So you'll need armor that remembers you when you forget yourselves."

Across the hall, Ling Li moved with deliberate grace, sorting through ancestral seals and guardianship rites. Her hands rarely faltered, but her eyes lingered on her daughters longer than usual — protective, grateful, fiercely proud.

She turned to Shinsei, who now prepared a low table with incense and thread charms.

"Will they be ready?" She asked.

Shinsei's response was soft, wrapped in certainty:

"They already are. They just haven't realized how much the world changed because they existed."

Silence fell again, but it was the kind that heals. Ling Li felt reassured.

Even Fatty, in his wheelchair, who had barricaded himself in the kitchen with three steam baskets, peeked around the door and whispered,

"Everyone's got a role. Mine is dumplings."

Shun, who was left by his side, chuckled.

At the hour of dusk, the family gathered on the outer balcony beneath a sky blooming with pale lavender.

Each member placed an object into the ceremonial basket — not as a weapon, but as an offering:

A slingshot wrapped in phoenix string

A scroll with broken seals was resealed anew.

A windscale bead drawn from the frozen forge

And a dragon crest sewn by hand

Ling Li held the final token: a mirror, once shattered, now re-silvered with elemental flame.

"Tomorrow," she said, voice echoing across the snow, "we inscribe them into guardianship. Not to control, but to honor. Not to bind, but to choose."

The twins leaned against Pharsa's sides.

Behind them, the wind stirred — not with omen, but with invitation.

As Mushu stood quietly off to the side, a wave of emotion washed over him. He hadn't anticipated the significance that the slingshots he crafted for the twins would hold in their hearts. The vibrant colors of the slingshots, painted with care, seemed to shimmer with a life of their own. At the same time, the twins' laughter echoed joyfully in the air, filling him with a bittersweet pride.

The Rite of Guardianship: Name and Flame

At twilight, the courtyard was transformed.

Veils of phoenix silk hung from the pine branches, and the stone platform had been encircled with twin elemental crests — wind and flame, each traced with ancestral salt and dream ink. Candles flickered in synchronized circles, casting undulating shadows across the entire hall.

The air itself was suspended in reverence.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin stood barefoot between the seals, cloaked in their newly embroidered training robes. The gold-threaded dragon crests stitched by Pharsa shimmered faintly under the moonlight, pulsing in rhythm with their breath. Their gazes were steady. Nervous, yes — but clear.

Ling Li, dressed in full ceremonial regalia, held the Guardianship Scroll aloft. Its surface glowed with active inscription — names of the protectors before them, each one sealed into legacy by choice, not birth.

Shinsei began the invocation, his voice deep and resonant, echoing through the courtyard like a song pressed into stone.

"We do not name you guardians today. We recognize that you have already become them."

He turned to Ling Li, who stepped forward and spoke in a sacred dialect, a tongue used only in rites bound by blood and oath.

"By flame, you remember. By wind, you carry. And by both, you protect."

Then to the twins:

"Kim Kim — what do you vow?"

Kim Kim stepped forward, fists clenched, voice strong despite the tremor.

"To defend what forgets itself. To remember what others leave behind."

"Chin Chin?"

Chin Chin inhaled.

"To protect the gate of blood and the shadow behind it. To choose fire only when silence no longer saves."

Their seals ignited — not explosively, but in perfect sync. Wind curled up, fire flared down. The crests on their robes glowed and pressed themselves into the Guardianship Scroll, becoming permanent entries.

From the perimeter, Madam Li and Old Master Li, with Mr. and Mrs. Xu, wept openly.

Pharsa's lips parted, but no sound came — only light.

Four Eyes lowered his head, murmuring a prayer that didn't need translation.

Chapter 289: ARRIVAL IN GENEVA

And then came the final inscription:

Ling Li raised the scroll and proclaimed:

"Let it be known — these twin guardians do not guard the past. They guard the right to rewrite its consequences."

A gust of wind surged through the courtyard.

The candles dimmed.

The stars seemed to lean closer.

Private Reflection: Ling Li and Four Eyes

Later that night, beneath the paper-lantern trees where the snow didn't reach, Ling Li sat quietly beside Four Eyes, a blanket wrapped between them. They didn't speak for a while — the silence was earned, not awkward.

Four Eyes finally broke it.

"I saw their names glow. Just like ours did, I remembered."

Ling Li nodded, eyes distant, voice gentler than usual.

"But our names were offered out of fear. Theirs... came from choice."

He turned to her, beard flecked with tea crumbs, eyes swimming with emotion.

"Are you scared?"

She stared up at the moon.

"Terrified," Ling Li said. "But proud. They're walking into legend, and we're just the hands that held the gate open."

Four Eyes laughed softly.

"They'll never understand what it meant to be afraid of prophecy. We did. And still gave them space to become it."

Ling Li leaned against him, the edge of vulnerability slipping past her guard.

"What if they falter?"

He touched her hand.

"Then they'll rise again. Because we showed them how."

They sat in silence.

And above them, two stars pulsed — twin points in a constellation newly awakened.

Arrival in Geneva

In the blink of an eye, Geneva unfolded beneath a sky of soft gold and alpine mist. The Li family had arrived a whole week earlier than planned, their entourage spilling out of the airport like a traveling opera troupe — elegant, chaotic, and unmistakably bonded.

Ling Li, ever the strategist, in her silk travel coat, had chosen to arrive early not just for Lily's Dance Sports Competition but to scout the venue and assess the spiritual climate.

With Solaris still unaccounted for, and the prophecy whispering of chaos when she sought the Heavens, she wasn't taking chances.

"This is the only place he can meet Lily openly," Ling Li murmured to Four Eyes as they stepped into the hotel lobby. "If he intends to disrupt anything, it'll be here."

Four Eyes adjusted his glasses, eyes scanning the marble floor like it might hide a trapdoor.

"Then we'll watch every shadow. And every chandelier." He joked as he wrapped Ling Li in his arms for comfort.

Pharsa swept into the hotel suite first, her coat billowing like a cape and her heels clicking with purpose. Behind her came Chatty, Mushu, and Rockie — the latter dragging his feet like a man condemned.

Mushu, ever vigilant, immediately began sniffing every corner of the suite with the intensity of a customs officer. He paused at the minibar, growled at a decorative vase, then trotted over to the curtains and began pawing at them suspiciously.

Rockie, meanwhile, collapsed onto the velvet couch with a dramatic groan, his hair tousled and his eyes half-lidded from jet lag.

"I swear it screamed in three languages," he muttered, referring to the Enfield that had accompanied them on the flight.

"French, Mandarin, and something that sounded like ancient Babylonian."

Pharsa didn't even blink.

"It missed Chatty," she said sweetly, removing her gloves with practiced grace.

"It missed tormenting me," Rockie corrected, rubbing his temples.

"Can you and your husband take it back, please? Before it starts chewing on the wallpaper or summoning thunder in the lobby?"

Pharsa chuckled, her eyes glinting.

"You talk with Chatty. You're the one who made a bet and raced him. Have you forgotten who trains him on the race track?"

She snorted, clearly amused.

"It's practically his second soul."

Chatty, who had just entered behind her, gave Rockie a smug nod and patted the Enfield's head like a proud parent. The creature purred — or growled — in response, its eyes glowing faintly.

"I won fair and square," Chatty said, finally acknowledging the conversation.

"You challenged it. You lost. Now it's bonded to you for seventy-two hours. That's the rule."

"That's your rule," Rockie snapped.

"It's a sacred pact," Chatty replied solemnly, clearly enjoying himself.

The Enfield leapt onto the couch beside Rockie, curled up like a lion cub, and promptly began snoring — loudly, and with occasional hiccups of static energy.

"I hate everything," Rockie whispered, defeated.

"You love us," Pharsa said, tossing him a chocolate truffle from her handbag.

"You just don't know it right now."

The Family Arrives

From Beijing, Ren and Shun arrived with Reginald and Dr. Norman, both of whom were dressed as if attending a diplomatic summit. Ren immediately ran to hug Ling Li, while Shun gave a quiet bow and handed her a sealed envelope.

"Updates from the Beijing sect," he said.

"Thank you," Ling Li replied, eyes already scanning the seal.

"Good to see you, Dr. Norman," Ling Li greeted the android now with a very eye-catching Korean face, it's even better looking than any K-pop artist.

"It's now Joonwoo," Dr. Norman said with a chuckle.

From Belgium, Fatty burst into the lobby with Goldie trailing behind him, carrying three suitcases and a box of pastries. Fatty's eyes darted around like a puppy searching for its owner.

"Where's Lily? Is she here? Is she rehearsing? Can I see her now?"

Goldie sighed.

"She's at the studio. You'll see her tonight."

Fatty pouted dramatically, clutching a heart-shaped pillow he bought at the airport for Lily.

"I miss her so much. I haven't seen her in two months. That's like two years in emotional time."

When they finally reunited at the rehearsal hall, Fatty ran to Lily like a man possessed, nearly knocking over a lighting rig.

"Lily! My little dumpling! My moonlight in Geneva!"

Lily laughed and hugged him tightly.

"You're so dramatic."

Shi Min, watching from the corner, darkened visibly as Fatty fed Lily a spoonful of yogurt, then wiped her mouth with a napkin like a doting husband.

"Can you two not feed me dog food during rehearsal?" he muttered.

"We're just hydrating, love," Fatty replied cheerfully.

Shi Min "..."

'Who asked me to be a single dog?!'

Exploring Geneva: Culture and Camaraderie

Before the competition, Ling Li took the family to explore Geneva's famous sites. They visited the Jet d'Eau, where Kim Kim and Chin Chin tried to race the fountain spray and ended up soaked and laughing.

Pharsa took photos of everyone with her spirit camera, which occasionally captured aura flares instead of faces

Chapter 290: INTERNATIONAL DANCE SPORTS COMPETITION

In the Old Town, Four Eyes got lost in a bookstore filled with ancient European grimoires. At the same time, Madam Li and Old Master Li marveled at the cobblestone streets and the cathedral bells.

"This place feels like it remembers its own stories," Old Master Li said, touching a stone wall.

"Then we'll add ours," Ling Li replied.

They attended a local chocolate-making workshop, where Ren accidentally summoned a wind glyph that scattered cocoa powder across the room. Shun helped clean it up with silent efficiency, while Fatty tried to sculpt Lily's face out of truffle paste.

"It looks like a potato," Lily said, giggling.

"A beautiful potato," Fatty insisted.

Everyone "...."

At the Lake Geneva promenade, the family watched the sunset together.

Ling Li stood slightly apart, eyes on the horizon.

"The Heavens are stirring," she murmured.

"Solaris?" Pharsa asked quietly.

Ling Li nodded.

"He knows Lily is here. And he knows I'll be watching."

Competition Day: Arena Geneva Awakens

The Arena Geneva shimmered beneath morning light, its glass façade reflecting the snow-dusted rooftops and the distant Alps. Inside, the venue had transformed into a world of rhythm and spectacle — polished floors gleaming under chandeliers, with velvet banners fluttering to display the insignias of international dance federations.

The audience filled the tiered seats in waves — coaches, families, dignitaries, and dance enthusiasts from across Europe and Asia. Murmurs of anticipation rippled through the crowd, punctuated by bursts of applause as early performers took the floor.

At the judges' table sat five figures of formidable reputation:

Madame Corinne, a former world champion in Latin ballroom, is known for her razor-sharp critiques and love of dramatic flair.

Mr. Takahashi, a stoic technician from Japan, whose scores were feared for their precision.

Dr. Elodie, a Swiss historian of dance, valued emotional storytelling above all.

Coach Miguel, a flamboyant choreographer from Spain, who clapped for every spin.

Ms. Anika, a young prodigy from Berlin, is known for her empathy and unpredictability.

Shi Min & Lily: The Semi-Final Round Begins

The day before was the qualifying rounds and quarter-finals, and Shi Min and Lily easily advanced to the semi-finals without a sweat. Today is the second day of the competition. Backstage, Shi Min adjusted his cufflinks, his black-and-gold tango suit tailored to perfection. His hair was slicked back, his posture regal. Beside him, Lily wore a crimson dress with flame-cut ruffles and a bodice embroidered with phoenix feathers — a nod to her heritage and her fire.

"Ready?" she asked, eyes sparkling.

"Born ready," Shi Min replied, though his fingers twitched slightly.

The announcer's voice boomed:

"Representing the Philippines School of Dance — Shi Min and Lily!"

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Rumba: The Whisper of Heat

The music began — slow, sultry, aching.

Shi Min and Lily moved like breath and heartbeat, their bodies close but never clashing. Every step was a conversation, every turn a confession. Lily's arm curled around Shi Min's neck in a slow spiral, and he lifted her with a single hand, letting her descend like silk.

Madame Corinne leaned forward.

"That's a rumba with restraint. Beautiful."

Samba: The Pulse of Joy

The tempo shifted. Drums. Heat. Carnival.

Shi Min's footwork exploded with precision, his hips sharp and fluid. Lily matched him beat for beat, her skirt flaring like fire with every bounce. They spun together, then apart, then back again — a celebration of rhythm and trust.

Coach Miguel clapped mid-performance.

"¡Eso! That's samba!"

Cha Cha: The Tease and Snap

Sharp. Flirty. Electric.

Lily's eyes sparkled with mischief as she flicked her wrist and spun away, only for Shi Min to catch her mid-turn and slide her into a perfect lockstep. Their timing was impeccable — every beat hit like punctuation.

Ms. Anika whispered to Dr. Elodie:

"They're dancing like they know each other's dreams."

Jive: The Storm Unleashed

Fast. Wild. Unrelenting.

Shi Min and Lily tore across the floor like lightning. Their kicks were high, their spins dizzying. At one point, Lily leapt into Shi Min's arms mid-jump, and he caught her without missing a beat.

The crowd gasped. Then roared.

Tango: The Final Flame

The lights dimmed.

The tango began.

Shi Min's expression hardened — an intense, focused look. Lily's movements became sharper, more deliberate. They circled each other like predators, then collided in a series of dramatic poses and sweeping lunges. The final move: Lily dipped low, her hand on Shi Min's chest, his gaze locked on hers.

Silence.

Then thunderous applause.

Family Reactions

Fatty was crying into a handkerchief.

"My baby!"

Pharsa clapped elegantly, eyes shining.

"That was art."

Chatty nodded.

"Shi Min's footwork has improved. They performed well yesterday, and they improved even further today. We sure are looking forward to the finals."

Rockie, arms crossed, muttered:

"I still think the Enfield could out-jive him."

Ren and Shun exchanged proud glances.

"They're ready," Ren whispered.

Kim Kim, and Chin Chin were bouncing in their seats.

"That tango was spicy," Chin Chin giggled.

Ling Li: Watching the Shadows

But Ling Li wasn't clapping.

She stood at the edge of the balcony, eyes scanning the crowd, her aura taut with tension. Her spiritual threads were extended — subtle, invisible — as she searched for anomalies; it was the second day she was on tender hooks.

Four Eyes joined her, placing a calming hand on her shoulder.

"No sign of Solaris yet," he murmured.

"He's waiting," Ling Li replied.

"He always waits until the light is brightest."

"Then we'll be brighter," Four Eyes said gently.

Ling Li didn't smile.

But she nodded.

Judges' Scores and Reactions: The Semi-Final Verdict

The dancers had barely exited the floor when the judges began conferring. The audience buzzed with anticipation, and the Li family leaned forward as the scores appeared on the massive screen above the stage.

Judges

Madame Corinne

Rumba 9.5 Samba 9.2 Cha Cha 9.4 Jive 9.0 Tango 9.6 Comments: "Elegant restraint, explosive control."

Mr. Takahashi

Rumba 9.3 Samba 9.0 Cha Cha 9.1 Jive 8.9 Tango 9.4 Comments: "Technically sound. Slight lag in Jive."

Dr. Elodie

Rumba 9.7 Samba 9.5 Cha Cha 9.6 Jive 9.2 Tango 9.8 Comments: "They told a story. I believed every step."

Coach Miguel

Rumba 9.6 Samba 9.8 Cha Cha 9.5 Jive 9.3 Tango 9.7 Comments: "¡Fuego! They danced with their souls."

Ms. Anika

Rumba 9.4 Samba 9.3 Cha Cha 9.2 Jive 9.1 Tango 9.5 Comments: "They're not just dancers. They're a force."

Total Average Score: 9.38

The crowd erupted. Shi Min and Lily had secured a place in the final round.

Spiritual Disturbance: The Whisper Beneath the Applause

As the family gathered backstage, basking in the glow of success, Ling Li's smile faltered. Her spiritual threads — normally calm and translucent — began to shimmer with static. Something was wrong.

She closed her eyes, reaching out.

There it was.

A ripple in the spiritual field. A scent of decay masked in perfume. A presence that didn't belong.

She turned sharply toward the dressing rooms.