

## **PROTEGE 291**

Chapter 291: GENEVA: SOLARIS'S FIRST MOVE

Solaris's First Move: The Masked Intrusion

Inside Lily's dressing room, the lights flickered.

The mirror fogged over — though the room was dry.

On the vanity lay a single white lotus, its petals tinged with black at the edges. Beneath it, a note written in calligraphy that mimicked Ling Li's own hand:

"Purity is a flame. It must be extinguished before it burns the wrong soul."

Lily hadn't seen it yet. She was still changing, laughing with Shi Min in the hallway.

Ling Li entered the room alone.

She touched the lotus. It hissed — a spiritual trap, designed to siphon energy from the one who touched it. Ling Li's fingers glowed with protective fire, neutralizing the spell.

Then she saw it.

In the mirror — her own reflection.

But it blinked first.

And smiled.

Solaris.

He had taken her face.

Ling Li's Response: The Shield and the Warning

Ling Li calmed as she was, snorted.

She whispered a prayer in Old Tongue, sealing the room with a protective ward. The mirror cracked — not from force, but from rejection. Solaris had been repelled, but not defeated.

She turned to Four Eyes, who had sensed the shift and was already at her side.

"He's here," Ling Li said.

"He's watching. He's wearing me."

Four Eyes clenched his fists.

"Then we'll make sure no one trusts your face but me."

Ling Li nodded.

"We must protect Lily. He wants her purity. He wants to sacrifice her to become young again."

"He'll try to charm her," Four Eyes said.

"Or confuse her. Or make her doubt herself."

"Then we'll remind her who she is," Ling Li replied.

"And we'll make sure he never gets close enough to touch her soul."

#### Nightfall Vigil: Shi Min's Quiet Inquiry

The moon hung low over Lake Geneva, casting silver ripples across the water. The dancers had returned to their hotel, exhausted but buzzing with anticipation. In the suite shared by the Philippine delegation, Lily was already asleep, curled beneath a weighted blanket, her breathing steady.

Shi Min sat by the window, eyes scanning the city lights.

He hadn't told Lily what he felt that afternoon — the sudden chill in the air, the flicker of something ancient brushing against his aura. It had passed quickly, like a shadow slipping between mirrors. But it had left a mark.

He had stayed close to her all day, not just as a brother, nor a dance partner, but as a shield.

Now, with the hallway quiet and the others winding down, he stepped out and knocked gently on Ling Li's door.

#### The Conversation: Truth in the Quiet

Ling Li opened the door, already dressed in a soft robe, her hair unbound. Four Eyes was seated at the desk, scribbling notes in a thick ledger.

"Mom, Paps. Forgive the hour. I need to ask something."

Ling Li gestured him in.

"You felt it."

Shi Min nodded.

"During the afternoon. Near the practice floor. It was faint, but... wrong. Like something was watching Lily through me."

Four Eyes looked up and gave him a nod.

"You're more attuned than most. That's rare for someone without formal training." Ling Li said.

Shi Min's voice was low.

"I didn't tell Lily. I didn't want her to worry. But I stayed close. I didn't leave her side."

Ling Li's expression softened.

"You did well. Solaris was there. In disguise. He's testing her boundaries — spiritual and emotional."

Shi Min's jaw tightened.

"He touched her shoulder."

Ling Li's eyes flashed.

"Then he's begun the tether."

The Briefing: Preparing for Tomorrow

Ling Li lit a stick of sandalwood incense and placed it between them.

"Tomorrow, he'll escalate. He's already tried fear. Now he's using charm. If Lily accepts anything from him — even kindness — he'll deepen the link."

Four Eyes added,

"He may shift again. Another disguise. Another approach. He's unpredictable, but his goal is constant: spiritual possession through emotional consent." This is what Shinsei had explained to him about Solaris.

Shi Min's voice was firm. "Do we have a plan for tomorrow?"

Ling Li handed him a small pouch of crushed obsidian and salt.

"Keep this on you. It will dampen his aura if he gets close. And if you feel the air shift again — if your skin prickles or your breath shortens — signal me."

Shi Min took the pouch, nodding.

"I'll protect my sister. On and off the floor."

Ling Li smiled faintly.

"She's lucky to have you as her big brother. But remember — Solaris doesn't just want her power. He wants her will. That's what makes her dangerous to him."

As Shi Min turned to leave, Ling Li called softly after him.

"Tomorrow, he'll be restless. Desperate. He's losing control of the narrative. That's when he's most dangerous."

Shi Min paused at the door.

"Then we make sure he loses everything."

Solaris Returns: The Coach with No Past

Early the next morning, in the dressing room. Shi Min helped fasten the final clasp at Lily's shoulder, his touch gentle, his eyes watchful.

"You slept well?" he asked.

Lily nodded, though her voice was quiet.

"I dreamed of mirrors. And someone walking behind me."

Shi Min's jaw tightened.

"Stay close to me today. No matter what."

She looked up at him, sensing the weight in his tone.

"Is something wrong?"

He hesitated.

"Nothing we can't handle."

"Solaris is here, right?" Lily asked.

Shi Min nodded. "Don't worry too much, we can handle it."

"I understand, I'll be careful." Lily said and tried to stay calm.

The morning of the final round dawned crisp and clear, with sunlight spilling across the Arena Geneva like a blessing. Dancers stretched and rehearsed in side halls, coaches whispered last-minute advice, and the energy buzzed with nerves and excitement.

Among the bustle, a new figure appeared.

He was tall, lean, with tousled chestnut hair and eyes the color of storm-washed silver. His suit was tailored but casual, his smile warm but never too wide. He introduced himself as Coach Lucien, a last-minute replacement for a flu-stricken mentor from the French delegation.

No one questioned it.

His credentials were "verified." His badge was "official." His charm was effortless.

But Ling Li felt it immediately.

She watched from the balcony as Lucien moved through the crowd — shaking hands, complimenting footwork, offering advice with the ease of someone who had studied every dancer's weakness.

Then he approached Lily.

The Encounter: Solaris Meets Lily

Lily was adjusting her shoes near the practice floor when Lucien knelt beside her, offering a small vial of herbal oil.

"For your ankles," he said, voice smooth. "It's a blend I use with my top students. Helps with balance and tension."

Lily blinked, surprised.

"Oh... thank you. That's kind."

#### Chapter 292: A RHYTHM MADE FROM REVENGE

Solaris whispered a curse in a dialect no longer taught. The bell, suspended over fireglass, screamed — not a metal shriek, but a spectral cry. It echoed down the catacomb halls, stirring memories in the bone-marble walls.

A cloaked figure approached, not walking but gliding — like fog dressed in silk.

"You summoned the Ironsworn?" the voice rasped.

Solaris did not answer at first. He picked up the blade and pressed it against his own palm, letting blood mark the obsidian altar.

"I summoned pain," he finally said.

"They will answer."

Four more figures cloaked in black entered.

Each bore a gymnast's token — beam shoes scorched with curses, masks adorned in ash, grips and wrist guards carved with names never spoken aloud.

"You want movement, Lord Solaris?"

"I want agony that pirouettes," he growled.

"I want rhythm made from revenge."

From behind a scorched column, a younger recruit trembled — a boy with eyes inked in fear and devotion. Solaris beckoned.

"He is the first," Solaris said.

"Train him with darkness and polish his grief. When he leaps, he will fracture a bone. When he lands, empires will crumble.

The Ironsworn bowed.

Above, far beyond the mountain's reach, the world remained blissfully unaware. But deep below, music began to form — discordant, haunting, inevitable.

"Let's begin again," Solaris whispered, as the bell cried once more.

Countdown to Power

The clock was ticking louder than ever.

Across three cities — Shanghai, Beijing, and the icy stretches of the Russian countryside — preparations crackled with a sense of urgency. Otako's decree had turned quiet resolve into an active storm: in less than a year, the successors would rise to shape the soul of the Chinese government. But none of them would ascend untested.

Training intensified. Secrets unfolded. Each had a role to play in a strategy that spanned bloodlines and legacy. And while the world watched the stars, these four moved beneath them — quiet meteors carving toward impact.

And Coach Carlos —

Inside the training room — polished wooden floors gleaming beneath steel rafters, beams of morning light cutting through dust like stage lights hunting a soloist.

Coach Carlos, lean and fox-eyed, stood at the far end of the hall tapping his clipboard in rhythm with Lily's turns.

"Again!" he snarled, not unkindly.

"That split was clean, but the breath wasn't aligned. Your landing needs to look like a decision."

Lily exhaled, then launched again — double spin, controlled hover, and a pointed landing that could have cracked glass. Carlos nodded once.

"Better. When the officials judge you, they'll hear your story in your silence. That's what wins."

Lily nodded; she fully understood. She was wearing her new competition leotard — dusky violet embroidered with silver crestwork, echoing the twin sigils of her sisters. Pharsa had helped enchant the threads to pulse with ancestral warmth, a quiet ward against Solaris's lingering reach.

After practice, Lily leaned against the balcony rail, the city humming beneath her like a breathing machine. Sweat cooled on her temples, the embroidered silver of her leotard catching glints of sunset. She pressed call.

"Are you swamped?" she teased as soon as Fatty picked up.

His video opened with glittering shelves behind him — enchanted perfume bottles rotating slowly on levitating displays, and a pastry chef conjuring mist into croissants in the background.

"Swamped?" Fatty scoffed. "Please. I'm practically drowning in champagne-soaked success. Our Luxembourg boutique shattered its ceiling this month — literally. We had to summon a contractor and a poet to reinforce the upper beams. That's how high our profits flew. And you know me... humble as a monk. Except with you, I brag recklessly."

He struck a dramatic pose, pretending to sip from a goblet made of shimmering dough.

Lily rolled her eyes fondly.

"Russia's calmer than Geneva. But it feels like something is still watching. Like the air forgot to blink."  
Lily said.

Fatty paused. His voice softened.

"Then practice harder," he said with quiet fire.

"You break mirrors when you leap. That's how we know you're magic."

He tried to hold the serious tone, but then fumbled it with a snort, tossing the dough goblet aside and pressing a stuffed fox plushie to his chest.

"Also, I may or may not have made a Lily-shaped cookie that I refuse to eat because it's too pretty. And possibly enchanted to argue with me."

Lily laughed, startled. "You made a cookie version of me?"

"It sits on my desk and judges me. Yesterday, I instructed the reduction of lavender sugar imports. The name sounds like you, which is unfair."

Fatty pouted. Then blinked fast.

"I miss you like Belgium misses sunlight. And I hate that I do, because every time I see your training clips, I get all proud and squishy inside. Like... the squishy that makes your chest weird."

"You mean a heart?" Lily teasingly asked.

"Gross. Yes." He hugged the fox tighter. "I named this one Pharsa Junior. It keeps me from doing reckless things like buying an island shaped like your initials."

"Quan Ye ..."

"Too late. The blueprints are drafted."

There was a pause. Soft.

"Anyway, keep leaping, magic girl. Call me tomorrow. Or sooner. I've bribed the cookie to start missing you, too."

CLICK

Lily "...."

"That brat!" Lily scoffed, shaking her head affectionately.

Fatty vs. Goldie: The Corporate Tantrum

Right after Fatty hung up the call.

"Sir, no," Goldie said flatly, blocking the conference room door with a tablet and the kind of glare that had previously neutralized minor curses.

Fatty, perched atop a velvet ottoman shaped like a mooncake, clutched a plush fox and a gilded sketchpad covered in doodles of 'LILY ISLAND™.'

"But Goldie," he whined. "The Vienna parade won't be the same without me riding a golden dumpling. And the fireworks —hear me out —should spell out her name in five languages. Preferably glitter fonts."

Goldie sighed, already texting the pyrotechnics team to cancel the glitter.

"You promised restraint. You promised me a fiscal quarter without themed pyromancy or enchanted pastries that sing."

Fatty hugged the plush harder.

"But I miss Lily! And my heart aches in the shape of a dumpling. Who knew longing had a flavor profile?"

Goldie blinked. "That's not how longing works."

"What if it is?" Fatty pouted. "We need to monetize emotional flavoring. You don't understand this feeling because you're a single dog."

Goldie snorted. 'Hmph!'

He paused as he scratched his chin and calculated.

"...That idea actually has traction. We'll discuss it after you cancel the unicorn-themed yacht."

Fatty slowly slid the sketchpad behind him. "Too late. They've already named the bow 'Lily's Leap.'"

"!!!!"

Goldie groaned.

Somewhere in Belgium, a team of accountants fainted.

"..."

Who knew that Fatty's whims regarding emotional flavoring became popular among younger generations? Of course, this story is for later.

Chapter 293: ARENA GENEVA: THE FINAL ROUND BEGINS

"You're Lily, yes?" Coach Lucien asked, eyes gleaming.

"I've heard your name whispered in every corridor. They say you dance like memory itself."

Lily flushed slightly, unsure how to respond.

"I'm just trying to do my best," she said.

Coach Lucien smiled.

"That's what makes you dangerous. Purity of intent. It's rare."

He stood, brushing a hand lightly against her shoulder — not inappropriate, but lingering.

"I'll be watching your final round. Closely."

Then he vanished into the crowd.

Ling Li's Reaction: The Trap Tightens

From above, Ling Li's aura flared.

"That's him," she whispered to Four Eyes, who was already scanning the crowd.

"He's changed faces again," Four Eyes muttered.

"He's using charm now. Not fear."

"He's trying to make her trust him," Ling Li said.

"If she accepts anything from him — even a compliment — he'll begin the spiritual tether."

"Then we cut it before it forms."

Ling Li nodded.

"We need to warn her. But gently. If she suspects too much, he'll shift again."

Pharsa's Intervention: A Shield of Grace

Later that afternoon, Pharsa approached Lily in the dressing room, her tone casual, her eyes sharp.

"That new coach — Lucien. Did he speak to you?"

Lily nodded.

"He gave me some oil for my ankles. Said I dance like memory."

Pharsa smiled softly.

"He's not who he seems. Don't accept anything else from him. Not advice. Not gifts. Not praise."

Lily's eyes widened.

"Why?"

Pharsa leaned in.

"Because he doesn't want to help you. He wants to claim you."

Lily's breath caught.

"Solaris?"

Pharsa nodded.

He's wearing a mask, and he's watching you. But you're not alone; we're here to protect you. Don't let him know you've uncovered his identity. Alright?

"Yes, I understand." Lily nodded, taking a deep breath.

"Give me the oil he gave you," Pharsa said.

Pharsa's words echoed in Lily's mind as she dressed for the final round. Her costume shimmered with threads of gold and river-blue silk, chosen to evoke the spirit of ancestral memory — a tribute to her late great-grandmother, whose lullabies had once guided her first steps.

The Arena: Final Round Begins

The Arena Geneva was transformed. The final round was a solo-pas de deux hybrid. Each pair would begin with a solo offering, then merge into a duet that symbolized unity across generations. The theme was "Inheritance."

Lily's solo was first.

As she stepped into the spotlight, the crowd hushed. Her movements were fluid, deliberate — each gesture echoing the rituals of her childhood, the sweeping of rice grains, the folding of joss paper, the circling of incense smoke.

But as she turned into her final pirouette, the air shifted.

A flicker — like a ripple in glass.

In the crowd, Coach Lucien watched, his silver eyes gleaming. But his face was no longer quite right. The charm had faded. His smile was too wide. His skin is too smooth.

Ling Li, seated beside Pharsa and Four Eyes, leaned forward.

"He's unraveling," she whispered.

"He's preparing to strike."

Solaris Moves: The Spiritual Assault

As Shi Min joined Lily for the duet, the music swelled. Their movements were perfectly synchronized — a dance of memory and protection, of vulnerability and strength.

Then the lights flickered.

A gust of wind tore through the arena, though no doors were open.

Coach Lucien stood.

And his disguise was shattered.

His form twisted — not grotesque, but too perfect. His skin glowed with unnatural light, his eyes turned molten gold, and his voice rang out like a bell struck underwater.

"Lily."

Lily froze mid-step.

"You've danced beautifully. But you belong to me now." Solaris declared with an infatuated gaze.

The crowd gasped. Some saw a man. Others saw a god. A few saw nothing at all. It was only for a split second.

As Solaris's form began to unravel mid-performance, his golden eyes flaring with unnatural hunger, Ling Li moved without hesitation.

She rose from the judges' table, her fingers already weaving through the air in swift, practiced arcs. Her voice dropped into the sacred dialect — low, resonant, and edged with ancestral authority.

"Seal of Veil and Mercy. Cloak the truth. Protect the innocent."

A shimmering wave burst from her palms, rippling across the arena like a sheet of moonlight. The seal expanded in concentric rings, encasing the dance floor in a translucent dome of spiritual distortion.

To the audience, the performance continued flawlessly — music, movement, applause. But inside the seal, reality fractured.

The air thickened. Solaris's glamour cracked. Shadows twisted unnaturally. But none of it reached the crowd.

"They must not see this," Ling Li murmured, her eyes glowing with focus.

"Let the innocent remember beauty, not battle."

Four Eyes stood beside her, reinforcing the edges of the seal with his own threads of logic and clarity, anchoring the illusion with mathematical precision. These were what he had recently learned from Shinsei—creating seals and talismans.

"You bought us time," he said.

"Now let's make sure it's enough."

Shi Min stepped in front of Lily, his aura flaring with the obsidian pouch Ling Li had given him.

"You'll never touch her."

Solaris laughed.

"You think you can stop me with salt and sentiment?"

Ling Li, her voice cutting through the chaos.

"Lily is not yours. And you are not welcome."

Pharsa began chanting under her breath, weaving protective sigils into the air. Four Eyes activated a barrier, shimmering like dragonfly wings.

Solaris lunged — not physically, but spiritually. His energy surged toward Lily, aiming to pierce her will, to claim her memory, her name.

Lily stepped forward.

Her voice rang clear.

"I do not consent."

The words struck like thunder.

Solaris flinched, his form flickering.

"You are mine by blood!" Solaris yelled

"I am mine by choice." Lily confidently retorted.

The Banishing: Memory as Weapon

Ling Li, Pharsa, and Four Eyes joined hands, forming a triad of ancestral power. Shi Min held Lily's hand, grounding her.

Together, they channeled the dance — not just as art, but as ritual.

Lily moved again, her steps now deliberate, sacred. Each gesture was a seal. Each turn a ward. Her body became a temple, her breath a spell.

Solaris screamed — not in pain, but in fury.

"You will forget who you are!"

Lily's final gesture was a bow — not of submission, but of release.

"I remember who I am."

With a final burst of light, Solaris's form shattered into a thousand mirrored fragments, each one swallowed by the protective wards.

The arena fell silent.

Then, the audience erupted in applause.

Aftermath: The Quiet Victory

Backstage, Lily sat with Shi Min, her hands trembling slightly.

"Was that real?"

Shi Min nodded.

"And you were stronger than him."

Ling Li entered, her face calm but tired.

"He'll try again. But not here. Not now."

Pharsa handed Lily a small charm — a silver thread woven with ash bark.

"Keep this close. It remembers you."

Lily smiled faintly.

"Then I'll never forget."

#### Chapter 294: FINALS AT ARENA GENEVA: DANCING WITH DESTINY

The final round at Arena Geneva began beneath a canopy of crystal light and ancestral song. Every finalist seemed to glow — but none more than Shi Min and Lily, now dressed in matching moon-gold and ember-crimson costumes stitched with phoenix swirls and storm-thread tassels.

As the music surged — a blend of tango's pulse and rumba's ache — the pair moved like one breath. Every step is a memory. Every spin is a vow.

The crowd was silent, awestruck.

When they bowed, the applause thundered. Even the judges stood.

#### Awarding Ceremony: A Crown for Two

Under a shower of golden confetti, the winners were announced:

"The Grand Laureates of the Geneva Dance Sports Championship... Lily Li and Shi Min!"

Lily blinked, then beamed. Shi Min, poised as ever, allowed himself a grin. The gold medals gleamed against their costumes, and the family rushed forward — hugging, weeping, cheering.

Fatty, lounged like a cannonball, hugged Lily so tight she squeaked.

"You were like a lightning goddess in velvet!" Fatty exclaimed.

"I thought you said I danced like memory," Lily teased.

"Memory dipped in glitter," Fatty sniffled.

Chatty snapped photos while Pharsa wiped a tear with dignity.

Four Eyes gave Lily a nod, standing beside Ling Li.

"You brought honor and light. It is well done." Ling Li said as she hugged Lily, her eyes teary.

The whole group returned to Russia wrapped in triumph. The flight home was full of quiet laughter, retold memories, and Mushu dragging Rockie's suitcase down the aisle in protest.

Back at the estate, snow had begun to fall again — soft and familiar.

Family Dinner: Toasts, Teasing, and Tenderness

The celebratory dinner was held beneath the estate's enchanted pine hall, glowing with lanterns and laughter.

Dishes from all regions lined the table:

Pharsa's fiery Sichuan tofu

Fatty's special Belgian stew that he learned and practiced while in Belgium

Lily's favorite steamed buns shaped into phoenixes by Ren and Tutor Chen

Even Chatty brought homemade lychee tarts — after Mushu taste-tested them for safety (twice)

Old Master Li led the first toast.

"To our dancers, our protectors, and our children — may joy chase them wherever they leap."

"CHEERS!!!"

Time to Part: Tantrums and Promises

When it came time to say goodbye...

Ren and Shun boarded their flight to Beijing. Ren squeezed Lily's hands tightly, "You did well."

Then came Fatty's farewell.

Except he refused to call it that.

Fatty, as usual, clung to Lily's arm with dramatic flair, dragging his suitcase behind like a wounded soldier.

"Don't send me away! My spirit breaks! My lungs tremble! My heart falls into seventeen pieces!"

"It's just a month," Lily giggled.

"We'll be in Shanghai for my gymnastics competition."

"But what if I wither?" Fatty wailed.

"What if Lily forgets me?"

"She won't," Chatty called. "You're too loud."

Rockie tossed a scarf around Fatty like a cape.

"Go forth, Drama Emperor."

Finally, Fatty sniffled and pulled Lily into one last hug.

"I will survive," he sighed.

"But only because you promised buns and victory in Shanghai."

Lily laughed out loud and looked across the room, where Four Eyes stood quietly with Chatty, watching.

She whispered to herself,

"How did my serious stepfather end up best friends with those two clowns?"

Pharsa chuckled from behind.

"Balance. Even the heavens need comic relief."

The two ladies laughed.

Snowfall and Silk Expanded: Ling Li & Four Eyes

It was midmorning in the Russian estate. The snow didn't fall so much as it floated — lazy, weightless, almost ceremonial. The pine trees, ringed in frost, cast long shadows across the garden where Kim Kim and Chin Chin chased birds with more ambition than success.

In the sunroom, every surface held a whisper of warmth: cushions steeped in jasmine, the scent of baked chestnuts trailing from the kitchen, and beside the old piano, a ceramic incense pot released coils of sandalwood smoke. A soft lullaby played on Ling Li's iPad — a Taiwanese folk song her mother used to hum during the rainy season.

She looked up as Four Eyes entered, his steps instinctively quiet. He carried the tray like a ritual — every detail deliberate:

Tea was brewed exactly four minutes so that the chrysanthemum wouldn't turn bitter.

Ginger sliced paper-thin, then warmed by hand.

A small dish of candied plums, just in case her nausea flared.

Ling Li smiled, her hand drifting toward him with the ease of muscle memory.

He knelt beside her, not out of ceremony, but reverence. When she reached to trace the faint crease between his brows, he caught her fingers and kissed them slowly, tenderly, like a monk reciting mantras.

"I used to think legacy lived in laws and bloodlines," Four Eyes said quietly.

"Now I believe it lives in tea leaves and heartbeat patterns."

Ling Li's voice was steady, but soft.

"Sometimes I dream that these three little buns are already here — in this room, giggling together. One kicking while the other tries to nap."

Four Eyes leaned toward her belly.

"You're having prophetic dreams again."

"Call it mother's instinct."

Four Eyes' cheek rested gently on her belly, and for a moment, silence painted everything golden.

Then came a subtle thump thump.

"There," Ling Li whispered.

"See? They're fighting over who gets the first martial arts lesson."

Four Eyes chuckled, then murmured to her womb:

"You are the three stars of my story. When you arrive, I'll show you maps of courage and lullabies of justice. I'll teach you to speak gently but never softly."

Ling Li couldn't help but laugh. "Where did you get those ideas?" she said, shaking her head happily.

When Ling Li pulled Four eyes into an embrace, it felt like the estate paused with them — breath held between snowflakes and eternity. In that fold of time, love wrapped around them like silk warmed on coals.

Obsidian Echoes: Solaris's Catacomb Ritual Expanded

The Moldovan mountains did not forgive easily.

Solaris stood in the deepest chamber — jagged walls breathing with embedded embers, heatless and ancient. The floor was etched with forgotten scripts, and the ceiling dripped with shadow glass, catching light in prismatic agony.

His breath came slow, measured.

He had not spoken in three days — not out of penance, but to preserve the rage fermenting inside him.

In front of him, the relics pulsed:

The ceremonial blade, once carried by the Lotus Guard who betrayed him, its tip shattered during Lily's final spin.

The vial of ritual blood, stolen from the Russian estate's protective wards — its warmth long faded, replaced by the scent of old thunder.

The child's bell, twisted and warped, once used in the dancer's initiation, now melted by Solaris's fury during his retreat from Geneva.

Chapter 295: COUNTDOWN TO POWER

The wind shifted gently over Shanghai rooftops as Lily closed the call, laughter still warm in her throat. She lingered by the balcony, fingertips brushing the edge of a tiny silk pouch tucked into her training bag — a charm Fatty had couriered weeks ago.

Delicate and folded with care, the talisman was stitched with silver lotus petals and spelled with two enchantments:

One to ward off spectral anxiety

One to warm her fingers in moments of doubt.

Tonight, it glowed faintly, pulsing with residual affection — not magic, exactly, but memory shaped into energy. She closed her palm around it and felt a flicker of calm take root beneath her ribs.

"Idiot," Lily murmured fondly. "Of course, you enchanted this to activate when I laugh."

The wind swirled, catching her loose hair, and somewhere deep in the city's concrete bones, a little ripple passed through the spiritual grid — subtle, unnoticed, except by those who knew what to feel for.

Beijing: Ren and Shun's Preparation for Power

In the secluded wing of the National Governance Academy, hidden behind layers of bureaucratic illusion and spiritual shielding, Ren and Shun trained under the watchful eyes of Tutor Ma and Tutor Chen.

The room was austere — no incense, no ceremonial flourishes. Just polished stone, scrolls of constitutional law, and a central table carved with the seal of the Republic. Moonlight filtered through reinforced glass, casting long shadows across the floor where the twins stood in quiet formation.

Ren, hair tied in a disciplined knot, recited policy clauses in Mandarin and Classical Chinese, her voice steady. Shun, beside her, reviewed diplomatic protocols and crisis response strategies, his fingers tracing the edge of a map marked with leyline intersections and political fault lines.

Tutor Ma, dressed in formal robes with the insignia of his high-ranking office, paced slowly.

"Otako's order is clear," he said, voice low but firm.

"This is not a revolt. It is a redirection. The president will be forced to abdicate — not by violence, but by truth. And he will endorse Shun as his successor."

Tutor Chen added,

"The president's son, Shun Chang, is protected by layers of secrecy and spiritual misdirection. No one has seen his face. No one speaks his name aloud. But those who have suffered under him remember."

Ren's eyes narrowed.

"And we carry their memory."

Shun spoke quietly, but with weight.

"When the time comes, I will not just replace him. I will restore what he buried.

Training was rigorous and precise:

Mornings were spent dissecting constitutional law, economic policy, and spiritual governance — learning how to balance secular power with ancestral responsibility.

Afternoons focused on diplomatic simulations, public speaking, and the art of commanding presence without domination.

Evenings were reserved for private sessions with Tutor Ma, where Ren and Shun practiced emotional regulation, strategic empathy, and the subtle art of political persuasion.

Tutor Ma watched them closely, his influence within the government shielding their progress from prying eyes.

"You are not symbols," he said one evening.

"You are successors. And successors must be sharper than the blade that forged them."

Shun and Ren nodded, their voice calm.

"We will not be feared. We will be followed."

Trackside Turbulence: Chatty and Pharsa

Back at Blaze Mountain Race Track in Russia, the racetrack twisted like a serpent through pine and frost. The air was sharp, the asphalt damp, and the sapphire-blue car gleamed like a predator waiting to pounce.

Chatty, helmet under arm, bounced on his heels like a boxer before a bout.

Pharsa, visor down and clipboard clutched like a weapon, eyed him with the precision of a sniper and the patience of a saint who'd run out of miracles.

"You can't race with swagger alone," she said, voice dry as gravel.

"The car doesn't care if you've won dance medals. It only listens to fear."

"Fear listens to me," Chatty quipped, sliding into the driver's seat.

"It sends me flowers."

"Then drive like you're breaking up with it," Pharsa said with a snort.

From the control booth, Mushu leaned forward, stopwatch in hand, chewing thoughtfully on a licorice stick. His eyes flicked between the telemetry and Pharsa's expression.

"Throttle discipline, Murphy," Mushu said calmly over the comms.

"You're still treating corners like they owe you money."

"I'm just collecting interest," Chatty replied nonchalantly.

"You're collecting spin-outs," Mushu said with a huff.

Pharsa tapped her clipboard against the booth's railing.

"Focus. This isn't a joyride. Ling Li wants you race-ready by the winter solstice. That means no flirting with the curves."

"Just dominate them," Chatty echoed, grinning.

"No," she corrected.

"Seduce them. Make them beg to be taken at 220 kph."

The engine roared to life, sigils of grip and focus glowing faintly along the chassis.

Chatty peeled out, tires screaming, fog parting like curtains before a show.

Turn 3.

"Brake earlier," Pharsa snapped.

"You're not auditioning for a crash reel!"

Turn 5.

"Better. Feel the road. It's whispering to you. Stop shouting over it."

Turn 7.

Chatty laughed mid-drift.

"If I die, I want a phoenix-shaped urn."

"If you die during rehearsal," Pharsa crackled back,

"I'll bury you with my clipboard. And I'll make sure it's laminated."

Mushu chuckled softly.

"He's improving. He's listening to the road, not just himself."

Pharsa's eyes narrowed, but her lips twitched.

"He's still a menace. But he's my menace."

Mushu laughed out loud.

Chatty overheard their conversation, smiled smugly as he hit top speed on the final stretch, the car humming like a spell about to break.

He pulled into the pit, breathless, grinning, and drenched in adrenaline.

"So?" Chatty asked, hopping out.

"Did I flirt or dominate?"

Pharsa walked up, rolled her eyes with a clipboard raised like a sword.

"You negotiated. I'll take it."

"That's romantic, coming from you."

"Don't push it. I still have three more drills and a bucket of insults."

Mushu, hearing the couple's playful banter, couldn't help but chuckle as he whispered to himself, "Look at these two! Even after tying the knot, they still bicker like Tom and Jerry. I half-expect them to chase each other around the living room with a rolling pin and a cheese wedge!"

"Hey, we can hear you!" Both Pharsa and Chatty retorted.

Mushu "..."

Fatty's Empire: From Pastries to Power

Meanwhile, across Europe, Fatty's business empire continued to expand.

In Brussels, Fatty's culinary line of enchanted buns was now endorsed by three spiritual dieticians for improving "emotional digestion." His boutique in Florence sold limited-edition charm glasses infused with rain-soaked poetry. A Prague salon burned signature "Fatty Mist" oils known to attract romantic confessions within three hours of wear.