

PROTEGE 296

Chapter 296: FATTY'S ECCENTRIC IDEAS

Goldie now operated as his logistics head, keeping Fatty's dramatic and eccentric impulses grounded.

"Sir," he said, tapping his tablet.

"You cannot host six simultaneous store openings and ride a unicorn parade through Vienna in the same weekend," Goldie said flatly, her voice the embodiment of exhausted logic. He didn't even look up from his tablet — he was too busy with a firework display Fatty had insisted should spell out "Lily's Leap" in five languages. He'd just aged five years in one sentence.

Goldie hadn't expected Fatty to go full eccentric the moment they landed in Belgium.

What he expected even less was that the market would embrace Fatty like a cult leader with a glitter budget.

Fatty's eccentric ideas — edible perfume, floating pastry shelves, enchanted loyalty cards that sang your name — weren't just tolerated. They were celebrated. His boutique in Antwerp had a waiting list. His Brussels flagship had been featured in three fashion magazines and one spiritual wellness journal. The unicorn parade? Already sold out.

Goldie sighed again, deeper this time.

"You're a walking contradiction," he muttered. "And somehow, a profitable one."

Fatty gasped, clutching his chest as if Goldie had just asked him to choose between oxygen and sequins.

"So you're saying... I have to choose my glory?"

Goldie didn't dignify that with a response. He was too busy trying to cancel a marching band made entirely of pastry chefs.

When Fatty wasn't orchestrating boutique empires or pitching perfume that smelled like nostalgia, he was glued to Lily's Shanghai updates — watching them on loop like they were sacred scripture.

"I miss her like Belgium misses decent sunshine," Fatty sighed, draping himself across a velvet chaise that hadn't been approved by procurement.

"She leaps... and my soul levitates."

Goldie blinked.

"..."

Fatty's arrival in Belgium had been less of a relocation and more of a cosmic event. He didn't just shake up the business — he detonated it. His father nearly had a heart attack every time Fatty burst into the conference room with a new idea, usually involving holograms, edible glitter, or a scent called "Lily's Whisper."

The madness escalated quickly.

Fatty insisted their following product line be infused with Lily's essence — her elegance, her unpredictability, her ability to make him feel like gravity was optional.

Each proposal was more outrageous than the last: mood-reactive dumplings, self-playing guzhengs, loyalty cards that whispered affirmations in Mandarin.

The boardroom became a stage.

Fatty, the star.

Everyone else?

Just trying to keep up.

And Fatty would always argue:

"I'm not eccentric," he declared. "I'm visionary. The world just needed a little sparkle therapy."

Goldie pinched the bridge of her nose.

"And apparently, Belgium agrees."

A Quiet Night in the Master's Bedroom

The moonlight spilled softly across the silk curtains, casting pale ripples over the master bedroom's polished floor. The air was warm with steam from the adjoining bath, and the scent of jasmine lingered faintly in the room.

Ling Li, wrapped in a pale robe, stepped out from the shower, her damp hair cascading down her back like ink on parchment. She padded quietly to the bed and sat beside Four Eyes, who was half-reclined against the headboard, a leather-bound book open in his hands.

She leaned slightly against him, her fingers brushing his arm.

"Honey," she began, voice low and thoughtful,

"In two weeks, it's Lily's gymnastics competition in Shanghai. I was thinking... how about you and the twins fly to China ahead of us?"

Four Eyes looked up from his book, brow lifting.

"You need to start taking over your business again," Ling Li continued.

"It's expanded so much, and you haven't personally visited the office yet. If we all fly together, it might be too eye-catching."

He closed the book slowly, setting it aside with deliberate care.

"No way," he said, turning to face her fully.

Then, with a quiet smile, he pulled her gently into his arms.

"How do you suppose I live my life away from you, hm?"

His voice was soft and teasing, but a tremor of truth lay beneath it. He leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

Ling Li shivered, her breath catching.

"You!" she protested, half-laughing.

"It's only two weeks! And you need to establish yourself as a Chinese businessman so you don't get too associated with me and Otako."

Four Eyes tilted her chin with two fingers, his gaze steady and warm.

"But I don't mind living under you," he murmured, eyes gleaming with mischief.

He kissed her nape, slow and deliberate, and Ling Li's shoulders tensed with a quiet gasp.

"Be serious!" she said, swatting his arm lightly.

"I am serious," he whispered. With a sudden playful motion, he tackled her gently onto the bed, pinning her beneath him with the ease of someone who knew every inch of her strength.

He kissed her lips — soft, lingering, reverent.

"I truly can't live without you by my side," he said between kisses.

"You should tie me to your waist. Make me your accessory."

Ling Li laughed, her cheeks flushed, her robe slipping slightly from her shoulder.

"Aiya... I truly don't know what to do with you!" she whined, half-exasperated, half-delighted.

"Of course you do," Four Eyes murmured, his voice low and velvet-smooth.

"You can make love to me. That usually helps."

She rolled her eyes, but her fingers curled around his collar, pulling him closer.

"You're impossible," she whispered.

"I'm yours," he replied.

And in the quiet hush of the night, beneath the weight of duty and the warmth of devotion, they folded into each other — not as leaders, not as strategists, but simply as husband and wife, tangled in love and laughter.

Morning Light and Mission Lists

The sun filtered through the frosted windows of the master bedroom, casting soft gold across the silk sheets and the carved lacquer panels that framed the room like a shrine. But the light felt thinner today—muted, as if the sky itself hesitated to intrude.

Ling Li sat cross-legged atop the bed's edge, her robe loosely tied at the waist, the silk slipping off one shoulder to reveal the curve of her collarbone. A steaming cup of ginseng tea rested in her palm, untouched. In her other hand, she held notes —written in her precise, elegant calligraphy, but the strokes were sharper than usual. Rushed. Intentional.

Four Eyes stirred beneath the covers, his bare chest half-buried in pillows, hair tousled from sleep and the night before. He blinked slowly, eyes adjusting to the light and the sight of her already in motion.

Chapter 297: INDULGENCE IS OVER

"You're already working?" he mumbled, voice thick with sleep and something softer.

"I thought last night earned me at least a morning of indulgence."

Ling Li didn't look up. She tapped the notes against his chest with a smirk that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Indulgence is over. You're flying to Shanghai in three days. I've listed everything you need to do before then."

He groaned, dragging a hand over his face like the notes had personally offended him. But he didn't reach for it. Not yet.

"Let me guess. Business meetings, spiritual grid inspections, and at least one awkward lunch with a bureaucrat who thinks I'm your bodyguard?"

"Two lunches," she corrected, sipping her tea.

"And you'll need to visit the main office. Your name is on the building now, Chu Yan. You can't keep concealing behind me forever."

He rolled onto his side, propping himself up with one arm, the sheet slipping down to reveal the long scar across his shoulder —the one Ling Li had traced with her fingers the night before. He stared at her, not the notes.

"But hiding behind you is so comfortable," he said, voice low, acting cute.

"And occasionally romantic."

Ling Li raised an eyebrow, a small, hesitant smile tugging at her lips. She was tempted to move closer, but she knew better than to risk it —otherwise, she might end up staying in bed for the next three hours.

"Chu Yan. You're supposed to be establishing yourself as a Chinese businessman. Not my overly affectionate shadow." Ling Li said with a sigh.

Four Eyes reached out, fingers brushing her wrist before tugging her gently toward him. She let herself lean in, just enough for him to press a kiss to her cheek —slow, lingering, like he was trying to memorize the shape of her skin.

"I can be both," he murmured.

"A powerful mogul and your shadow. I multitask."

Ling Li laughed, but it was quieter this time. She pulled away before he could draw her fully into the bed again. Her hand disappeared beneath the pillow and emerged with a second note —this one shorter, messier, and slightly singed at the edges.

"This one's for the twins," she said, handing it to him like a live grenade.

"They tried to decode it with fire magic. Again."

Four Eyes stared at the note like it might explode.

Ling Li "..."

"No promises," Four Eyes muttered.

Then, quieter:

"I truly don't want to go."

Ling Li paused, her gaze softening. She reached out, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. Her fingers lingered longer than usual.

"I know."

Outside, a gust of wind rattled the windowpane. The tea in her cup had gone cold.

"Come back fast," Four Eyes finally said.

"Or I'll start hiding behind Otako."

Ling Li smiled in amusement, but her eyes held the same quiet ache. She didn't promise anything.

"You'll be fine. Just don't let the twins burn down Shanghai."

Four Eyes finally took the notes, but held them like they weighed more than they should.

Twin Trouble at Breakfast

Downstairs, the breakfast table was a portrait of serenity: warm congee steamed gently in porcelain bowls, sliced dragonfruit glistened beside pickled plum, and a pot of Ling Li's favorite chrysanthemum tea sat nestled in a carved jade warmer. The air smelled faintly of ginger and sandalwood.

Four Eyes had just taken his first sip, savoring the quiet, when the door slammed open with the force of a small typhoon.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin stormed in, breathless and wild-eyed. Their hair was tousled in opposite directions, their boots mismatched —one red, one green —and their nightgowns were streaked with moss and something that sparkled ominously.

"Mom!" Kim Kim shouted, skidding to a halt.

"We need emergency clearance for the spiritual vault under the greenhouse!"

"It's glowing again!" Chin Chin added, clutching a half-eaten rice ball.

"And it's humming in Morse code!"

Four Eyes blinked, mid-sip.

"You two weren't even supposed to be near the greenhouse."

"We weren't!" Kim Kim said.

"We were meditating!" Chin Chin added.

"With snacks!"

Ling Li set down her tea with surgical precision, already rising to her feet. Her robe swirled around her ankles like storm clouds gathering.

"What did you touch?" she asked, voice calm but edged.

"Nothing!"

"Just the moss!"

"And the stone with the weird face!"

'They said they didn't touch anything, but they touched everything.' Four Eyes groaned, rubbing his temples as if trying to massage away a prophecy.

"This is why I need a third note. One just for managing you two."

Kim Kim grinned, unrepentant.

"We're a full-time job."

Chin Chin nodded solemnly.

"But we come with benefits. Like chaos. And charm."

Four Eyes didn't know if he wanted to laugh or cry.

Ling Li didn't respond. She was already halfway to the door, her braid swinging like a pendulum of judgment.

"Chu Yan, you're taking them to Shanghai," she said without turning.

"Consider this your warm-up."

Four Eyes groaned theatrically, slumping back into his chair.

"I knew I should've stayed in bed."

Kim Kim winked, grabbing a dumpling from the table.

"Too late. You're ours now."

Chin Chin tossed a lotus petal into his tea.

"We travel light. But we bring drama."

"..."

Four Eyes stared into the petal-laced tea like it might offer him a way out. It didn't.

Flashback: The Greenhouse Incident

It had started innocently enough.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin had crept into the greenhouse just after dawn, their silk night dresses flapping, arms full of snacks and ritual tools that probably weren't meant to be used together. The air inside was thick with humidity and the scent of jasmine and damp stone. Vines curled around the rafters like sleeping serpents. The spiritual vault beneath the floor pulsed faintly, a heartbeat buried in soil.

"We're just going to observe," Kim Kim whispered, unwrapping a sesame bun.

"No touching," Chin Chin agreed, already poking the moss with a jade tuning fork.

They sat cross-legged on the stone tiles, surrounded by incense sticks, dried lotus petals, and a half-eaten bag of shrimp chips. For a moment, it was peaceful. The vault hummed quietly beneath them, like a dragon dreaming.

Then Chin Chin noticed the stone.

It was half-buried in the moss, carved with a face that looked suspiciously like their grumpy cousin. Its eyes were closed, mouth twisted in a smirk.

"It's watching us," Chin Chin said.

"It's judging us," Kim Kim replied.

"Let's poke it."

They did.

Stone face "...."

Chapter 298: I FORGOT, I'M OTAKO

The stone pulsed once, then began to glow —soft at first, then brighter, casting flickering shadows across the greenhouse walls.

The vines twitched.

The koi pond bubbled.

The vault beneath them began to hum in short bursts.

"That's Morse code," Chin Chin said, eyes wide.

"It's spelling something."

Kim Kim squinted.

"I think it says 'hungry.' Or 'honor.' Or maybe 'honey.'"

The moss around the stone began to smoke.

"Okay," Chin Chin said, standing.

"We need Mom!"

"We need clearance," Kim Kim corrected.

"And possibly a fire extinguisher!!! Aaaahhhhhh! Run!!!"

They scrambled out of the greenhouse, night dresses trailing smoke, spiritual energy crackling around their ankles. Behind them, the stone face opened one eye.

Just one.

Ling Li and the Vault Below

The greenhouse was quiet now, but not still.

Ling Li stepped inside, her boots silent against the stone floor. The air was thick with residual energy — sweet and metallic, like incense laced with ozone. The vines had recoiled from the walls, curling inward as if bracing for something. The koi pond bubbled faintly, though no wind stirred the surface.

She knelt beside the moss patch where the twins had sat, fingers brushing the scorched edges of a lotus petal. The stone with the carved face lay exposed, its single eye now closed again. But the hum remained —low, rhythmic, pulsing beneath the floorboards like a heartbeat trying to sync with hers.

Ling Li pressed her palm to the tiles.

The vault answered.

A surge of heat rippled through her arm, followed by a whisper—not in words, but in sensation. Hunger. Memory. Recognition.

Ling Li closed her eyes and reached deeper, letting her qi thread through the stone and soil. The vault was ancient, older than the estate, older than her family's stewardship. It had always been dormant.

Contained. But now...

Now it was listening.

And it knew the twins.

Ling Li's breath caught. The energy wasn't just reacting —it was responding and echoing their rhythm. Their chaos. Their blood.

She opened her eyes, gaze sharp.

"You weren't supposed to wake yet," Ling Li murmured to the vault.

"Not until the rites were complete."

The stone pulsed once, and the vines twitched.

She stood, brushing moss from her trousers, her expression unreadable. The twins hadn't just disturbed the vault;

'They'd activated something. Again, for that matter!' Something that recognized them. Something that had waited.

Ling Li sighs.

Ling Li turned toward the door, her voice low and steady.

"Otako needs to see this."

Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the greenhouse glass. The koi leapt once from the pond, then stilled.

Ling Li stood in the greenhouse doorway, the wind tugging at her robe, the scent of scorched moss still clinging to the air. Her fingers trembled slightly, not from fear—but from recognition.

She whispered to herself, almost too softly to hear.

"I forgot... I'm Otako."

"..."

The words hung in the air like a bell struck underwater. Not a title. Not a role. A truth.

'I've been telling my family half-truths and half-lies about Otako, and I seemed to have convinced myself as well.' Ling Li shook her head, pinching her brows in deep thought.

She stepped forward again, kneeling beside the stone with the carved face. Her palm hovered just above it, and the hum deepened —no longer Morse code, but something older. A rhythm she hadn't heard since her own initiation.

"They weren't supposed to awaken yet," she murmured.

"Not until the rites were complete. Not until the grid was stable."

But the vault had responded to them. Not to her being Otako.

To Kim Kim and Chin Chin.

She closed her eyes, letting her qi settle. The vines around her pulsed once, then stilled. The koi in the pond leapt again —twice this time.

Ling Li opened her eyes, gaze sharp.

"They're not just heirs," she said aloud.

"They are the keys."

She stood, brushing moss from her knees, her expression unreadable. The wind outside shifted again, colder now. Somewhere in the estate, a bell rang —not physical, but spiritual —a warning.

She turned toward the exit, her voice steady.

"I need to speak with the ancestral council."

And beneath the greenhouse floor, the vault pulsed once more —this time in perfect sync with the twins' heartbeat.

Scene: The Chamber of Echoes

The moon had not yet risen, but the courtyard stones glowed faintly, lit by the bioluminescent moss that only bloomed during spiritual convergence. Ling Li moved swiftly, her clothes cinched tight, her hair braided in the Otako's spiral: three loops for past, present, and the yet-to-come.

Using a teleport talisman, she reached the hidden entrance beneath the old shrine, pressing her palm to the dragon-carved panel. It hissed open, revealing a narrow stairwell that spiraled downward into silence.

At the base, the Chamber of Echoes awaited.

Twelve lanterns flickered to life as she entered, each one representing an ancestral council. Their faces shimmered in the smoke —not alive, not dead, but suspended in ancestral memory. The council did not speak with voices. They spoke with presence.

Ling Li knelt at the center, her forehead touching the obsidian floor.

The air thickened. The lanterns pulsed.

A voice —not heard, but felt —rippled through her bones.

"You have broken the sequence."

She lifted her head slowly. "I did not. The twins did. The vault responded to them."

Another pulse. This one is colder.

"They are not ready."

"Then why did the grid shift?" Ling Li's voice was steady, but her heart pounded. "Why did the koi leap twice? Why did the vines pulse in rhythm with their breath?"

The lanterns dimmed, then flared.

A third presence emerged—older than the others. The elder who had sealed the first vault. Her image was fractured, like a mirror half-submerged in water.

"You must choose," the elder said.

"To guide them... or to contain them."

Ling Li's breath caught. She had hoped for clarity. She had received a burden.

"If you guide them, the rites must be rewritten.

And if you contain them, the grid will fracture."

Silence fell. Ling Li closed her eyes, remembering the twins' laughter, their stubbornness, their dreams. She saw the way Kim Kim had touched the stone, not with fear, but with recognition.

Ling Li stood.

"Then I will guide them. But I will not rewrite the rites alone."

The lanterns pulsed once more—this time in approval. The chamber began to fade, the ancestral presence retreating.

As she ascended the stairwell, the wind outside had changed again. It carried the scent of jasmine and storm.

And far above, in the twins' sleeping quarters, the air shimmered faintly —like something ancient had just awakened.

Chapter 299: ARRIVAL IN SHANGHAI: XU FAMILY TOUCHDOWN

The private plane hissed onto the tarmac like a dragon trying not to be noticed — sleek, silent, and coiled with latent power. Shanghai's skyline loomed ahead, a vertical symphony of glass, steel, and ambition. Bodyguards especially provided by Otako for Four Eyes and the children stepped out first, followed by Four Eyes, coat sharp, expression sharper. His glasses caught the neon glare, but his eyes were already scanning for surveillance — magical and mundane.

Behind him, the twins emerged — Kim Kim and Chin Chin, not quite two years old and already pulsing with cultivation energy that made nearby electronics flicker and airport spirits retreat.

Chin Chin's fox-spirit backpack twitched once, as if sensing the city's ley lines. Kim Kim clutched his sketchpad, its pages humming faintly with disguised battle formations and protective glyphs drawn in crayon.

The air around them shimmered with tension — not fear, but the kind of alertness born from too many secrets and too much power packed into too small a space.

"We're being watched," Four Eyes muttered, adjusting his collar.

Mrs. Xu didn't look up, but chuckled.

"Of course we are. You brought the twins."

Kim Kim grinned.

"We're famous."

Chin Chin corrected him.

"We're dangerous."

As they passed, the airport's ambient sensors flickered. A vending machine spat out three extra cans of chrysanthemum tea, then powered down with a sigh.

The passersby "!!!!"

Four Eyes "...."

Waiting outside was the Xu family's sleek, matte-black vehicle—an imposing, reinforced car that commanded attention while maintaining a low profile. As they climbed in, Four Eyes checked his messages. Still nothing from Ling Li. Just a timestamped note:

Arriving in Myanmar. Camp Phoenix inspection begins. Keep the twins out of trouble.

He sighed.

"Define trouble."

The twins exchanged a look — the kind that usually preceded ritual mischief or spontaneous summoning.

"We only performed a tiny ritual," Kim Kim said with a playful glint in her eyes, her mischievous smile betraying the guilt simmering beneath the surface. She twirled a loose strand of hair around her finger, trying to project an air of innocence as she stood before her father, hoping her endearing antics would shield her from the consequences of her actions.

"It was tiny," Chin Chin added.

"Just a blessing for the plane."

"And a curse for the snack cart."

Mrs. Xu turned slowly.

"You cursed the snack cart?"

"Just a little," Chin Chin said, holding her fingers apart to show a small gap. "It kept giving us seaweed chips," she added, making an aggrieved face.

Mr. and Mrs. Xu shared a warm laugh as Mrs. Xu gently playfully tousled Kim Kim's hair, while Four Eyes rubbed his temples, already regretting the day's itinerary.

"We're here to meet with the Shanghai office. You two will sit quietly, answer no questions, and touch nothing."

Kim Kim raised a hand.

"What if someone insults us or threatens us?"

"Then you smile politely and write their name down for later."

The car pulled into traffic, weaving through Shanghai's pulse — augmented billboards flickering luxury ads, drones zipping overhead like metallic sparrows, and somewhere in the distance, a temple bell rang. Faint. Real.

Four Eyes stared out the window, jaw tight.

Ling Li was halfway across the continent, inspecting the most volatile facility in their network. Meanwhile, he was stuck babysitting two mystical prodigies with a penchant for chaos and a bloodline that made spirits uneasy.

"This is fine," Four Eyes muttered, trying to comfort himself. "This is manageable." He tapped the pockets of his coat, knowing that all the notes Ling Li had given him were there, as if to give him reassurance.

The twins started to hum together in perfect harmony, their voices creating a deep, resonating vibration that filled the car. This unusual sound caused the dashboard lights to flicker rhythmically, as if responding to their melody, while a soft glow emanated from the protective amulet worn by both the driver and the bodyguard seated beside him. The amulet sparkled gently, casting a warm light across the interior of the vehicle. Fortunately, the trio was accustomed to this strange phenomenon, having encountered it numerous times before.

Mrs. Xu let out a weary sigh, the kind that hinted at the weight of the world resting on her shoulders, though her expression remained soft and considerate. "They're harmonizing again," she remarked, her voice laced with a mix of resignation and gentle amusement.

Four Eyes stood unmoved, the faintest curve of a smile playing on his lips. "We're going to need tea, better yet, a very strong coffee," he stated matter-of-factly, his brow furrowing slightly in thought. "And probably a lawyer," he added, as if each word carried the gravity of a well-rehearsed mantra in this peculiar setting.

Return to the Xu Conglomerate — Shanghai Office Arrival

The Xu Conglomerate headquarters rose like a monolith in the heart of Pudong —glass and steel forged into a fortress of modern power. It had evolved since Four Eyes last stood beneath it. The logo was sleeker now, the security tighter, and the energy inside pulsed with the kind of precision only Ling Li's team could engineer.

But the name etched into the building's core remained unchanged: Xu Chu Yan.

He was the man behind the myth —the CEO who vanished three years ago not for scandal or failure, but for something far more intimate and dangerous. He had walked away from boardrooms and balance sheets to become a father, a caretaker, and a protector. The empire he inherited from his father had nearly slipped through his fingers —until Ling Li stepped in, infused it with her own team, and rebuilt it in his name. Her team had run the company ever since, transforming Xu Corporation into the crown jewel of the Xu Conglomerate.

Now, after three years of silence, he was returning. And most of those inside had never seen his face.

As the car pulled up to the private entrance, the twins quieted. Kim Kim clutched her sketchpad tighter, sensing the shift in atmosphere. Chin Chin's fox-spirit backpack blinked once, its charm reacting to the tension in the air.

Mrs. Xu straightened her scarf, her lips pressed into a line of quiet resolve. Mr. Xu adjusted his cufflinks with ceremonial precision. Neither spoke. Both of them were also excited to see the company.

Chapter 300: THE RETURN OF XU CHU YAN

Then they saw him. The person, Four Eyes, has been looking forward to seeing again.

Jack stood at the entrance like a sentinel —dressed in a tailored suit over tactical boots, the scar across his jaw a permanent reminder of Mystic Mountain. He had trained with Four Eyes in blood and fire, where survival was earned, not given. Now, he was here not as a warrior, but as a shield.

His eyes locked onto Four Eyes the moment he stepped out of the car.

No salute. No bow.

Just a nod.

"You're late," Jack said.

Four Eyes smirked, the corner of his mouth twitching with old familiarity.

"You're early."

Two muscular men quickly pat each other's shoulders.

Jack's gaze flicked to the twins, assessing them like potential threats.

"They're smaller than I expected."

"They're louder than you'll expect," Four Eyes replied.

Jack stepped aside, scanning his palm across the biometric panel. The door unlocked with a soft click.

"Everyone's inside —directors, partners, Madam's team. They've been briefed, but they haven't seen you. Not once."

Four Eyes paused at the threshold. The weight of legacy pressed against his chest. Three years ago, he had walked away from this world —away from the empire his father built with blood and expectation. He hadn't planned to return. But Ling Li had rebuilt the company in his name, protected it, and expanded it. And now, she had asked him to walk back into it.

He turned to the twins.

"No rituals. No humming. No summoning."

Kim Kim nodded solemnly, her eyes wide with understanding.

"We'll be normal."

Chin Chin grinned, mischief dancing in her eyes.

"Mostly."

Mrs. Xu whispered a quiet prayer under her breath, hoping the twins would behave. Mr. Xu placed a hand on Four Eyes' shoulder—just for a moment. A gesture of grounding. Of trust.

Then the whole group entered in a synchronized stride, the air around them taut with purpose. Behind them, the bodyguards fanned out like shadows —silent, alert, and unmistakably dangerous. Jack and Four Eyes led the way, their steps measured, deliberate. Jack’s suit glimmered brilliantly with every step he took, his expression as unyielding as stone. Next to him, Four Eyes moved with an imposing presence, commanding attention with each deliberate stride.

The lobby exuded an air of hushed anticipation, its tranquil ambiance fractured by the subtle ripple of disruption. Employees paused mid-keystroke, their screens casting ghostly glows across wide eyes.

Security personnel moved with quiet precision, their earpieces crackling faintly, eyes scanning for threats that hadn’t yet materialized.

Whispers slithered through the air like smoke curling from a lit fuse.

"Which one is our CEO?"

"Look at the twins! They’re so adorable!"

"The CEO must be the man special assistant Jack is talking with. He looks intimidating!"

"He looks so young!"

"Icy but handsome!"

"Giggles..."

The murmurs weren’t just idle curiosity —they were laced with awe, speculation, and a touch of fear. The newcomers didn’t just arrive. They shifted the atmosphere.

A soft chime rang out, deceptively gentle. The elevator doors parted with a hiss, like a curtain rising on a stage where reputations were forged and shattered.

The executive floor unfolded like a different world —gleaming marble stretched beneath their feet, cold and pristine. Sleek glass partitions sliced the space into elegant compartments, each pulsing with the energy of high-stakes ambition. The conference room ahead buzzed with restrained urgency. Inside, professionals sat poised, their expressions taut with expectation.

They had known Xu Chu Yan only through the ink of his signature —contracts, directives, approvals. He was myth and memory, a name that carried weight like thunder.

Now, the legend was about to walk in.

Jack leaned closer to Four Eyes, his voice a low hum beneath the sterile buzz of the fluorescent lights overhead.

"Are you ready?"

The words were simple, but the weight behind them was anything but. Jack's tone remained steady, but his sharp, calculating eyes betrayed the gravity of what lay ahead. He wasn't just checking in; he was bracing for impact, reading Four Eyes like a battlefield map.

Four Eyes adjusted his glasses, the lenses catching the harsh glare above and casting fractured light across his face. His jaw clenched.

"Hmm," he acknowledged with a nod.

Behind his eyes, a storm churned.

'Wife, why did you let me come back? I could've been by your side, holding your hand and showing you the love I never stopped feeling. Nine hours apart... but it feels like nine years.'

The ache was physical, a phantom pain in his chest where her warmth used to be. He blinked hard, as if that could push the memory back into the recesses of his mind. But it clung to him —her scent, her

voice, the way her fingers curled around his when she was afraid. He sighed, the sound barely audible, but it carried the weight of longing and reluctant duty.

Jack caught a flicker of emotion in Four Eyes and didn't press further. His smile was brief, almost imperceptible —neither mockery nor pity, just a quiet offering of solidarity. A flicker of warmth in a battlefield of nerves. He reached out and gave Four Eyes a firm pat on the shoulder —just once. Enough to anchor him. Enough to say, 'I see you. I've got you.'

Outside the conference room, the air felt heavier. The silence wasn't empty; it was loaded, the kind that comes before a verdict or a storm.

Then, without another word, they stepped forward.

They entered the room. The door swung open with a soft click, but the silence that followed was deafening. Heads turned, and conversations died mid-sentence. The air thickened.

Jack's posture straightened as his gaze swept the room like a commander assessing the terrain. Four Eyes hesitated for half a breath, then followed with his shoulders squared in forced resolve.

Every eye in the room locked onto them —some with curiosity, some with calculation, and a few with veiled apprehension.

And somewhere, behind the glass, marble, and whispered legends, Xu Chu Yan's legacy awaited confrontation.

Boardroom: The Return of Xu Chu Yan

Conference Room Entrance. The door swung open with a soft click, but the silence that followed was thunderous.

Jack stepped in first, his presence slicing through the room like a blade. Four Eyes followed, his spine straight but his eyes flickering —scanning the faces, the polished table, the gleaming nameplates that

seemed to mock his uncertainty. The executives turned, one by one, their expressions shifting from polite curiosity to guarded calculation.

Some sat straighter. Others subtly angled their chairs, as if preparing for impact.