

PROTEGE 306

Chapter 306: ATC: AUTONOMOUS TACTICAL CONSTRUCT

Live Training Exercise — ATC Deployment

The first light of dawn painted the sky over Camp Phoenix in hues of gold and crimson when, suddenly, the sirens blared — not as a warning, but as a signal to commence.

On the southern field, a high-stakes combat simulation erupted into life. Thirty elite soldiers, clad in adaptive gear that shimmered in the early morning light, moved with lethal grace through a meticulously crafted mock urban environment. The terrain featured angular modular buildings that loomed like silent sentinels, smoke generators that released swirling plumes of fog, and unpredictable threat nodes that heightened the tension. Their mission was clear: breach the enemy stronghold, secure the area, and extract their team — all under the relentless pressure of simulated warfare.

But this time, they were not alone.

At precisely 0600 hours, the ATC — Autonomous Tactical Construct — glided into position, an imposing figure of ingenuity. Its low-slung frame resembled a mobile fortress, armored like a beast ready for battle. There was no face to show fear, no limbs to express hesitation — just an amalgamation of kinetic plating, advanced sensor arrays, and internal fabrication cores. The only sounds it emitted were the soft humming of its magnetic treads and a subtle pulse from its encrypted uplink, like a heartbeat in a tense atmosphere.

"ATC online," Pharsa's voice crackled through the comms from the command tower, her tone decisive. "All systems green. Awaiting field sync."

Ling Li stood resolutely beside her, arms crossed and eyes narrowing with intensity as she surveyed the scene.

"Let it sync. Let it lead."

With a precision that was both unnerving and impressive, the ATC began analyzing the terrain. Within moments, it mapped every inch of the simulation, pinpointing threat clusters and deploying two micro-

drones that zipped forward, relaying real-time data that flickered onto the soldiers' HUDs like fireflies in the dark.

"It's not just reacting," Mushu observed, disbelief coloring his voice. "It's orchestrating."

In the thick of the simulation, Captain Ren, the squad leader, barked commands with authority as the ATC mobilized its resources, rerouting power to a malfunctioning entry gate before swiftly deploying a smoke dispersal unit that erupted in a billowy cloud, shrouding their movements in a veil of obscurity. When a simulated ambush flared to life, the ATC executed a perfect counter —launching a kinetic shield that enveloped the squad, absorbing the explosive shockwaves and recalibrating its plating in real-time.

"It just saved Bravo team from a complete wipe," Dane, the Camp Commander in charge, remarked, eyes wide with admiration. "And it's guiding Alpha through a blind corridor, providing thermal cover."

The soldiers moved with a unity that transcended spoken direction; they adjusted their formations rhythmically in tandem with the ATC's strategic maneuvers. No one questioned its autonomy —there was an unbreakable trust that bound them to this machine.

By 0745, the simulation concluded without a single casualty; a flawless extraction. As the ATC powered down, its plating cooled with an almost serene hum, and the micro-drones returned to their docking ports, like birds settling back into their nests.

An electric silence filled the air for a brief moment.

Then — Sublevel 3 erupted into chaos.

Behind the reinforced glass of the subterranean control deck, engineers, tacticians, and system architects sprang to their feet, the thrill of victory igniting the air. Cheers cascaded off the steel walls, a raucous tide of celebration. Pharsa slammed her palm against the console, the joy in her eyes sparkling like sunlight on the ocean waves.

Mushu turned in his chair, arms raised high like a quarterback who had just thrown the winning pass, his energy infectious.

Above ground, Camp Phoenix erupted in a symphony of exuberance. Soldiers clapped their armored hands together, some launching their helmets skyward in jubilant abandon. The mess hall sprang to life as off-duty personnel flooded the field, their voices mingling in shouts, whistles, and heartfelt embraces. Even the stoic sentries lining the perimeter exchanged knowing nods, their pride evident in the corners of their mouths.

The ATC, standing stoically amidst the celebration, merely retracted its shield and dimmed its uplink, its presence a testament to the teamwork that had triumphed today. It displayed no need for praise, yet it had undeniably earned it.

Ling Li, together with El Padre, lingered at the edge of the field, observing the ripples of jubilation spread like a shockwave of vindication. She remained impassive, waiting for the right moment to allow her own smile to break free.

Turning to Pharsa, she found a reflection of exhilaration in her eyes.

Pharsa nodded, breathless with excitement.

"They're already on it!"

The Call of the Gloating Phoenix

The screen flickered to life in Shi Min's office, a sleek, minimalist space cluttered with data pads, half-drunk tea, and Wushing pacing like a caffeinated shadow. Shi Min barely looked up as the three-way conference call connected.

El Padre's face filled the center screen, backlit by the golden haze of Camp Phoenix's celebratory aftermath. His grin was so wide it practically needed its own bandwidth.

El Padre:

"Gentlemen. Or should I say, absentee landlords of tactical glory? I just witnessed the ATC performing ballet in a war zone. Ballet. With smoke, shields, and zero casualties. Meanwhile, you two were... what? Filing paperwork and sipping lukewarm tea?"

Shi Min (without looking up):

"Some of us are consolidating twenty-seven active systems before seclusion, El Padre. Not all of us have time to narrate battlefield poetry."

El Capitan (joining from a sun-drenched balcony, sipping something suspiciously tropical):

"I was told there'd be no poetry. Also, I'm technically on leave. Strategic leave. Very strategic. I'm studying wind patterns... from a hammock."

El Padre leaned back, the sound of distant cheering still echoing behind him. He raised a finger like a professor about to deliver a thesis.

El Padre:

"Let me paint you a picture. Thirty soldiers, one ATC, zero casualties. It moved like a ghost with a PhD in warfare. It saved Bravo team from a simulated wipeout so clean, I almost cried. Almost. But I didn't. Because I'm emotionally fortified."

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NOTE: The Autonomous Tactical Construct (ATC) depicted in this story is a fictional creation of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real technologies, systems, or entities is purely coincidental and intended solely for narrative purposes.

Chapter 307: LING LI'S RESPONSE FROM MYANMAR

El Padre:

"Too late. I'm already the favorite. It synced with me like we were soulmates in a tactical opera. Even Ling Li nodded. Nodded. That's basically a standing ovation in her language."

Shi Min finally looked up, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Shi Min:

"Just send me the full report. I'll review it between transferring the last of the neural interface protocols and convincing Wushing not to alphabetize the missile inventory."

Wushing (off-screen):

"It's already alphabetized. You're welcome."

El Capitan:

"Shi Min, you need a vacation. Or a clone. Or both."

El Padre:

"Or better yet, you could've been here. You missed the helmet toss. Even the perimeter guards smiled. I saw teeth, Shi Min. Teeth."

Shi Min:

"I'm logging off before you start reciting victory haikus."

El Padre:

"Too late. I already wrote one."

He cleared his throat dramatically.

Steel beast glides through fog.

Victory blooms without blood

Shi Min missed it all.

El Capitan (applauding slowly):

"Bravo. That's going in the next tactical memo."

Shi Min (sighing):

"Wushing, mute him."

Wushing:

"Already done."

El Padre's voice cut off mid-laugh, his face still smug as the screen faded to black. Shi Min leaned back, rubbing his temples.

Shi Min:

"Remind me never to let him near the poetry module again."

Wushing:

"Noted. Also, I saved the haiku. It's oddly... inspiring."

Shi Min "...."

Live from Myanmar — Ling Li Responds

The following day, an uncanny stillness enveloped the medical wing of Camp Phoenix, where even the air felt charged with anticipation. The only sounds breaking the silence were the soothing whir of sterilization drones gliding effortlessly through the sterile atmosphere and the percussive cadence of Pharsa's boots striking the polished floor like a precise metronome. At the heart of the diagnostics bay stood Ling Li, her intense gaze fixated on a transparent screen, adorned with swirling streams of data pulsating rhythmically in a hypnotic dance of neural sync protocols.

Just as Rockie began to dive into the depths of a critical report, a sudden alert sliced through the tranquility like a bolt of lightning — sharp and jarring. A soft chime resonated, followed by a steady pulse — a call to attention that seemed to reverberate through the very walls. Ling Li's bracelet ignited with a breathtaking cascade of colors, not the usual red or yellow, but a mesmerizing interplay of gold and white, signaling the activation of an urgent protocol — the twins were in motion.

Without a moment's hesitation, she tapped the screen, conjuring a live feed that blossomed into three distinct panels: the vibrant images of Kim Kim and Chin Chin flanked by an intricate diagnostic overlay of the Xu Conglomerate's monolithic Shanghai headquarters. The structure itself appeared to shudder and sway, lights flickering ominously in a chaotic ballet of illumination, doors swinging wide like open arms inviting an unseen presence to slip through, while scent systems adjusted nervously to an altered atmosphere. Emotional resonance crackled in the air, hinting at a disarray within — a harmonization teetering on the edge of chaos.

Ling Li's eyes narrowed, sharpening with a fierce determination. "Pause the inspection," she commanded, her voice a steady anchor that cut through the brewing intensity as she strode purposefully toward the secure communications room, with Pharsa trailing behind like a vigilant shadow. Rockie remained rooted in place, his nimble fingers expertly rerouting the neural sync data to Ling Li's private channel, an action executed with practiced finesse.

Inside the comms room, Ling Li initiated the live relay, her movements fluid and confident. The screen pulsed, flickering once before establishing a connection. Four Eyes materialized, his appearance slightly

disheveled, hair tousled as if he had just emerged from a tempest. Beside him stood Jack, arms crossed, his posture radiating a palpable sense of readiness. In the background, the twins animatedly engaged with a vending unit that had just dispensed an eccentric snack, whimsically labeled 'Existential Egg Tarts,' their expressions a delightful blend of curiosity and mischief.

Ling Li bypassed any customary greeting, urgency simmering in her tone as she set the stage for the impending conversation. "The twins harmonized seamlessly with the building — a strange unison of existence between flesh and architecture."

Four Eyes tilted his head, curiosity sparkling in his eyes. "They didn't mean to," he replied, disbelief threading through his words.

"They never do," Jack interjected curtly, leaning casually against the doorframe, tension radiating from him like heat off a pavement.

"The infrastructure's responding as though the twins are intricately woven into its very essence. It isn't merely biometric; it's a profound bond — one that is both behavioral and emotional. The scent diffusers tune into their unspoken moods, and the kinetic sculpture pivoted gracefully to face Chin Chin the moment she stomped in frustration."

Ling Li's gaze sharpened, intensifying like a laser beam. "That building was never programmed for emotional input," she asserted, her voice steady yet charged with urgency. "I embedded a dormant protocol two years ago — a failsafe, an insurance policy. It was never intended to activate."

Four Eyes raised an eyebrow, astonishment evident on his face. "You embedded a protocol and didn't bother to inform me?" he questioned, incredulity woven through his tone.

"I didn't anticipate my children would possess such raw power," she replied, the weight of her words settling heavily into the thick silence that enveloped them.

Off-screen, the twins resumed their gentle humming, a soft melody that floated like delicate smoke through the air. Behind Four Eyes, the lights flickered in a ghostly rhythm, casting fleeting shadows that danced across the walls. Suddenly, the temperature shifted, as if a hidden door had creaked open, allowing a delicate breeze to whisper through the vents, carrying the intoxicating scents of jasmine and zesty citrus that mingled harmoniously with the hum of advanced technology.

Ling Li exhaled slowly, her breath deliberate, as if weighing the gravity of each word. "They're syncing with inheritance code," she stated, her tone unwavering but edged with urgency. "That means the system perceives them as extensions of both you and me."

Jack's brow furrowed, running a hand through his hair, thoughts tangling like climbing vines. "So the building's essentially parenting them," he remarked, incredulity lacing his voice.

Ling Li maintained her serious demeanor, her eyes gleaming with resolve. "Contain it. Don't suppress it. Allow them the freedom to explore — but monitor everything closely. If they trigger the inheritance clause, the entire network could recalibrate in ways we can't foresee."

Four Eyes nodded, his expression set in concentrated resolve. "Understood."

Chapter 308: HIGH STAKES RENEGOTIATION (SHANGHAI)

Ling Li paused, her gaze momentarily drifting as a flicker of pride ignited in her eyes, casting a warm glow across her face. "Tell them I'm proud," she said, her voice steady yet soft. "But if they dare to breach the executive vault, I'll send them to the mountain," she warned, her words dripping with a blend of affection and caution, echoing like a distant thunderstorm.

Jack blinked, his features contorting into a mask of bewilderment. "There's a mountain?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, as the weight of her ominous words lingered in the air, thick with unspoken dangers and layered meanings.

Without waiting for a response, Ling Li ended the call, the sound of the disconnect punctuating the heavy silence.

Across the room, The Twins erupted into ecstatic disbelief, their elation bursting forth like fireworks in the night sky. They sprinted towards their father, their small frames darting forward like twin comets, propelled by an unstoppable force of affection and the promise of comfort.

"Dad, hug... hug..." Kim Kim implored, her little arms spread wide like a pair of eager wings, reaching out as if trying to gather the entire universe into her warm embrace.

"Dad, up... up..." Chin Chin chimed in, her voice bubbling with excitement as she bounced on her tiny toes, radiating the earnestness of a pint-sized diplomat, desperately seeking a lift into the comforting safety of her father's arms.

Four Eyes peered down at his two charming little manipulators, a playful twitch pulling at the corners of his lips as he struggled to suppress a smile that threatened to betray his resolve. He was all too familiar with this dance. The twins weren't merely exhibiting their irresistible cuteness; they were expertly wielding their tactical affection like seasoned strategists. Their mother's impending wrath hovered over them like a dark storm cloud, and in that moment, they needed their father to act as the lightning rod that would draw away the approaching tempest.

'The Mountain...?'

The twins' exuberant chorus of disbelief echoed through the air: "NO WAY!"

"Dad, I love you the most..."

"You're the best Daddy in the whole wide world!"

Sweet words tumbled from their lips like joyous confetti filling the sky, each compliment bursting with sincerity and mischief. Just as swiftly as they unleashed their heartfelt flattery, the twins catapulted from his arms, dashing away with gleeful glee — mission accomplished, delightfully victorious.

Four Eyes stood there, momentarily frozen, gazing at the empty arms where his children had just been.

Four Eyes: "..."

He felt the warmth of their absence settle around him, a poignant reminder of the fleeting moments that slipped through his fingers like sand. It was as if they had burned the bridge of affection the instant their feet hit the ground.

He watched them disappear into the distance, then turned to Jack, whose expression mirrored his own confusion.

Kim Kim had crouched beside the vending unit, her pencil dancing across the page as she meticulously sketched its interface, resembling an aspiring engineer lost in a world of circuits and codes. Meanwhile, Chin Chin leaned close to the enigmatic sculpture, his voice barely a whisper, as it pulsed with a soft, otherworldly glow — an unsettling yet captivating acknowledgment of their presence.

Four Eyes rubbed his temple, the weight of incredulity etched on his face, letting out a weary sigh, like a man who'd just discovered that his once-robust firewall was nothing more than a flimsy picket fence.

"We're going to need a bigger firewall," he muttered, the gravity of the situation settling in around them like an impending storm.

Day Three — The High-Stakes Renegotiation (Shanghai)

The Xu Corporation's executive tower loomed over the Huangpu River, its mirrored facade catching the morning haze like a blade. Inside, the 47th-floor conference suite had been cleared of its usual decor — no brand colors, no digital art. Just a long table, twelve chairs, and a single screen displaying the Project Skybridge logo: a bridge of light stretching across Southeast Asia.

Four Eyes stood at the head of the table. He hadn't slept. Ling Li's division had already begun preliminary integration tests in Manila and Da Nang. The numbers were promising. The politics were not.

The legacy partners, each one a strategic pillar of the company, entered one by one. They were old, but not obsolete—each one tied to Xu Chu Yan's original expansion charter. Their contracts were woven into the company's operating code, resistant to dissolution without unanimous consent.

Mr. Han, a logistics and port authority official, still wore his father's signet ring.

Madam Qiu, who had once built the data infrastructure, had once built the backbone of Xu's neural grid.

The Lin Brothers, silent stakeholders in regional security, hadn't spoken publicly in ten years.

Zhao Min, legal architect, had drafted the inheritance clause that still governed executive succession.

They sat. No greetings.

Four Eyes began.

"Project Skybridge is live. We've secured preliminary nodes in five Southeast Asian cities. Ling Li's division has proven the tech. We're ready to scale."

Madam Qiu raised an eyebrow.

"Without us?"

"With new partners," Four Eyes said. "Agile, responsive, unburdened by legacy clauses."

Mr. Han leaned forward.

"You want us to dissolve."

"I want us to evolve."

Zhao Min tapped the table once. The screen behind Four Eyes flickered, revealing a clause from the original charter.

"Clause 17.3. No dissolution without full consensus. You need all five signatures." The weight of these words hung heavy in the air.

Four Eyes nodded.

"That's why we're here."

Silence.

Then Madam Qiu spoke, voice low.

"Your father built this company on trust. On continuity. You're asking us to erase ourselves."

"I'm asking you to release the future," Four Eyes replied. "Skybridge isn't just expansion. It's a transformation. If we don't move now, we'll be obsolete in three years."

Mr. Han's jaw tightened.

"And what happens to our networks? Our people?"

Jack entered then, unannounced. He placed a data shard on the table—clean, gold-edged, pulsing with live metrics.

"We've modeled the transition. No layoffs. No asset loss. Legacy networks will be absorbed into the new grid. But we need flexibility. We need speed." Four Eyes declared.

Zhao Min studied the shard. Then looked at Four Eyes.

"And if we refuse?"

Four Eyes didn't blink.

"Then we trigger the override. Clause 19.2. Emergency restructuring in the face of systemic threat."

The Lin Brothers stirred. That clause hadn't been invoked since the cyber-collapse.

Madam Qiu exhaled.

"You'd burn the house to build a bridge."

Chapter 309: FATTY'S WEEKEND MADNESS

Four Eyes met her gaze.

"Only the parts that won't cross."

Renegotiation Vote — Project Skybridge

The rain had finally ceased, but the atmosphere inside the Shanghai boardroom crackled with unspoken tension. The legacy partners sat in a deliberate silence, their expressions a mixture of apprehension and anticipation. On the wall behind Four Eyes, an imposing display flickered with the Project Skybridge metrics: rising growth curves that soared like the skyline outside, intricate regional integration maps, and a relentless countdown flashing towards deployment.

Standing at the head of the gleaming conference table, Four Eyes was a figure of resolution, arms folded across his chest, a steady gaze locking onto each partner in turn.

"You've seen the figures. You've heard our ambitious vision. Now I need your decision," he stated, the weight of his words heavy in the air.

Madam Qiu was the first to break the silence, her voice steady yet filled with the gravitas of experience.

"I built the very grid that powers this headquarters. I've witnessed your father sign contracts on the basis of nothing more than a handshake and a promise. But change is inevitable, and I have watched it unfold. I vote yes," she declared, her finger tapping fluidly on her tablet. A moment later, her signature materialized on the screen — clean, final, and undeniably binding.

Mr. Han leaned back, his fingers drumming thoughtfully against the polished wood of the table, the rhythm echoing like a ticking clock.

"My ports still handle 40% of your materials. My people wear the Xu crest proudly. But there's a restlessness among them — they crave speed, they demand relevance. I vote yes," he affirmed, his determination evident in every syllable.

Two votes down.

The Lin Brothers exchanged a conspiratorial glance, one swiftly typing while the other nodded in agreement, the silent communication born of years of brotherhood.

"We vote yes, with one stipulation: we retain advisory status for the first 18 months," they said in unison.

Four Eyes nodded, a slight smile breaking the tension. "Granted."

With four signatures now inked, only Zhao Min remained, her presence like a palpable weight in the room. She sat unmoving, a statue of resolve.

"I crafted the clause you seek to obliterate. It was designed to safeguard the company against rash leadership. Against emotional whims disguised as innovation," she stated, her voice unwavering as she locked eyes with Four Eyes.

Four Eyes stepped closer, his voice calm yet insistent. "This isn't impulsive; it's overdue."

Zhao Min's eyes narrowed, her expression unyielding. "And when the technology falters? When the new partners withdraw? When the twins are left to inherit a company built on speed, not stability?"

Four Eyes addressed her directly, his tone measured and firm. "Then they will rebuild, much like we did. But they'll be constructing their vision, not yours."

Zhao Min's gaze shifted from the screen to Four Eyes, a flicker of doubt crossing her features. "You were never meant to lead. You were meant to preserve."

Unflinching, Four Eyes replied, "I'm not preserving; I'm preparing."

An agonizing pause settled between them, the air thick with unspoken history and future potential. Eventually, Zhao Min's resolve cracked as she tapped her tablet, her signature appearing last — reluctant yet resigned, sealing the decision with finality.

"Clause dissolved," she stated, her voice steady despite the gravity of the moment.

The screen flickered, the legacy clause dissolving into nothingness while Project Skybridge shifted to green—a beacon of hope and new beginnings.

With a deep exhale of relief, Four Eyes felt the weight of the world lift.

Zhao Min rose from her seat, her presence still commanding as she moved to leave. She paused at the door, casting a final, penetrating glance over her shoulder.

"Don't forget what you buried. It remembers," she intoned, her voice echoing as she exited the room, leaving a lingering sense of foreboding in her wake.

Fatty's Weekend of Madness — Vienna, Gloriously Unprepared

It began with a cascade of confetti.

But not just any confetti — Fatty had commissioned a sparkling spectacle imbued with emotional resonance. Each delicate piece glimmered and shimmered, exuding sentiments such as nostalgia, triumph, and a hint of mild regret. There was even a wild batch that unleashed waves of spontaneous weeping among startled diplomats. The parade hadn't even kicked off, and already three dignitaries were embracing strangers, murmuring heartfelt apologies for hasty treaties signed in moments of desperation.

Fatty, naturally, was late.

Not late in the chic, stylish sense. No, he was operationally late — entangled in the chaos of simultaneously inaugurating six store openings across three time zones, each one curated around a distinct emotional state. In Prague, the “Bittersweet Dumpling Emporium” had just unveiled its poignant grief-flavored mooncakes. In Kyoto, “Joy & Soy” tantalized taste buds with tofu guaranteed to incite uproarious laughter. Meanwhile, in Berlin, the “Regret & Ramen” establishment boasted a serpentine line that stretched around the block.

And in Vienna, the unicorns could barely contain their restlessness.

Their hooves scraped the cobblestones outside the magnificent Hofburg Palace, their manes intricately braided with fine silk and steeped in evocative scents of longing. Fatty had insisted on emotional fragrance — each unicorn wafted the aroma of a cherished memory. One radiated the sweet scent of first love, while another carried the poignant essence of a childhood argument that had been beautifully resolved too late. The lead unicorn, a resplendent creature aptly named Tax Deduction, emanated an intoxicating perfume that celebrated triumphant victories over red tape.

Then, at long last, he made his entrance.

Fatty descended from his whimsical chariot, shaped like a giant floating dumpling, its surface shimmering with paint that glinted in the sunlight. Draped around him was an eccentric robe crafted from a kaleidoscope of old receipts and vibrant ceremonial napkins, each piece telling its own story. His hair, a fantastical swirl, was lacquered to perfection, defying the laws of gravity and perhaps even the bounds of decency. With a flourish, he waved to the multitudes of onlookers, using both hands and one foot in a dance of overzealous greeting — he was a firm believer in what he dubbed “maximum greeting density.”

Lily, who was watching the live broadcast and waiting for Fatty to show up.

“...”

‘Is this man really Quan Ye, whom she fell in love with?’

“...”

The parade, a carnival of joyous absurdity, began its vibrant march.

Behind him, marching was the "Feelings Brigade," a troupe of dancers expertly trained in the art of expressing intricate emotions through the fluid movements of noodle choreography. They twirled elegantly, their bodies curving like soft pasta, while tears of joy streamed down their faces, occasionally punctuated by ecstatic screams of delight.

Chapter 310: THEY TREAT FATTY LIKE A CULT LEADER

Fatty, brimming with uncontainable enthusiasm, narrated the entire spectacle through a live emotional broadcast, his voice echoing like a charming melody in the minds of every captivated spectator.

"And this next float," he exclaimed with a dazzling flourish, "represents the moment I accidentally kissed a ghost! Both hilariously awkward and surprisingly enlightening, it was a twist of fate that left me breathless."

Vienna was swept away like leaves in a whirlwind. Children's laughter rang out like chimes in the air, while elders twirled in jubilant dances. A banker, overcome with inspiration, tossed aside his briefcase mid-parade and opened a whimsical poetry café. Glittering unicorns pranced through the Ringstrasse, weaving trails of shimmering dust and unresolved emotions in their wake.

At the crescendo of the parade, Fatty stood triumphantly atop the final float—a colossal, steaming bowl of vibrant soup — declaring:

"Let commerce be tender! Let feelings be edible! Let unicorns be tax-deductible!"

The crowd erupted in ecstatic cheers.

"YES!!!"

"WE LOVE YOU!!!"

"AHHH! I LOVE YOU!!!

Goldie, vigilantly shielding Fatty from the exuberant crowd, couldn't help but think, 'People truly treat him like a cult leader.'

And somewhere, hidden in a shadowy alley of the city, a rival merchant muttered, "We'll never beat him. He sells nostalgia in a dumpling."

Post-Parade Collapse — Fatty in Velvet and Vapor

The parade concluded in a spectacular crescendo of glittering dumpling-shaped fireworks, with an unexpected group hug inspired by a unicorn named Tax Deduction. Vienna thrummed with an electric afterglow — each cobblestone pulsed with lingering joy, and one lamppost even began reciting delicate poetry in melodious Cantonese.

Fatty stumbled into his penthouse suite like a war veteran returning from a surreal battlefield — if that battle were fought with sequins, soup floats, and a chaotic whirlwind of simultaneous ribbon-cuttings. He collapsed into a plush velvet beanbag sculpted like a bao, flinging his arms wide as if to embrace the world, his shoes nowhere to be found, one eyebrow still twitching from the exhilarating adrenaline.

"I am art," he whispered to the stillness that enveloped him.

"I am commerce. I am chaos incarnate."

Goldie "...."

'Is there truly anyone who can rival his level of narcissism? It's hard to believe that such a trait could be infectious, isn't it?'

Goldie felt a chill on his back and exited the room like a scared cat.

The room was cocooned in dim light, illuminated only by the soft radiance of mood-reactive lanterns. One lantern shifted to a tranquil blue as he exhaled deeply. Another flickered pink at the mere thought of Lily, bringing a wistful smile to his face.

Fatty lay there for what seemed like an eternity, letting the silence wrap around him like a luxurious silk robe. His fingers grazed the edge of a dumpling-shaped pillow, embroidered with the whimsical phrase, 'Feelings are edible.'

"I did it," he murmured, an air of reverence in his voice.

"I sold nostalgia in a parade. I weaponized whimsy."

Goldie, who just returned to serve him tea, pondered, 'He can't possibly be prouder than this, right?'

"...."

But then, the lantern closest to him pulsed crimson, and a shimmering message took form in the air — Ling Li's seal glowing softly, her voice calm yet unmistakably unimpressed.

"Fatty. You've turned Vienna into a therapy session with unicorns. Again."

Fatty blinked, sitting up slightly, the weight of reality slowly settling back in.

"Six store openings in one weekend is not a strategy. It's spiritual overextension. Emotional flavoring is not a substitute for governance."

Fatty groaned, flopping back into the beanbag, the soft fabric cradling his limbs as he melted into it.

"She's so stern when she's right," he muttered.

The message continued, unwavering.

"Chaos is beautiful. But it must be tempered by consequence. You've stirred the grid. The koi spirits are restless. And someone in Prague just wept into a dumpling and glimpsed their past life."

Fatty winced at that revelation. "Okay, that one might have been a bit too strong."

Ling Li's voice softened, bridging the sternness with a hint of warmth.

"Rest. Reflect. Then recalibrate. You're not just a spectacle; you're a pillar. Don't forget that."

As the message faded, the lantern transformed into a gentle gold glow, enveloping him in a sense of calm reassurance.

Fatty lay still, gazing at the ceiling where a mesmerizing projection of his parade playfully danced in slow motion — unicorns prancing, joyful dancers weeping, steam swirling from the enchanted soup floats. A smile crept across his face.

"Even pillars need glitter."

With a renewed sense of purpose, he reached for his phone and typed a reply:

"Noted. Also, I'm sending you a sequined phoenix tapestry. It's emotionally neutral. Mostly."

Ling Li sighed, 'Did he even grasp what I was trying to convey? Hays!'

Arrival at Mystical Mountain — Otako Ascends

By 0900, Ling Li was soaring through the skies, the world beneath her shrinking into a sea of clouds. Her tactical trench coat was traded for a sleek, tailored travel coat that hugged her form, with every stitch whispering both elegance and purpose. Her braided hair remained tightly woven, while her striking features were obscured beneath a matte-black face mask, leaving her expression an enigmatic riddle.

Below her, Camp Phoenix dwindled into obscurity as her jet banked eastward, a lone sentinel in the vast expanse of the heavens.

Alone, she traveled incognito — unyielding to the concerns of El Padre, Mushu, and Pharsa, who had voiced their apprehensions. Within the depths of her satchel lay a treasure of secrets: encrypted reports like whispers of untold stories, a sealed vial glimmering with the essence of the forge, and an intricately folded invitation to Lily's gymnastics competition in the bustling heart of Shanghai.

But before all that, the siren call of Mystical Mountain beckoned her. She had sworn to herself that she would make this trip — not for the sake of ceremony or the pull of nostalgia, but for a deeper purpose.

As the jet began its descent into the hidden valley, a tapestry of emerald peaks and cerulean skies unfolded beneath her. With each passing moment, Ling Li shed her mortal coil, transforming back into Otako — immortal, omnipotent, and shrouded in an enigmatic aura. The very essence of her being shifted, cloaked in a mantle of silence and unassailable sovereignty, as she prepared to commune with the Majesty of the Mountain — the revered Azure Dragon.