

## **PROTEGE 311**

### Chapter 311: MYSTICAL MOUNTAIN: MEETING THE AZURE DRAGON

At the entrance to the mountain, seven figures awaited her with an air of reverence and purpose.

The Seven Shah.

Otako's immediate subordinates. Her shadows. Her truth.

They knelt in perfect harmony, their heads bowed as one, a living testament to their loyalty. "Greetings, Master," they intoned, their voices echoing like whispers carried through a labyrinth of ancient stone.

Otako didn't hesitate. "Rise. Let's go."

No formality. No waiting for the echoes to fade.

In seamless synchrony, they ascended onto their Qinglong — serpentine sky beasts born from the very elements of wind and will. The air grew colder, more substantial, thick with the weight of tradition and ancient magic. The mountain loomed above them, its rocky spine arching inward as if acquiescing to her approach.

Halfway up the ascent, a colossal figure loomed in their path.

A Giant Bear Beast — the steadfast guardian and gate-keeper of the inner sanctum.

Its eyes burned with an otherworldly intelligence that seemed to pierce the veil of reality. In a fluid ripple of power and fur, it transformed, becoming an elderly man clothed in robes of braided bark and shimmering starlight.

He bowed — not deeply, but with profound respect, for he recognized the power that stood before him.

"Immortal," he intoned, his voice low and gravelly like the whispered secrets of the mountain. "What can I do for you?"

Before Otako could respond, the air around them shimmered and breathed — a harbinger of those who awaited her.

More beasts emerged from the mist — silent, titanic, and steeped in reverence. Guardians of the Mountain, sentinels imbued with the essence of ancient magic. They felt Otako's power resonate like the chords of a well-tuned string.

Yet, Otako and the Seven Shah remained steadfast, unflinching.

"I'd like to meet with His Majesty," she stated with quiet authority. "Please inform him that Otako comes to pay a visit."

With a single, solemn nod, the Bear turned toward the Barioth — a majestic, quadrupedal wyvern, its crystalline wings glistening like shattered glass in sunlight, its voice reverberating like a thunderclap.

The Barioth took to the skies, ascending through the clouds with a powerful beat of its wings that seemed to echo off the very heart of the mountain.

In that moment, the world felt still.

Otako stood patiently, poised for what lay ahead.

Mystical Mountain — The Azure Dragon's Audience

The courtyard unfolded before her, expansive and majestic, hewn from glimmering obsidian and laced with veins of silver light that pulsed in unison with the mountain's core. At its center, an imposing gate of translucent crystal stood sentinel — alive, breathing, waiting for their arrival. The guardians assembled, a silent legion — watchful and unmoving. They neither bowed nor spoke, yet instinctively stepped aside, granting passage.

Moments later, the Barioth returned, wings folding gracefully as its crystalline body refracted light in dazzling patterns of storm and sky.

"His Majesty will receive you," it announced with gravitas.

Otako merely nodded. No ceremony. No hesitation.

With a resonant hum that reverberated through her bones, the crystal gate parted, as if the mountain itself whispered its approval.

Inside, the chamber was vast and timeless, an expanse that defied the very essence of measurement. Floating lanterns drifted high above, glowing with a light that shimmered not with flame, but with the weight of memory and past glories. The walls glimmered, adorned with ancient carvings that chronicled daring souls who had once stood in this sacred space.

At the far end, coiled majestically upon a throne of ethereal cloudstone and luminescent fireglass, lay the Asure Dragon.

Majestic. Massive. Eternal.

His scales sparkled like the boundless ocean, shifting between hues of sapphire and tempestuous storm-gray; his eyes radiated starbursts—twin galaxies swirling with wisdom and calm contemplation. He did not rise. He did not roar.

Instead, he transformed.

With a radiant ripple of light and breath, the Asure Dragon became a man — young, impossibly handsome, draped in robes that shimmered like the night sky woven from strands of starlight. His presence remained vast, divine, unfathomable.

"My dear friend," he spoke, his voice enveloping her like a warm embrace, "what a joy it is to see you. My heart swells with happiness, knowing that you took the time to visit this old man."

He stepped closer, his gaze softening with genuine warmth.

"But I must beseech you to walk lightly — especially with the precious three little princesses nestled within your womb. Their fragile existence is a treasure beyond measure. It would be wise to move with utmost care."

Ling Li froze, an electric shock coursing through her, even beneath the confines of Otako's samurai mask. The Azure Dragon had pierced the veil, revealing her deepest secret.

"Come now," he chuckled, eyes sparkling with understanding. "After all, I wouldn't be called the Majesty if I couldn't sense such trifles."

There was no threat in his tone, only affection wrapped in an unwavering truth.

Otako recognized that she had come seeking a favor, and with her secret laid bare, the need for disguise faded into the ether. Steadying her breath, she reached up and removed her Samurai mask.

Her long silver hair cascaded down like a waterfall of light, glowing faintly as if kissed by celestial rays. Her face emerged — ethereal, luminous, beautifully serene — an embodiment of sublime grace. The air around her shifted as if the very mountain bowed in reverence.

The Seven Shahs lowered their heads instinctively, their respect palpable. Not one dared to meet her unveiled gaze.

She was Otako.

Immortal.

Mother.

Commander.

And now, revealed in her true, resplendent form.

The Azure Dragon's eyes sparkled with delight. He understood the gesture — Ling Li's unveiling was not mere formality, but a gift of trust.

"Ah, I knew it!" he exclaimed, a low chuckle rumbling through his chest like distant thunder. "I've long suspected that behind that mask lay a beauty reserved for legends, not meant for mortal eyes." He gestured grandly, his immense figure radiating warmth and invitation. "Come in, sit by my side. Let this old soul revel in the radiance of your presence."

The Azure Dragon's eyes gleamed with a mischievous delight, shimmering like stars against the velvet night. He grasped the significance of the moment — Ling Li's unveiling was not merely a formality but a profound gift of trust, a rare glimpse into a hidden world.

#### Chapter 312: MYSTICAL MOUNTAIN: NIRVANA ELIXIR

Ling Li didn't stand on ceremony. She moved with an effortless grace, stepping forward into the vast chamber where shadows danced along the obsidian floor, her silver hair cascading behind her like strands of moonlight illuminating the night.

"You mentioned my three beanies are all girls?" she inquired, her voice imbued with a delicate awe that softened each word.

The Azure Dragon, magnificent and imposing, responded without a moment's hesitation. "Oh yes, three little girls — each a radiant reflection of your spirit."

Ling Li blinked in surprise, her heart a tumultuous blend of joy and bittersweet memories. A smile flickered as she thought of Shi Min, her only son, who had longed for a younger brother. She could almost hear his whispered wishes, the way he had counted the twinkling stars, hoping each one would grant him three boys.

"Why?" the Azure Dragon asked gently, his brow furrowing with genuine curiosity. "You don't wish for daughters?"

"Certainly not," Ling Li replied, her smile a mix of warmth and aching nostalgia. "I would be overjoyed to have them. It's just... my husband and my son were hoping for boys. I already have two older daughters, one son, and a pair of boisterous two-year-old twins — both girls."

As she spoke, laughter spilled from her lips like a gentle breeze rustling through cherry blossoms, brightening the space around her.

"Ha ha ha ha!" The Azure Dragon let out a booming laugh that resonated through the chamber like rolling thunder, shaking the very air. "You truly have a full house! Meanwhile, my wife and I are bound by the sands of time — we can only bring forth a child once every hundred years."

His eyes twinkled with mischief, yet there was an underlying weight to his sigh, a reminder of the eternity he carried within him.

"But enough of my ancient woes," he said, a playful glimmer returning to his gaze. "You didn't brave this mountain merely to indulge an old dragon. Tell me, my friend — how may I assist you?"

Mystical Mountain — The Request for the Nirvana Elixir

Ling Li sat poised in the flickering glow of the lanterns, her silver hair cascading around her like ethereal strands of moonlight, shimmering against the dimly lit chamber's walls. An almost palpable stillness enveloped the room, thick with the weight of her impending request, making the air feel electric.

"Allow me to share my predicament first," Ling Li began, her voice steady yet laced with a vulnerability that belied her composed exterior. A slow exhale escaped her lips, as if releasing the burden she had carried for too long. "My only son is set to enter seclusion in just two months. He has been ensnared by this bottleneck for nearly eight long years, distracted — entangled in the affairs of the mortal realm: business, duty, a whirlwind of diversions. But now, he stands at the threshold of readiness. Should he succeed, he will transcend earthly bounds and achieve immortality."

Her voice wavered, betraying a flicker of doubt amidst her resolve.

"The trials he shall face, however... fill me with dread."

The Azure Dragon's demeanor softened, his expression shifting as he leaned back with a thoughtful gaze, arms folded across his chest. "Ah, your family possesses remarkable gifts for cultivation. Yet, the tribulation your son will encounter... it will be fierce and unyielding."

A heavy silence fell momentarily as his eyes darkened, shadowed by the weight of solemn truths. "Anyone who dares to ascend must confront the wrath of the heavens — an envy born of our very existence. They strive to break our will, to remind us of our mortality. And so, tribulations will be unleashed. Forty strikes of lightning shall rain down upon him. He will not escape unscathed."

Ling Li nodded, her jaw set with determination, though the worry flared in her chest like a living ember.

"I understand," she affirmed, her voice steady despite the turmoil within.

"Then tell me," the Azure Dragon urged gently, his tone a balm against the anxiety that hung in the air. "What is your plan? How can I be of assistance to you?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Ling Li met his knowing gaze.

"I have come with a request for your wife," she revealed, her heart racing.

The Azure Dragon's brows arched in surprise.

"Are you suggesting you wish to concoct a Nirvana Elixir?"

The very air seemed to tremble as the words echoed through the chamber, reverberating like a bell's toll in serene waters.

"!!!!"

The Seven Shahs gasped collectively, their expressions frozen in wide-eyed astonishment, breaths caught sharply in their throats.

Ling Li felt her heartbeat quicken, a surge of hope entwined with trepidation as she lowered her head slightly in reverence. "Yes, Your Majesty. I hope I do not come across as presumptuous."

With a wave of his hand, the Azure Dragon's voice flowed with a calm assurance. "Presumptuous? Not at all. While some may deem it inconceivable, for beings such as us, it is but standard practice."

A collective blink of disbelief spread among the Seven Shahs.

"!!!!"

'Standard?' their minds echoed as one, grappling with the reality of their past misconceptions.

They had only ever encountered whispers of the Nirvana Elixir in fables — an artifact of mythic proportions, dismissed as an impossibility, a distant dream. And now, here it lay before them, spoken of with an ease that felt both shocking and liberating. Had their lives truly been confined to such narrow boundaries of understanding?

"..."

The Azure Dragon let out a soft, rumbling chuckle, his vibrant scales shimmering in the light, as he noticed the skepticism etched on their faces. "It is only natural for us to nurture our young," he said, his voice enveloping them like a warm embrace. "Even amidst the fiercest storms wrought by the heavens, we stand vigil to shield that which we hold dear."

With a graceful turn, his flowing robes cascaded behind him, leaving trails of iridescent starlight that twinkled like distant galaxies.

"Come," he beckoned, his eyes glinting with warmth. "Allow me to introduce you to my beloved wife. She's guiding our youngest daughter as she learns the art of flight."

There was a shift in the dragon's tone — infused with affection, pride, and the delicate tenderness that only family could evoke.

Ling Li followed closely, her footsteps light yet resolute, feeling the palpable magic of the moment as she stepped into the gentle radiance of their world.

### Chapter 313: MYSTICAL MOUNTAIN: THE MISCHIEVOUS PHOENIX

Following behind Ling Li, the Seven Shahs stood in hushed reverence, their thoughts a tumultuous haze. They had arrived in search of a favor, yet now they found themselves stepping into the realm of legend.

Mystical Mountain — The Azure Dragon's Family.

As they crossed the winding stone corridor that led away from the throne chamber, the Azure Dragon's voice emerged with an unexpected gentleness — stripped of regal grandeur, resonating instead with the warmth of a devoted husband and father.

"My wife remains delightfully playful, even in her twilight years," he murmured, a nostalgic smile gracing his lips as if he were savoring a cherished memory. "She adores her games — it's been her nature since time immemorial. Now that our youngest daughter has finally taken to the skies, she insists on teaching her daring aerial maneuvers. I find myself torn between laughter and concern."

Ling Li glanced sideways, a smile curling at the edges of her lips, charmed by the affectionate exasperation that colored his words.

"My two sons," he continued, laughter bubbling forth like a gentle brook, "have developed a rather profound sister complex. They are always close at hand during her flight practice, fretting over her every move, as if the air itself were a treacherous abyss, afraid their sister would fall. It's sweet — though a touch absurd."

His laughter resonated through the corridor, warm and unguarded, creating a cocoon of joy around them.

In an instant, they emerged into the light. The rear of the chamber unfolded into an expansive field, breathtakingly lush and painted in vibrant hues of nature's palette. Wildflowers danced in the soft caress of the wind, their petals shimmering faintly with a magical luminescence. Fruit-laden trees formed a majestic border, their branches sagging under the weight of golden pears and silvery plums, the sweetness of their fragrance pervading the air like an enchanting spell.

Above them, two phoenixes soared — one grand and magnificent, the other a petite silhouette — trailing ribbons of crimson fire across the azure canvas of the sky, like brushstrokes on a masterful painting. Just beneath, two dragons glided effortlessly in perfect synchronization, their iridescent scales reflecting sunlight like jewels catching the eye.

Ling Li paused, captivated, her breath momentarily stolen away. The scene before her was achingly vivid, imbued with tenderness and untouched by the burdens of immortality. It embodied sheer joy — a testament to family, protection, and the simple delight of play.

A soft smile blossomed on her lips as she inhaled the beauty of it all.

"They're exquisite," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

The Azure Dragon nodded, his eyes drawn upward, shimmering with a deep affection.

"They are the very essence of my heart."

Mystical Mountain — The Phoenix's Gift

"Honey," the Azure Dragon called, his voice a melodic whisper that danced through the air like the delicate rustle of silk. High above the vibrant tapestry of wildflowers, a magnificent figure pierced the cerulean sky — the giant crimson phoenix. With a poised, sweeping motion, she glided downward, her wings ablaze with shimmering embers that trailed after her like fiery jewels against the backdrop of the heavens. Just before touching down, her radiant form transformed — the vivid feathers dissolving into ethereal light, while the fierce flames folded seamlessly into flesh.

She descended lightly, now manifesting as a young woman, her hair cascading to her ankles like a river of molten ruby, glistening in the sun's golden rays. Her eyes, the color of a smoldering sunset — bright, piercing, and imbued with an ancient wisdom — met Ling Li's gaze with a blend of curiosity and warm familiarity. Her features were small yet striking, radiating an air of serene, immortal beauty.

Without a moment's hesitation, she playfully leaped into the Azure Dragon's embrace, catching him off guard, her laughter like the tinkling of crystal bells.

"Honey, you have a guest?" she chimed, her tone light and teasing, as though the very air around her was filled with joyful mischief.

"Yes," he replied, chuckling as he steadied her with a tender smile. "This is Otako. She's here for you. Otako, this is my beloved wife."

Ling Li bowed her head slightly, her voice imbued with respect. "It's an honor to meet Her Majesty finally."

With a flourish, the Phoenix waved her hand dismissively, a bright grin illuminating her face. "Oh, don't be too formal with me. Just call me by my name — Red."

Ling Li hesitated for a heartbeat, caught off guard by such an unassuming title. "Red?"

At this, Red burst into laughter, unabashed and unrestrained, her joy lighting up the glade around them. "I know, I know! I think my mother was too lazy to think of anything else and just named me after my feathers!"

She turned back to Ling Li, her arms opening wide, inviting warmth and friendship in a vibrant gesture of welcome.

"My husband has mentioned that you're here for me. Just let me know what you need; since you're his friend, that makes you my friend too."

Ling Li blinked, taken aback by Red's forthrightness. The warmth and ease in her voice were unexpected, wrapping around Ling Li like a comforting blanket in a chilly room.

The Azure Dragon, ever attuned to his wife's mindsets, stepped forward to clarify Ling Li's intentions. As he spoke of the fabled Nirvana Elixir and the impending tribulation looming over Shi Min, Red's expression transformed. The playful glint in her eyes dimmed, replaced by a solemnity that deepened the air around them.

"Oh, the Nirvana Elixir," she mused, the gravity of the situation settling over her like a heavy cloak. "So, you'll need my blood. How much do you require? A full cup, perhaps?"

With a bemused smile, the Azure Dragon playfully flicked her forehead with his finger. "Do you truly believe your body could spare a full cup of heart's blood?"

"Ouch!" Red exclaimed, rubbing her forehead while pouting, a mixture of indignation and delight flickering across her face. "This is my first time giving blood. I'm just thrilled!"

A sudden silence enveloped the room, the air thick with disbelief.

The Seven Shahs exchanged puzzled glances: "..."

Ling Li stood frozen, her thoughts racing, echoing the astonishment of everyone present. Who, in their right mind, gets excited about offering their heart's blood?

"..."

#### Chapter 314: MYSTICAL MOUNTAIN: THE PHOENIX'S GIFT

Ling Li stepped forward with the grace of falling snow, her presence gentle yet unmistakably potent. Her voice, soft as silk, carried the weight of ancient knowledge.

"Just three drops, if it's alright with you." Ling Li said.

Red tilted her head, brows lifting in surprise. "Only three drops? That's easy. Where should I put it? Do you have a container?"

Without a word, Ling Li reached into her space ring — a glimmering band etched with celestial glyphs — and summoned a small glass vial. Its surface shimmered with protective runes, each one pulsing faintly with embedded enchantments. The vial itself was no ordinary vessel; it was forged from starlight-tempered crystal, designed to hold the essence of immortals without corruption.

Red accepted it with curiosity, turning it slowly in her hands. The runes responded to her touch, glowing faintly in hues of gold and violet.

"Honey?" she asked, glancing at her husband with a mixture of amusement and uncertainty. "How do I take the blood from my heart?"

The Azure Dragon chuckled, his voice a low rumble of affection. He stepped closer, brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead before flicking it playfully.

"I thought you wouldn't ask," he said, his eyes gleaming with mischief and pride.

He placed two fingers gently against her sternum. "Stand still. Relax your breathing."

Red obeyed, her posture straightening, her expression shifting from playful to serene. Her chest rose and fell in slow, deliberate rhythm as she centered herself.

The Azure Dragon took the vial from her hand and hovered his palm over her heart. A soft glow bloomed from his fingertips — an iridescent stream of qi, precise and refined, flowing into her core. The air around them shimmered, thick with spiritual energy. A hush fell over the chamber.

Then, as if summoned by the breath of the cosmos, three perfect drops of blood rose from Red's chest. They hovered in the air — deep crimson, each one glowing faintly with phoenix fire, flickering like miniature suns.

The scent of burning lotus petals filled the room.

With a flick of his wrist, the Azure Dragon guided the drops into the vial. The runes flared briefly, sealing the contents with a protective ward. He handed the vial to Ling Li with reverence.

"Here. It's done."

Red blinked, her eyes momentarily unfocused. A soft sway overtook her stance.

"Oh, I didn't expect it to be that easy..."

Her knees buckled before she could finish the sentence. The Azure Dragon caught her effortlessly, his arms steady and sure, laughter bubbling from his chest.

"And you were still thinking of giving a full cup, when three drops already made you dizzy."

He began to channel qi into her, but Ling Li stepped forward, her expression calm and resolute.

"Allow me," she said.

She raised her hands, hovering them just above Red's back. Her palms glowed with concentrated energy — cool silver light threaded with strands of emerald. A wave of qi flowed into the Phoenix, gentle yet potent, like spring rain nourishing parched earth.

Red's complexion brightened instantly. Her eyes regained their spark, the golden flecks within them dancing anew. Her breath steadied, and her aura flared with renewed vitality.

"Oh! That felt amazing!" she exclaimed, twirling once with the grace of a dancer, her feet barely touching the ground before she landed lightly beside her husband.

The Seven Shahs, seated in a semi-circle of reverent silence, exhaled in quiet awe. Their expressions reflected a mixture of respect, wonder, and the subtle recognition of a bond deepening before their eyes.

Ling Li tucked the vial safely into her space ring, the runes sealing with a final pulse of light.

The gift had been given.

And the bond between immortals had deepened — woven not just through blood, but through trust, reverence, and the quiet magic of shared purpose.

The wind whispered through the towering pines of Mystic Mountain, carrying with it the sweet, intoxicating fragrance of plum blossoms and a flickering essence that seemed to dance like phoenix fire in the air. Ling Li stood at the edge of the jade courtyard, the iridescent vial of phoenix blood safely cradled within the folds of her elegant robes. Behind her, the Shahs formed a solemn semicircle, their presence a steadfast wall of respect and support, like a protective tide ready to shield her from any storm.

With a graceful step back, she lowered herself into a deep bow — exactly forty-five degrees — her spine straight and unwavering, every muscle poised with intention. The Seven Shahs mirrored her, their movements perfectly synchronized, a silent testament to their shared honor and reverence.

"I find it difficult to express my gratitude," Ling Li said, her voice steady yet resonant with raw emotion. "You've bestowed upon me more than just a gift; you've ignited a flame of hope within my heart."

Red, her gaze warm and inviting, reached out to gently lift Ling Li's arm, guiding her out of the bow with an ease that spoke of deep camaraderie.

"We're friends, aren't we?" she said, a radiant smile lighting up her face. "Just promise to visit us often. That would mean the world. And bring your family!"

Ling Li nodded, a playful sigh escaping her as a hint of amusement danced in her eyes.

"I promise I will. But I must warn you, my twins have a knack for bringing delightful chaos wherever they go."

"How could that possibly be a problem?" Red exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Let them come! I envy you for having the joy of multiples while I can only dream of one child at a time — and only once every hundred years!"

The Azure Dragon, a magnificent creature with shimmering emerald scales, tilted his majestic head, a spark of curiosity glinting in his wise, amber eyes.

"What troubles your twins?" he inquired, his voice a deep rumble that resonated through the air.

Ling Li took a deep breath, her heart swelling with both admiration and frustration. With a graceful sweep of her hand, she began to unravel the strange tale of their cultivation — how the mysterious seal of twin guardians had been etched into their very souls, marking them with a profound destiny. As she spoke, her brow furrowed in thought, her gaze flickering between awe and exasperation, as she grappled with the weight of their unique burden.

#### Chapter 315: LET HER WIN

"So they were your twins," the Azure Dragon mused, his voice low and thoughtful, like distant thunder rolling across a mountain range. His gaze, ancient and penetrating, lingered on Ling Li with quiet reverence. "I've heard whispers from the elders... that the seal has reappeared. Then I must meet them."

Ling Li's expression softened, pride and urgency mingling in her eyes. "You will," she promised, her voice steady with conviction. "I just need to rush back. One of my daughters is competing in the Asian Gymnastics Olympics in Shanghai next week. And the 'Eye' will soon open at Hidden Valley. It may take time, but I'll return — with all of them."

The Azure Dragon nodded slowly, his silver-blue robes stirring with the wind, rustling like storm-touched silk. "No rush," he said, his tone warm and teasing. "Come back after you give birth to those three little girls. Bring them with you to play."

Ling Li smiled, her heart swelling with emotion. The thought of her future daughters — bright, wild, and full of potential — filled her with a quiet joy.

Red stepped forward, her crimson hair trailing behind her like a comet's tail, catching the light in fiery strands. She reached out and clasped Ling Li's hands, her phoenix eyes glowing with warmth and certainty.

"You'll come back," Red said — not as a question, but as a vow etched in flame.

Ling Li nodded, her voice barely above a whisper, yet resonant with promise. "I will. With my children. And with stories to share."

Red's smile deepened, and she leaned in, her breath warm against Ling Li's ear. "Tell your twins they're welcome to set the mountain on fire. I'll rebuild it with better feng shui."

Ling Li laughed, the sound light and crystalline, echoing through the celestial grove. "You might regret that invitation."

"Never," Red replied, her grin mischievous and fierce. "Chaos is just another form of joy."

The Azure Dragon stepped forward, his presence commanding yet serene. As he raised his hand, a soft glow bloomed in his palm — a blessing sigil, shaped like a coiling dragon entwined with a rising flame. The sigil pulsed with ancient power, its light shifting between gold and sapphire.

"For protection," he said, his voice imbued with solemnity. "Until you return."

Ling Li accepted it with both hands, the warmth of the sigil sinking into her skin like sunlight on spring soil. She bowed again, deeper this time — not out of obligation, but from the depths of her gratitude.

"Thank you," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "For everything."

The Azure Dragon inclined his head. "May your daughter soar higher than any gymnast before her. And may the Eye reveal only truth when it opens."

Red added with a wink, her tone playful yet fierce, "And may your three little girls inherit your stubbornness. The world needs more women who refuse to bend."

Ling Li turned to go, her robes trailing behind her like moonlight on water. The Seven Shahs, silent and regal, formed a quiet procession behind her, their footsteps barely disturbing the sacred ground.

As she stepped onto the cloud ferry — an ethereal vessel woven from mist and starlight — it shimmered beneath her feet, responding to her presence with a soft hum. She paused at the edge, turning once more to look at the couple standing beneath the celestial pines.

Red waved with both hands, her smile radiant, eyes gleaming with affection and fire.

The Azure Dragon watched, his gaze steady, timeless, as if etching her silhouette into memory.

And then, with a final shimmer of light, Ling Li vanished into the sky — carrying with her the blood of a phoenix, the blessing of a dragon, and the promise of return.

### The Descent Resumes

The catacombs throbbed with a lingering warmth — echoes of ancient conflicts entombed deep within the mountain's spine. Above the flickering fireglass, the bell emitted a haunting, ethereal toll, a sound more felt than heard, reverberating like sorrow resonating through bone.

From the depths of the shadows, Solaris emerged, his cloak trailing behind him like a shroud draped over the memories of the fallen. The burn across his chest, a testament to Ling Li's assault during Lily's Dance Competition in Geneva, pulsed with an eerie glow beneath his robes, a constant reminder of his suffering and a harbinger of his imminent retribution.

Before him knelt two Ironsworn, their hoods cloaked in layers of ash, their breaths swirling in the cold air like fleeting specters. They had come without a sound, summoned by the bell's mournful cry and the unwavering command of Solaris's will.

Solaris offered no greeting, his countenance as sharp and unyielding as obsidian. "What is the status of our preparations?" he demanded.

The taller of the two raised his head just enough for their eyes to meet. "The illusions are ready. The light will sow seeds of doubt that whisper in the shadows of her mind."

"And the sigil?" Solaris pressed, his tone laced with urgency.

"Bound tightly to the gold," the second replied, their voice low and steady. "When Lily stands on the brink of victory, it will awaken."

A chill flickered across Solaris's lips — not a smile, but a twist of something far more sinister. "Excellent. Let her win. Let her bask in the false light of safety, unaware of the storm closing in around her."

Solaris turned his gaze toward the altar, its surface cracked and veined with dried blood, a grotesque canvas of past sacrifices. His fingers traced the stone, which hissed softly in response, as if it were eagerly absorbing the fury radiating from him.

"Lily will take the stage at the Gymnastic Olympics in Shanghai next week," he whispered, his voice low and filled with foreboding. "The arena will bathe in bright lights. The crowd will roar like a tempest. But beneath the jubilant shouts — beneath the facade of celebration — there lurks something far more sinister."

From the shadowy depths of the chamber, a new figure emerged. A girl, not much older than Lily herself, stepped forward. Her eyes, rimmed in dark soot, reflected a depth of sorrow, while her leotard, intricately stitched with shimmering runes, glimmered like bruises under the dim light. She moved with a calculated grace, yet her presence was marked by an aura of fragmentation — grief sculpted into a semblance of elegance.