

PROTEGE 316

Chapter 316: THE BELL BENEATH THE STAGE

"This puppet is the second," Solaris declared with a chilling certainty. "She will stand beside Lily. She will fall beside her. And when she stands again, it will be with my name etched in her bones, a haunting reminder of loyalty and sacrifice."

The Ironsworn bowed once more, this time sinking deeper, as if acknowledging a fate sealed in shadows.

"We have begun this girl's training in the forgotten forms," one of them reported, reverence mingling with awe in his tone. "She pirouettes like a vengeful spirit. She lands with the precision of a blade, striking hard and true."

Solaris nodded, a satisfied smirk curling his lips. "Then let the world bear witness. Let the cheers drown out the whispers of dread. And let this moment herald the fire that will soon engulf us all."

Above, the stars twinkled with an innocence that belied the darkness brewing below. Deep within the catacombs, he began to hum — a haunting melody, twisted and tainted with the essence of vengeance and bittersweet memories.

Once more, the bell tolled, its cry echoing through the stillness.

And the descent into chaos resumed.

Solaris stood beneath the bell, its spectral cry still echoing through the catacombs like a wound refusing to close. The Ironsworn bowed low, their cloaks brushing the scorched floor, awaiting dismissal.

Solaris didn't speak; he raised one hand — fingers curled like talons, palm glowing faintly with residual fire. The gesture was enough. The Ironsworn melted into the shadows, their figures dissipating like wisps of smoke against the bone-white marble walls, leaving nothing but silence in their wake — a suffocating shroud that blanketed the chamber.

Solaris turned with painstaking slowness, each movement deliberate and heavy, as if his very steps were chiseled from the stone of vengeance itself. He descended the altar steps, settling onto the obsidian throne — a relic once shining with the light of celestial judgment, now tarnished and tainted by his smoldering wrath. The dark stone groaned beneath him, as if it, too, bore the weight of his fury.

Solaris' visage transformed into a mask of menace; the burn Ling Li had inflicted pulsed beneath the surface of his skin — a jagged scar throbbing with a cursed luminescence. His eyes, once radiant with divine clarity, now glimmered a sickly gold, encircled by shadows like a storm-clouded night. When he spoke, his lips curled in a dangerous snarl, each word dripping with venomous intent.

"Lily," he breathed, his voice low and jagged like a serrated knife. "If I can't have you... Then no one shall."

The air around him quivered, saturated with tension. The catacombs reacted, their walls trembling, as ancient runes flickered to life, and the bell above resonated with a faint, mournful toll that echoed the depths of his despair. Leaning forward with predatory intent, Solaris rested his elbows on his knees, hands clasped as if poised to strike.

In the recesses of his mind, he envisioned her — Lily, balanced on the beam, her form a breathtaking blend of grace and defiance. He remembered Geneva and how her very essence radiated strength and rebellion. She had danced, effortlessly evading his grasp, mocking his power in every elegant movement.

His jaw clenched tight, muscles taut with rage. "Lily, you humiliated me," he spat into the emptiness of the chamber, each syllable a dagger. "You waltzed through my trap, shattering my ambitions into fragments."

With a sudden ferocity, Solaris drove his fist into the armrest of the throne. The obsidian splintered under the force of his wrath, a network of spiderweb cracks blooming outward like a dark flower. A cold, cursed wind howled through the catacombs, extinguishing the flickering torches in a single, savage breath.

"Lily, you will not escape my grasp again."

From the farthest recesses of the cavernous chamber, a delicate rustling emerged, like whispers in the dark. The second recruit — the girl with eyes shadowed by soot — clung to the edges of the shadows,

her breath a series of quick, shallow gasps, her body coiled tight as a drawn bowstring. She had overheard the vow, its weight pressing heavily upon her chest.

Solaris turned his gaze toward her, his movements slow and deliberate, like a predator sizing up its prey.

"You will be Lily's mirror," he intoned, his voice reverberating through the dimness. "Her shadow. Her undoing."

The girl nodded, her voice almost drowned by the echoing silence. "I will learn her routines. I will break it."

A twisted smile curved on Solaris's lips, one more reminiscent of a crescent scar than a genuine expression of pleasure.

"Good," he whispered, his voice a serpent's hiss. "Let Lily perform. Let her soar. And when she lands... let the world crumble beneath her feet."

He reclined heavily into the throne, its dark contours looming around him like a coffin, the ancient stone walls closing in as if to mourn. Above them, the mountain stood watch, an unyielding sentinel of silence. But below, in the bowels of darkness where sunlight dared not intrude, Solaris began to hum again — a haunting melody that reverberated through the stillness.

A tune of decay. A dirge for Shanghai.

Mignight Reunion

The private jet touched down on the secluded runway of Shanghai's elite terminal, its sleek frame gleaming under the moonlight. Butler Oda had arranged everything with precision — Ling Li's arrival was quiet, discreet, and shielded from the public eye. But even silence couldn't mask the storm of anticipation building in her chest.

It was past midnight. The city beyond the airport pulsed with neon dreams and sleepless ambition, but here, in the velvet hush of the VIP exit, time seemed to pause.

As Ling Li stepped through the frosted glass doors, the cold night air kissed her cheeks. Her long trench coat fluttered behind her like a banner of midnight silk, her heels clicking softly against the polished stone. Her eyes scanned the dimly lit corridor — and then she saw them.

Two small figures broke from the shadows like cannonballs — Kim Kim and Chin Chin, their twin laughter slicing through the quiet like bells in a temple. Their feet barely touched the ground as they sprinted toward her, arms flung wide, eyes brimming with joy.

Chapter 317: HOME IT IS

"Mom!" they cried in unison, voices high and trembling with emotion. "We missed you so much!"

They collided with her legs, then scrambled upward, clinging to her neck with the desperation of children who had counted every second of her absence. Ling Li dropped to her knees, arms wrapping around them tightly, her breath catching in her throat.

"My babies," she whispered, pressing kisses to their foreheads, their cheeks, their hair. "I missed you more than you'll ever know."

Kim Kim's grip tightened, her little fingers digging into her coat. Chin Chin buried her face in Ling Li's shoulder, sniffing softly. The reunion was not just joyful — it was a release, a flood of emotion that had been dammed for too long.

Then came the sound of footsteps — measured, confident, familiar.

Four Eyes approached, dressed in casual clothes that somehow made him look even more dashing. His shirt was slightly rumpled, his sleeves rolled up, and his eyes — those sharp, intelligent eyes — were locked on his wife with quiet intensity.

He didn't rush. He didn't speak immediately. He simply walked forward and wrapped his arms around all three of them, enclosing the family in a cocoon of warmth.

"It's been hard on you," he said softly, his voice low and full of concern. "Are you hungry? Would you like to grab some food before we go home?"

Ling Li looked up at him, her eyes shimmering with exhaustion and love. "I've already eaten on the plane," she said, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Let's go home."

Four Eyes nodded, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple. "Home it is."

They stood together, the four of them — mother, father, twins — bathed in the soft glow of the terminal lights. Their silhouettes were striking, almost unreal. Passersby paused, drawn by something they couldn't name. Phones were raised discreetly. Pictures were taken. Whispers floated through the air.

"Who are they?"

"Are they celebrities?"

"They look like a royal family..."

Ling Li didn't notice. Or perhaps she did, but chose not to care. Her focus was on the warmth of her children's hands, the steady presence of her husband, and the quiet promise of rest.

But beneath the surface — beneath the smiles and the soft laughter — there was tension. Ling Li could feel it in the air. A subtle pressure. A whisper of something watching.

She glanced once over her shoulder, toward the distant shadows of the terminal.

Nothing moved.

But she knew.

Solaris was stirring.

And Shanghai would not stay quiet for long.

The car glided through Shanghai's midnight streets like a phantom — its sleek body absorbing the city's neon reflections, its interior wrapped in quiet luxury. Inside, the warmth of reunion still lingered. Still, the air had shifted — charged now with playful tension and the unmistakable scent of mischief.

Ling Li sat with her daughters nestled against her, their small bodies pressed close, their energy still buzzing from the airport reunion. She brushed a strand of hair from Chin Chin's forehead and looked down at both girls, her voice gentle but edged with curiosity.

"I heard you two made a lot of trouble at your dad's office," she said, her tone light — but her eyes sharp, the kind that saw through illusions and half-truths.

The twins froze.

Kim Kim's mouth parted slightly, her expression caught between innocence and alarm. Chin Chin blinked rapidly, her grip tightening around her mother's arm. It was the look of two guilty souls who hadn't expected their secret to surface so soon.

But they were trained in the art of denial.

"Mom, we never did!" Kim Kim blurted, her voice high and defensive. In a flash, she wriggled out of Ling Li's embrace. She launched herself onto her father's lap, grabbing his collar with practiced desperation.

Four Eyes raised a brow, amused but silent.

Kim Kim stared into his eyes, blinking pitifully, her thoughts flowing directly into his mind like a whispered plea. Dad, you won't let Mom send us to the mountains, right?

Four Eyes didn't answer. Not aloud. Not mentally. He simply smirked, letting the silence stretch, curious to see what further tactics his daughters would deploy. His fingers rested lightly on Kim Kim's back, steady and warm, but his eyes sparkled with mischief.

Chin Chin, still curled in Ling Li's arms, took a different approach — one of logic and charm.

"Mom, we were honestly behaved in the office," she said earnestly, her voice steady. "Even the office itself likes us! You can ask Uncle Jack!"

Ling Li tilted her head, unconvinced but entertained.

Kim Kim scoffed. "There's no use asking Uncle Jack! He can't even comprehend our abilities and looks dumb."

From the front passenger seat, Jack stiffened.

"..."

His fingers twitched on his tablet. 'Do they think my ears are only for decoration?'

Four Eyes reached up and flicked Kim Kim's forehead with a gentle tap. "You can't speak like that about Uncle Jack or anyone else," he said, his voice calm but firm.

"That's very rude."

Kim Kim rubbed her forehead, pouting. "Oh, I was only speaking the truth!"

Ling Li turned to her daughter, her expression soft but serious. "Kim Kim, not all truth needs to be spoken loudly. If you think it might make someone feel awkward or misunderstood, it's better to keep it to yourself. Words, once spoken, are like spilled water. No matter how much you apologize, you can never gather them back."

Her voice was patient and melodic, yet carried the weight of wisdom earned over centuries.

Both twins nodded solemnly, their eyes wide and unblinking, absorbing the lesson as if it were sacred scripture.

Four Eyes chuckled quietly, wrapping an arm around Kim Kim and pulling her close. "You two are lucky your mother's a sage and not a storm."

Kim Kim grinned, her earlier guilt melting into affection. "She's both," she whispered.

Chin Chin giggled, nuzzling into Ling Li's shoulder. "But she's our storm."

Ling Li narrowed her eyes, though the corners of her lips twitched with amusement. She wasn't fooled — not by the praise, not by the yawn, and certainly not by the synchronized innocence of her twin daughters.

"Now," she said, her voice calm but unmistakably firm, "back to my question. Tell me what happened at your father's office."

Chapter 318: SEE I TOLD YOU

"Now," Ling Li said, her voice calm but unmistakably firm, "back to my question. Tell me what happened at your father's office."

The twins froze again, their earlier relief evaporating like mist under sunlight. Kim Kim, ever the strategist, blinked rapidly as if rebooting her mental playbook. Chin Chin, still nestled against their mother, stiffened slightly, her yawn now clearly a diversion tactic gone stale.

Kim Kim recovered first.

"But Mom," she began, voice rising with theatrical admiration, "you see, the person who designed the system at the office was truly brilliant! It could be said as... ingenious! It recognizes the owner and even family members by blood! And it can feel our emotions!"

Kim Kim gestured dramatically, as if presenting a masterpiece to an audience. Her eyes sparkled with exaggerated reverence, clearly hoping to flatter her way out of trouble.

Ling Li raised a brow, her expression unreadable. But inside, she was amused. She knew precisely what Kim Kim was doing — and why. After all, she was the one who had designed the system.

Four Eyes smirked, his gaze shifting between his daughter and his wife. He could practically hear the gears turning in Kim Kim's mind. She's trying to butter you up, he thought, and she's not even modest about it.

"Sister is correct," Chin Chin chimed in, her voice soft and sleepy. She let out another yawn — this one more exaggerated than the last — and leaned deeper into Ling Li's side. "Mom... I'm sleepy..."

Ling Li looked down at her daughter, who was now blinking slowly, her lashes fluttering like a tired kitten's. Chin Chin's small hand curled around her mother's wrist, her body limp with practiced fatigue.

Four Eyes glanced at Ling Li, then at the twins, then back again. His lips parted in a silent chuckle. "Are they auditioning for a drama?" he murmured.

Ling Li sighed, her expression caught between sternness and affection. "You two are unbelievable."

Kim Kim snorted, clearly unimpressed by her sister's sleepy act. "She's faking it," she muttered. "She was just awake enough to eat two bowls of noodles before we came."

Chin Chin opened one eye, glaring at her sister. "Traitor."

Four Eyes laughed aloud this time, unable to hold it in. "You both inherited your mother's cunning and your grandfather's flair for theatrics."

Ling Li shook her head, gently brushing Chin Chin's hair back. "I'm not angry," she said. "I just want to know what happened. No tricks. No flattery. Just the truth."

The twins exchanged a glance — one of those silent, telepathic twin moments where a thousand thoughts passed in a blink.

Kim Kim sighed dramatically. "Fine. We may have... accidentally activated the emergency lockdown."

Chin Chin added quickly, "But only because the receptionist said we couldn't have the mango pudding in the executive fridge."

Ling Li blinked. "You triggered a lockdown... over mango pudding?"

Kim Kim nodded solemnly. "It was a very delicious pudding."

Jack, still in the front seat, groaned audibly. "They locked down the entire floor. I couldn't even access my files for two hours."

Chin Chin perked up. "But Uncle Jack, you got to take a nap!"

Jack, 'did I just mutter something unintelligible?' He hurriedly turned up the car's privacy screen.

"..."

Kim Kim looked at them silently, but she was implying, 'See, I told you, he is useless.'

Four Eyes leaned back, chuckling, giving Kim Kim's head a soft pat. "Well, at least the system works. It recognized them as family and didn't call security."

Ling Li sighed again, but this time with a smile. "Next time, just ask. No need to storm the fridge."

The twins nodded solemnly, their faces the picture of repentance — though their eyes still gleamed with mischief.

Outside, the city lights blurred past, casting fleeting shadows across their faces. Inside the car, laughter mingled with lessons, and the warmth of family wrapped around them like silk.

But far beyond the city's glow, in the catacombs where bells cried and vengeance brewed, Solaris was already watching.

And the storm he was preparing would not be so gentle.

The car rolled past the gilded gates of Peonies' Castle, its tires whispering against the cobblestone path lined with moonlit petals. The estate, nestled in the heart of South Central Beijing, stood like a dream sculpted from wealth and legacy. Known as one of the most luxurious districts in the city, the Li family's ancestral home was more than opulent — it was sacred.

Peonies bloomed in every direction, their colors painting the night in strokes of crimson, ivory, violet, and gold. The air was thick with their fragrance — sweet, earthy, and calming, like a lullaby sung by the garden itself. Lanterns swayed gently in the breeze, casting soft halos across the winding paths and koi ponds that dotted the grounds.

As the car pulled to a stop beneath the arched entrance, Four Eyes stepped out first, his movements fluid and practiced. He opened the door for Ling Li, who emerged with quiet grace, her coat fluttering behind her like a shadow stitched in silk. In her arms, Chin Chin stirred faintly, her breath warm against her mother's neck. Kim Kim remained curled against Four Eyes's shoulder, her tiny fingers still clutching his collar in sleep.

Without a word, the couple moved in perfect sync — two halves of a whole. They carried the twins through the grand foyer, past the marble columns and the ancestral wall etched with generations of Li family names. The chandeliers above glowed like constellations, their light refracting through crystal and casting dancing patterns across the polished floors.

Upstairs, the twins' bedroom awaited — a sanctuary of soft pastels, plush toys, and enchanted nightlights that flickered like fireflies. Ling Li gently laid Chin Chin onto her bed, brushing a kiss across

her forehead before tucking the blanket beneath her chin. Four Eyes did the same with Kim Kim, adjusting her pillow and smoothing her hair with a tenderness that only a father could master.

The girls didn't stir. Their breathing remained slow, steady, wrapped in the safety of home.

Ling Li stood for a moment, watching them sleep. Her heart swelled — not just with love, but with a quiet ache.

Chapter 319: YOU LOVE IT

***** R18 ***** MATURE CONTENT *****

Ling Li had missed the twins more than she'd allowed herself to admit. The world outside was shifting, dangerous, and unpredictable. But here, in this room filled with warmth and innocence, time stood still.

Four Eyes stepped beside her, his hand brushing hers.

"They're safe," he said softly.

"Uhm," Ling Li replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

They lingered a moment longer, then turned and left the room, the door closing with a gentle click behind them.

Outside, the peonies rustled in the wind, their petals glowing under the moonlight.

Just as Ling Li stepped into their room, the soft click of the door behind her barely registered before the world tilted.

She gasped — her vision spun in a dizzying three-sixty as Four Eyes swept her off her feet with practiced ease. One arm cradled beneath her knees, the other supporting her back, his grip firm yet gentle. Her coat fluttered as he moved, and her breath caught in her throat.

"Chu Yan!" she exclaimed, startled, her voice half-laugh, half-protest.

But Four Eyes didn't answer immediately. His face was close —too close— and his warm breath brushed against her ear, sending a shiver down her spine. His eyes, usually calm and calculating, now burned with something deeper. Longing. Relief. Possession.

"I missed you so much," he whispered, voice low and husky. "Let's take a quick shower together."

Before she could respond, he was already striding toward the bathroom, his steps confident, purposeful. The room blurred past her — soft lamplight, silk sheets, the faint scent of peonies drifting in from the garden. Her heart thudded in her chest, not from fear, but from the sudden rush of emotion.

'This is never going to be a quick shower,' She thought.

Ling Li's cheeks flushed, her fingers instinctively clutching his shirt. She could feel the heat radiating from his body, the tension in his shoulders, the quiet urgency in his movements. It wasn't just desire — it was the ache of separation, the need to reconnect after days apart.

"You're impossible," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

Four Eyes glanced down at her, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "You love it."

She truly did.

And as the bathroom door closed behind them, it was just the two of them. A moment stolen from chaos. A breath before the storm.

Steam curled around the marble tiles like silk unraveling in slow motion. The bathroom, lined with pale jade and brushed gold fixtures, glowed softly under the ambient lighting. The rainfall shower had already begun to mist the air, its gentle rhythm echoing like a heartbeat against the glass.

Four Eyes set Ling Li down with care, her feet touching the warm stone floor. She blinked up at him, cheeks flushed, not just from the heat but from the sudden shift in atmosphere. Her coat slipped from her shoulders, and he caught it before it hit the ground, folding it with casual precision and placing it on the bench.

"You're very efficient," she murmured, brushing a damp strand of hair from her temple.

"I've had years to practice," he replied, stepping behind her and gently pulling her hair aside to expose the nape of her neck. His fingers grazed her skin — light, deliberate, reverent.

Ling Li shivered, not from cold, but from the quiet intensity in his touch. She turned slightly, catching his gaze. His eyes were dark, focused, but softened by the kind of affection that only came from knowing someone deeply, completely.

"You're staring," she said, voice low.

"I'm memorizing," he answered.

She rolled her eyes, but her smile betrayed her. "You're ridiculous."

"And you're beautiful," he said, reaching for the clasp of her necklace and undoing it with a flick. "Even when you're exhausted. Especially then."

The water behind them hissed gently, beckoning them forward.

They stepped in together, the warmth enveloping them instantly. Ling Li tilted her head back, letting the water cascade over her face and shoulders, washing away the tension of travel, the weight of responsibility, and the quiet dread of what was to come.

Four Eyes stood close, his hands resting lightly on her waist. He didn't rush. He didn't press. He simply existed beside her, a steady presence in the storm.

Ling Li opened her eyes, droplets clinging to her lashes. "You know," she said, "I thought about you every night I was away."

He leaned in, brushing his lips against her temple. "I know. I felt it."

She turned to face him fully, water streaming between them like a veil. "You didn't say you missed me."

"I didn't need to," he said. "You're here now."

Four Eyes kissed Ling Li's neck with his hands, caressing her whole body and ending on her bosoms, kneading them with precision and pinching the nipples once in a while, which made Ling Li arch her body.

Four Eyes pulled one of Ling Li's legs up and let it wrap around his waist. At the same time, he hungrily kissed Ling Li's lips, his hard cock, which is ready to explode, with visible veins, evident in how eager it is. Ling Li wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Honey, may I?" Four Eyes murmured, as his cock positions just at Ling Li's wet entrance, adding its precum to its juice, exploring its fold.

"Yes, please..."

Four Eyes, without wasting a second, plunged his stiff cock into Ling Li, making her arch her body more, pushing herself to Four Eyes, both in sync with their rhythm.

Four eyes gripped Ling Li's buttocks, and her leg tightened as Ling Li pushed with him.

"Aaahhhhhh... Uhhmmmmmm..." Ling Li, with her head tossed back, and Four Eyes' face buried in her neck, nibbling, made her feel elated.

"Aaahhhhhh... Honey... I'm coming..." Ling Li cried, her arms tightly wrapping around Four Eyes.

"Yes, let's come together..." Four Eyes whispered as he accelerated his rhythm and made each of his thrusts harder and deeper, knowing this is how Ling Li wants it. Deep.. Hard... and Fast.

"Aaahhhhhh... yes.. yes.. Aaahhhhhh..."

"Honey, I'm coming too... Ugghhhhhh... Ugghhhhhh..."

Four Eyes finished and once again captured Ling Li's lips to kiss her passionately, expressing his genuine love for her.

After which, he helped Ling Li wash and carried her into their bed without even wiping...

Chapter 320: UNTIL IT'S FLAWLESS

***** R18 ***** MATURE CONTENT *****

Just as he placed Ling Li on their bed, he once again devoured her, kissing Ling Li from her lips, neck, down to her bosoms, sucking each nipple and teasing it with his tongue and giving it a gentle bite, which makes Ling Li arch her back, and grips Four Eyes' hair, which makes Four Eyes smirk. When both nipples were standing proud to him, he felt satisfaction and proceeded to kiss down to Ling Li's navel and finally moved down to his final destination, Ling Li's wet fold.

Four Eyes moaned as he rubbed around the wet entrance with his thumb and licked the damp juice on his finger with pride. He moved his face down and smelled it, inhaling as if his life depended on it. This scent is what he missed..

'Ah, two weeks!' He thought, 'This scent is what I've been longing for.' Just the mere scent of Ling Li's V made him frenzied. He stuck out his tongue and started to lick each juicy fold, slowly at first, but only after a while that he somewhat lost his patience and devoured it like a hungry wolf without forgetting his thumb rubbing her clit.

When Ling Li finally climaxed, Four Eyes hungrily gobbled all the juice. When he was done, he wiped his face with the towel he had grabbed earlier and knelt on top of Ling Li. Looking at the little bump on Ling Li's tummy, he didn't dare to lie on top of her. He's afraid of hurting his three little beanie babies.

With Ling Li's petite body, Four Eyes effortlessly pulled Ling Li to sit on top of his hard cock. Ling Li tightly wrapped her legs and arms around him while Four Eyes held her on her buttocks.

Four Eyes could no longer wait and rocked himself in and out of Ling Li. With Ling Li's weight from above, each thrust was deep, making Ling Li once again arch her body, her head thrown back in the air.

Four Eyes couldn't help but bury his face in Ling Li's alluring neck, leaving bite marks on it, as he whispered, "Honey, don't leave me again... I'll go crazy without you..."

The evening of the couple was long and full of twists and turns, with erotic moans that echoed through the night.

The morning sun filtered through the silk curtains of Peonies' Castle, casting golden patterns across the polished floor. Ling Li stirred beneath the embroidered duvet, her senses slowly returning to the waking world. The bed beside her was cold.

She sat up, eyes narrowing. Four Eyes was gone.

A glance at the clock confirmed it — ten o'clock, late by their usual rhythm. Ling Li swung her legs over the side of the bed, her movements swift and purposeful. Something in her chest tightened — not panic, but a quiet urgency.

She freshened up quickly, her robe replaced with a tailored blouse and soft trousers that allowed for movement. Her hair was swept into a loose braid, her expression composed but alert. Today was important. The children were arriving, and Lily's training for the Gymnastics Olympics was entering its final stretch.

As she descended the grand staircase, the scent of peonies drifted in from the garden, mingling with the faint aroma of breakfast. Butler James met her at the base, bowing slightly.

"Madam," he said, "Master Chu Yan left early this morning with the young misses. They've gone to the training grounds and have not yet returned."

Ling Li nodded, her gaze flicking toward the garden path. "They'll be back soon," she murmured, more to herself than anyone else.

She waited in the sunroom, the light spilling across the marble tiles like liquid gold. Her fingers tapped lightly against the porcelain teacup in her hand, her thoughts already drifting toward Lily. The competition was only days away. Every moment counted. She also planned to craft the elixirs as soon as possible.

Then, just as the clock struck half past ten, the sound of laughter echoed from the courtyard.

Ling Li rose.

The doors opened, and Four Eyes stepped in, his shirt damp with sweat, his hair tousled from exertion. Kim Kim and Chin Chin trailed behind him, their cheeks flushed, their ponytails bouncing, their training gear smudged with chalk and joy.

"Mom!" they cried in unison, rushing toward her.

Ling Li knelt, arms wide, catching them both in a warm embrace. "You two smell like effort," she teased, kissing their foreheads.

"We did flips!" Chin Chin declared proudly.

"And Dad tried to keep up!" Kim Kim added, giggling.

Four Eyes raised a brow. "I did more than keep up."

Ling Li smiled, her heart full. "Breakfast first. Then we go see Lily."

They ate together in the garden pavilion, the peonies swaying gently around them. The twins recounted their morning adventures with dramatic flair. At the same time, Four Eyes listened with amused patience, occasionally correcting their exaggerations with a raised brow or a chuckle.

After breakfast, they departed for the gym.

The training facility was a sleek, modern space tucked within the city's elite athletic district. As they entered, the air shifted — calm, focused, electric with ambition. The rhythmic thud of landings, the sharp commands of coaches, and the hum of determination filled the space.

Lily was on the beam.

Her body moved like a blade — precise, fluid, lethal in its grace. Coach Carlos stood nearby, arms crossed, eyes narrowed, his voice sharp but encouraging.

"Again," he said. "Your landing was half a breath late."

Lily nodded, sweat glistening on her brow. Her muscles trembled, but her eyes burned with resolve. She mounted the beam again, her movements faster this time, more aggressive. She flipped, twisted, and landed — perfectly.

Carlos didn't smile. He nodded once. "Better. But not enough."

Ling Li watched from the observation deck, her arms folded, her expression unreadable. Four Eyes stood beside her, his gaze locked on Lily's every move.

"She's pushing herself too hard," Ling Li murmured.

"She has to," Four Eyes replied. "She knows what's coming."

Below, Lily dismounted and turned toward Carlos, her breath coming in ragged gasps. "Again?"

Carlos nodded. "Until it's flawless."