

## **PROTEGE 321**

Chapter 321: NOT TO PROBE. BUT TO CLAIM

The twins pressed their faces against the glass, eyes wide. "Second sister is amazing," Kim whispered.

"She's a storm," Chin Chin said.

Lily's feet struck the mat with precision, her landing sharp, her breath controlled — but her heart was racing.

'Not enough,' she thought, echoing Coach Carlos's words. Not yet.

Lily reset her stance, chalk dust clinging to her palms, the beam looming before her like a challenge she had to conquer again and again. Her muscles ached, her joints protested, but she welcomed the pain. It meant she was pushing. It meant she was alive.

Her mind flickered back to Geneva — the moment she'd felt Solaris's reach, the way the air had twisted around her, the way her body had moved not just to win, but to survive. That memory had never left her. It was stitched into her spine, into every leap, every twist, every breath.

She mounted the beam again.

Focus. Precision. Control.

She could hear Carlos's voice in her head even before he spoke aloud.

"Don't chase perfection. Command it."

Lily moved — fluid, fierce, a storm wrapped in grace. Her body obeyed, but her thoughts were louder now.

He's watching. He's waiting. He failed once. He won't fail again.

She landed cleanly, her feet silent against the beam. Carlos nodded, but Lily barely registered it. Her eyes scanned the gym, her senses stretched to the limit. Something was wrong. Not here. Not now. But close.

He's coming.

—

Up in the observation deck, Ling Li's fingers tightened around the railing.

She had been watching Lily's form, her technique, her rhythm — but now her attention had shifted. The air had changed. It was subtle, like a thread pulled taut beneath silk. A vibration in the qi. A whisper in the ether.

She closed her eyes briefly, tuning out the sounds of the gym—the thud of landings, the bark of commands, the hum of fluorescent lights. She reached inward, past the surface of her thoughts, into the deeper currents of energy that flowed through the world.

And there it was.

A pulse.

Faint. Familiar. Foul.

Solaris.

Her eyes snapped open, scanning the gym. He wasn't here — not physically. But his presence was brushing against the edges of the space, like a shadow testing the light. Ling Li's breath slowed, her mind sharpening.

She could feel it — the pressure mounting, the air thickening. Solaris was out there. Watching. Waiting.

And Lily was dancing on the edge of a blade.

She turned to Four Eyes, who had already sensed it too. His gaze met hers, and in that silent exchange, everything was understood.

"He's probing," Ling Li murmured.

Four Eyes nodded. "Looking for cracks."

Ling Li's gaze dropped to Lily, who was now stretching, her brow furrowed, her aura flickering with unease.

"He's watching her," Ling Li said. "Not just the performance. Her spirit."

Four Eyes's jaw tightened. "Then we reinforce everything. Her training. Her protection. Her mind."

Ling Li nodded, but her heart was heavy. She had faced Solaris before. She had wounded him. But she hadn't destroyed him.

And now, he was circling again.

The twins, still seated nearby, sensed the shift. Kim Kim looked up from her juice box, her eyes narrowing. Chin Chin leaned against her sister, whispering, "Mom's worried."

"Because the demon is here," Kim Kim said.

"Oh," Chin Chin replied, blinking.

Ling Li turned to them, forcing a smile. "Everything's fine," she said gently.

But the peonies at home had begun to sway harder than the wind allowed.

And somewhere beneath the city, a bell cried once more.

The gym's atmosphere was thick with focus. Lily had just finished another flawless routine, her breath steady, her muscles trembling with exertion.

Coach Carlos nodded approvingly, but his eyes remained sharp—he was pushing her to the edge, and she was meeting him there.

Leeroy stood at the far end of the gym, arms crossed, his stance relaxed but alert. His eyes scanned the perimeter constantly, his senses tuned to any fluctuation in qi. He had been assigned to protect Lily, and he took that duty seriously. But even he didn't sense what was to come next.

It began as a flicker.

A ripple in the air — subtle, almost imperceptible. The temperature dropped by a fraction. The shadows near the ceiling stretched unnaturally. The scent of chalk and sweat was briefly replaced by something colder, metallic, and ancient.

Solaris was here.

Not in body, but in essence. A projection. A sliver of his spirit, woven through cursed qi and cloaked in silence. He hovered just beyond the veil of perception, watching Lily with eyes that burned from another realm.

Lily paused mid-stretch, her spine stiffening. Her gaze darted toward the rafters, her instincts screaming. Something was wrong.

Coach Carlos noticed the shift. "Lily?" he asked, stepping forward.

"I... I felt something," she murmured, her voice tight.

Leeroy's head snapped up. His aura flared, scanning the space. "Everyone out," he ordered, voice low but commanding. "Now."

But it was too late.

The shadows twisted, and a pulse of cursed energy surged toward Lily — silent, sharp, aimed directly at her heart. It wasn't meant to kill. Not yet. It was meant to mark her. To weaken her. To claim her.

Ling Li, still in the observation deck, felt the rupture instantly.

She didn't hesitate.

Her body blurred as she descended, her qi flaring like a beacon. She landed between Lily and the incoming strike, her palm raised, her energy forming a barrier of pure light. The cursed qi collided with her shield — and shattered.

The gym trembled. The lights flickered. The air hissed.

Solaris recoiled.

He hadn't expected Ling Li. Not here. Not now.

Ling Li's eyes narrowed, her voice cutting through the silence like a blade.

"You dare touch her in my presence?"

The shadows writhed, then retreated. The cursed essence unraveled, vanishing into the ether like smoke fleeing sunlight.

Solaris withdrew.

But not in defeat.

In calculation.

Ling Li turned to Lily, who was pale but steady. "Are you hurt?"

Lily shook her head. "No. Just... shaken."

Leeroy approached, his expression grim. "That wasn't a probe. That was a claim."

Ling Li nodded. "He's accelerating. Leeroy, you've done well — but this threat is beyond solo defense."

She reached into her sleeve and pulled out a communication talisman, pressing her qi into its core. The parchment glowed briefly before dissolving into light.

Chapter 322: SHE BLOCKED ME ONCE. SHE WON'T BLOCK ME AGAIN

"To Butler Oda," Ling Li said. "Send the First and Second Shah. And their subordinates. I want Lily guarded at all times. Secretly. No one outside this room must know."

Leeroy bowed. "Understood."

Ling Li turned back to Lily, her voice softer now. "You're not alone. Not ever."

Lily nodded, her eyes fierce despite the tremble in her hands. "I won't stop training."

Ling Li smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Good. Because he won't stop hunting."

At Peonies Mansion, the peonies swayed violently, though the wind had died.

And far beneath the city, Solaris whispered to the dark.

'She blocked me once. She won't block me again.'

The First and Second Shah arrived just after noon, cloaked in silence and authority. Their presence was unmistakable — two figures wrapped in ceremonial black and silver, their eyes sharp, their movements fluid with centuries of discipline. Behind them, their elite subordinates followed like shadows — silent, lethal, loyal.

Ling Li met them at the gym's private entrance, her expression composed but urgent.

"Lily was marked," she said without preamble. "Solaris attempted a spiritual strike, but he failed. However, he won't stop," she added.

The First Shah bowed, his voice low and resonant. "Then we shall not sleep."

The Second Shah nodded. "Lily shall be guarded in layers. No one will see us. But we will see everything."

Ling Li turned toward the training floor, where Lily was stretching beneath Coach Carlos's watchful eye. "Lily must not feel caged," she said. "She must feel supported."

"She will," the First Shah replied. "We are not walls. We are wind."

Ling Li's gaze lingered on Lily for a moment longer. Then she turned, her decision made. "I trust you. I must return. The others are arriving."

—

Far beneath the city, in the catacombs carved from silence and spite, Solaris stood before the cracked altar, his cloak billowing with residual heat. The failed strike had left him drained — but not defeated.

Solaris paced slowly, his fingers trailing across the bone-marble walls. "Ling Li blocked me," he murmured. "Again."

The Ironsworn knelt nearby, heads bowed, awaiting instruction.

Solaris's eyes burned. "Ling Li is near. Her presence fouls the air. But she will leave. And when she does..."

He turned to the second recruit — the girl with soot-rimmed eyes and a leotard stitched with runes. "You will shadow Lily. Not her form. Her rhythm. Her breath."

The girl nodded, her voice barely audible. "I will learn her soul."

Solaris smiled, cruel and quiet. "Good. Because when she falls, it must look like fate."

He raised his hand, and the bell above the fireglass cried once more.

—

Back at the gym, Lily resumed her training. The atmosphere had shifted — subtly, but unmistakably. The First and Second Shah had positioned themselves in unseen corners, their subordinates blending into the architecture, the crowd, even the staff. Their presence was invisible to most, but Lily felt it — a quiet pressure, a shield she hadn't asked for but now welcomed.

Coach Carlos barked commands, pushing her harder than ever. "Again! Your dismount was half a breath late!"

Lily nodded, sweat dripping from her brow. Her body ached, but her spirit was steel. She mounted the beam again, her movements sharper, her focus deeper.

She knew Solaris was watching.

She knew he would try again.

But she wasn't alone.

—

By mid-afternoon, Peonies' Castle was alive with arrivals.

Shi Min from Manila stepped out of his car with a radiant smile. Despite working day and night to finalize important matters, review, and approve proposals and projects, his energy remained vibrant and grounded. Shi Min was in the process of turning over his responsibilities to Wushing, who would become the deputy manager of all his businesses. Shi Min was preparing to enter a period of seclusion as per his mother's demand, making him helpless.

"Mom," Shi Min called as he entered the castle and saw Ling Li coming down the stairs.

"Shi Min, you've lost so much weight," Ling Li said, her brows furrowed with concern.

"Um," Shi Min replied quietly. He hugged his mother and kissed her lovingly on the forehead.

"You've put in a lot of hard work," Ling Li said.

Not long after, Shun and Ren arrived from Beijing, accompanied by their security team led by the ever-stoic Reginald, whose eyes scanned every corner before allowing the twins to step forward.

"Mom, Big Brother!" Ren called excitedly as he entered, giving both a big hug. "Where are Dad and the twins? Is Lily still in training?"

Shun, following closely behind Ren, also called out to Ling Li and Shi Min.

"Dad and the twins are in the back garden, and Lily is still training and will be back later. Are you both alright?" Ling Li asked, turning her attention to Shun.

"We're both well, Auntie," Shun replied politely.

Fatty from Belgium arrived next, his laughter booming like a festival drum, echoing through the grand courtyard of Peonies' Castle. His presence was impossible to miss — broad-shouldered, radiant with joy, and dressed in a vibrant embroidered jacket that clashed delightfully with the muted elegance of the estate. His arms were laden with boxes, each one steaming faintly, the unmistakable scent of dumplings wafting through the air like a culinary spell.

Behind him, Goldie trailed with quiet grace, her long coat fluttering in the breeze, his eyes scanning the perimeter with practiced precision. He gave a subtle nod to the staff and security, though she said nothing; his presence was a silent promise: Fatty was safe.

"Hello, family!" Fatty bellowed, his voice full of sunshine. "I brought a mountain of dumplings for everyone to enjoy!"

The staff lit up at his arrival, some bowing, others clapping softly. The scent of pork, chive, and mushroom filled the air, mingling with the perfume of peonies and the distant sound of wind chimes.

Just then, the garden doors burst open.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin came hopping in, their cheeks flushed, their ponytails bouncing, slingshots still dangling from their wrists like trophies of mischief. Behind them, Four Eyes followed at a leisurely pace, his shirt slightly rumpled, a faint grass stain on his sleeve, and a bemused smile tugging at his lips.

"I want to eat a lot of dumplings, Uncle Ye!" Kim Kim shouted with glee, launching herself into Fatty's arms with the precision of a gymnast and the enthusiasm of a rocket.

Chapter 323: YOU TRAINED HARD. I REWARD HARD

Fatty caught Kim Kim effortlessly, spinning once before settling her on his hip. "You'll have to fight me for the last one!" he teased, tickling her side.

"I'll win," Kim Kim declared, puffing her cheeks.

Chin Chin approached more calmly, her eyes already locked on the dumpling boxes. "Are there shrimp ones?"

"Shrimp, crab, truffle, and even chocolate," Fatty said proudly. "I raided every kitchen from Brussels to Beijing."

Four Eyes chuckled, stepping forward to shake Fatty's hand. "You always arrive like a festival."

Fatty winked. "And you always look like you just survived one."

Goldie gave a faint smile, his gaze briefly meeting Shi Min's. "The perimeter's secure. No unusual movement."

Shi Min nodded. "Good. We'll need that vigilance."

Ling Li appeared from the side corridor, her expression softening at the sight of the reunion. She walked over, brushing a kiss across Kim Kim's forehead and giving Chin Chin a gentle pat on the head.

"Uncle Ye brought dumplings," Chin Chin reported solemnly, as if delivering state news.

Ling Li smiled. "Then let's eat before the next wave arrives."

Fatty clapped his hands. "To dumplings and family!"

The courtyard filled with laughter, the scent of food, and the warmth of reunion. But beneath the joy, each adult knew the truth: this was not just a gathering. A shield was forming around Lily.

And the storm was still circling.

Then came Mushu, Rockie, Pharsa, Chatty, and El Padre from Myanmar — El Capitan fresh from his diplomatic visit to Colombia, his aura calm but commanding, his steps measured like a man who carried nations in his stride. Their arrival added a final layer to the mosaic of allies now gathered at Peonies' Castle.

The courtyard was very lively.

Peonies swayed in the breeze like dancers welcoming royalty, their petals catching the afternoon light in bursts of crimson, ivory, and gold. The air was fragrant with the scent of flowers and laughter, the atmosphere charged with reunion and purpose.

Fatty had transformed the mood hours earlier. His booming laughter still echoed through the halls, and the scent of dumplings lingered like a warm memory. He had insisted on feeding everyone — staff, guards, guests alike — until the courtyard felt less like a fortress and more like a festival.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin had claimed Fatty as their personal jungle gym, climbing over him between bites of shrimp dumplings. At the same time, Four Eyes watched with quiet amusement, occasionally flicking a dumpling from Kim Kim's hand when she tried to sneak a seventh.

Now, with the arrival of Mushu and the rest, the courtyard brimmed with energy — joyful, protective, and quietly fierce.

Ling Li stood at the center, her heart full as she greeted each one with a bow, a touch, a word.

"You're all here," she said, voice thick with emotion. "Thank you."

El Padre bowed deeply. "We came for Lily. But we stay for you."

Pharsa nodded, her eyes sharp. "We protect what matters."

Ling Li's gaze drifted toward the gym in the distance, where the sound of rhythmic landings and barked commands echoed faintly. "She's training harder than ever. And Solaris is circling."

Rockie cracked his knuckles, his grin feral. "Then let him circle. We'll be the thorns in his orbit."

The group laughed, but beneath the humor was steel.

They weren't just friends.

They were her army.

And Lily was no longer just a gymnast.

She was the flame they would shield.

Just then, the main doors opened.

Lily stepped into the courtyard, her training gear still clinging to her frame, her hair damp with sweat, her expression focused — but the moment she saw the crowd, she froze.

Her eyes widened.

Shi Min waved first, followed by Shun and Ren, who held up a banner that read "Shanghai's Star!" in glittering calligraphy. Mushu and Chatty threw confetti into the air. Pharsa offered a quiet nod. El Padre placed a hand over his heart.

And then—

Fatty broke into a run.

"LILY!" he cried, arms wide, dumpling box still in hand.

Lily blinked. "Ye — wait — what are you —"

Fatty didn't slow. He scooped Lily up mid-sentence, spinning her in a full circle before setting her down with theatrical flair. "I brought dumplings, devotion, and a dangerously handsome smile!"

Everyone stared.

"????"

Even Kim Kim dropped her dumpling.

Lily's face turned crimson. "Ye!"

Fatty grinned, utterly unrepentant. "You trained hard. I reward hard."

Everyone "...."

Ling Li, who was drinking tea, almost choked. "COUGH... COUGH... COUGH..."

Lily covered her face with both hands, overwhelmed by the cheekiness, the affection, the sheer absurdity of it all. But beneath the embarrassment, her heart swelled.

Before anyone could react, Chatty — who had been eating dumplings and waiting for the perfect moment — leaned forward with a dramatic gasp.

"Oh-ho-ho! Is that your new pickup line, Fatty? Because if dumplings are the reward, I've been emotionally training for years!"

Everyone burst into laughter.

Even Four Eyes smirked, shaking his head. "You've been emotionally eating for years, Murphy."

Chatty placed a hand over his heart. "Exactly! Emotional stamina is underrated. Where's my dumpling bouquet?"

Lily, still blushing from Fatty's dramatic entrance, couldn't help but laugh. "You're all impossible."

Fatty winked. "But irresistibly loyal."

Everyone "...."

"You're just envious," Fatty smirked, his eyes glinting with mischief.

"Heh! I get to snuggle with my wife every night," Chatty declared triumphantly, pulling Pharsa into his embrace, a wide grin plastered across his face.

Pharsa looked at him, her expression a mix of confusion and bemusement.

"...."

'What did I just get myself into?' she thought, catching a glimpse of the playful chaos unfolding around her and shaking her head.

Lily's face flushed a vibrant shade of red, reminiscent of a freshly boiled shrimp, as embarrassment washed over her.

However, she was surrounded.

By warriors. By friends. By love.

And for the first time in weeks, she felt safe.

Ling Li watched from the steps, her eyes soft. The storm was still circling.

But the fortress was built.

And Lily was ready to rise.

The moon hung low over Peonies' Castle, casting silver light across the garden paths and peony petals that shimmered like silk. The laughter from dinner had faded into quiet hums and distant footsteps. Most of the guests had retired to their rooms or gathered in small clusters, sipping tea and sharing stories under the glow of lanterns.

Chapter 324: SHE IS SURROUNDED, BUT NOT INVINCIBLE

Lily stepped out onto the veranda, her hair loose, her training jacket replaced with a soft robe. The night air was cool against her skin, but her heart was still warm from the day's surprises.

She didn't expect him to be waiting.

Fatty sat on the edge of the koi pond, legs crossed, a dumpling box beside him — half-eaten, of course. His jacket was gone, replaced by a simple shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows. He looked up as she approached, his grin immediate.

"I saved the last dumpling," he said, holding it up like a trophy. "For the champion."

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

"And you're radiant," he replied, patting the stone beside him. "Sit. Before I eat your prize."

She sat, tucking her legs beneath her, the soft rustle of peonies brushing against the wind. For a moment, they didn't speak. The koi swam lazily beneath them, and the lanterns above swayed like sleepy fireflies.

"You really surprised me today," Lily said finally, her voice quiet.

Fatty leaned back on his palms. "Good. I wanted to. You've been carrying too much alone."

She looked at him, eyes searching. "I didn't know you'd come."

"I didn't know I wouldn't," he said. "You're not just training for gold. You're dancing through danger. And I'd rather be here than anywhere else."

Lily's throat tightened. She hadn't cried in weeks — not since Geneva. But something about his presence, his ease, his unwavering loyalty — it cracked something open.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

Fatty didn't flinch. He reached out, took her hand, and squeezed it gently. "Good. Fear means you're awake. But you're not alone. Not with me. Not with all of them."

She nodded, blinking fast. "You made everyone laugh today."

"I make everyone laugh every day," he said proudly. "It's my superpower. That and dumpling diplomacy."

Lily laughed, the sound soft and real.

Fatty leaned closer, his voice dropping. "But with you... I don't just want to make you laugh. I want to be the reason you feel safe enough to cry. To rest. To breathe."

Lily looked at him, stunned. Her heart thudded once, hard.

"You're being serious," she said.

"Terrifying, isn't it?" he grinned. "Don't worry. I'll go back to being cheeky in five seconds."

She smiled, then leaned her head against his shoulder. "Make it ten."

They sat like that, wrapped in moonlight and quiet, the koi drifting below, the peonies swaying around them like guardians of the night.

And somewhere far beneath the city, Solaris stirred.

But for now, Lily was safe.

And she was loved.

—

The Next Day.

The gym was quiet, but not still.

Lily moved across the floor with the precision of a blade — her body honed, her breath measured, her focus absolute. Every leap, every twist, every landing was a declaration: she was ready. Not just for the Olympics, but for whatever Solaris dared to send.

Around her, the air shimmered with silent vigilance.

Coach Carlos barked commands, his voice sharp and rhythmic. Shi Min stood near the vault, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. Shun and Ren monitored the perimeter with Reginald's security team, their movements crisp and coordinated. Goldie leaned against the far wall, his fingers resting near his concealed blade. At the same time, El Padre, together with El Capitan and Pharsa, quietly exchanged signals in a language older than war.

And above them all, the First and Second Shah watched from the shadows — one perched in the rafters, the other cloaked near the entrance, their subordinates scattered like ghosts across the facility. Their presence was invisible to most, but their eyes missed nothing.

Which is why they saw it first.

A ripple.

A distortion in the air near the northeast wall — subtle, deliberate, wrong.

Two Ironsworns emerged from the veil of cursed qi, their bodies cloaked in illusion, their steps silent. They didn't attack. Not yet. They were testing the waters — measuring Lily's rhythm, her aura, her vulnerability.

But they had miscalculated.

The First Shah moved before breath could be drawn. One moment, he was a shadow, the next, he was a storm—his blade slicing through the illusion with a hiss of silver light. The cursed qi shattered, revealing the Ironsworns mid-step, their eyes wide with shock.

The Second Shah struck from behind, his palm glowing with containment seals. One Ironsworn collapsed instantly, his limbs bound by invisible threads. The other tried to flee — but Goldie was already there, his blade pressed to his throat before he could vanish.

Coach Carlos didn't flinch. "Lily, keep going," he said calmly.

Lily nodded, her heart pounding, but her form never faltered. She flipped, landed, and reset. Her allies were here. She was protected.

Fatty, seated near the observation deck with Kim Kim and Chin Chin on either side, leaned forward. "That's what I call a warm-up."

Chatty, munching on a dumpling, added, "If that's the appetizer, Solaris better bring dessert."

Four Eyes stood beside Ling Li, his gaze locked on the scene below.

"They're probing. Solaris is getting desperate."

Ling Li's jaw tightened. She had been preparing to craft the Nirvana Elixir. This rare and sacred tonic could restore spiritual balance and elevate physical resilience. She had also planned to refine body conditioning pills for the others, knowing the battles ahead would demand more than loyalty and skill.

But now, with Solaris circling Lily like a vulture, she couldn't afford a distraction.

She turned to Butler Oda, who stood silently behind her. "Delay the elixir," she said. "And the pills. Until after the Olympics."

Oda bowed. "Understood."

Ling Li's eyes returned to Lily, who was now mid-routine, her body glowing faintly with qi resonance. "She's the priority. Until she's safe, nothing else matters."

The Ironsworns were dragged from the gym, their illusions stripped, their curses bound. The First Shah whispered something to the Second, who nodded and vanished into the ether — already hunting the source of the intrusion.

And far beneath the city, Solaris hissed.

His fingers curled around the edge of the altar, his eyes burning with fury.

'She is surrounded. But she is not invincible.'

Solaris turned to the third Ironsworn, a silent girl with eyes like obsidian and a voice that could mimic anyone.

"Next time," he said, "we don't test. We infiltrate."

But above ground, in the light of loyalty and love, Lily trained harder.

And the flame they would shield burned brighter than ever.

Chapter 325: THAT'S MY GIRL

The final rehearsal took place under dimmed lights; the stadium was quiet, except for the rhythmic thud of Lily's landings and the soft commands of Coach Carlos. The air was heavy with anticipation.

Every movement Lily made was precise, honed, and deliberate — her body a weapon, her spirit a flame.

Lily mounted the beam one last time, her breath steady, her muscles trembling from repetition. The double-tucked salto backward with two full twists — her most difficult routine — was the final test.

She launched.

Time slowed.

Her body tucked, twisted, spun—a blur of grace and power. She landed with a whisper, her feet silent against the beam, her arms extended like wings.

Carlos exhaled. "Perfect!"

Lily didn't smile. She simply nodded, her eyes sharp. "Tomorrow, I make it count."

### Ling Li's Formation

While Lily rehearsed, Ling Li stood atop the stadium's highest balcony, her robes fluttering in the wind. She traced ancient sigils into the air, her fingers glowing with qi. The protective formation she was crafting wasn't just spiritual — it was ancestral, woven from the Li family's deepest arts.

Golden threads of energy stretched across the venue, embedding themselves into the walls, the beams, the very foundation. The formation would detect cursed qi, distort illusions, and repel spiritual interference.

But Ling Li's heart was heavy.

She had planned to begin crafting the Nirvana Elixir and the body conditioning pills for the others. They would need them soon. But with Solaris circling Lily like a hawk, she couldn't afford to divide her focus.

'After the Olympics,' she thought. 'First, we shield the flame.'

### Opening Ceremony: Asian Gymnastics Olympics

The stadium roared to life.

Flags from across Asia waved in synchronized choreography. Drummers pounded rhythms that echoed through the arena like war chants. Dancers spun in midair, suspended by invisible wires, their costumes shimmering like constellations.

The announcer's voice boomed:

"Welcome to the 2025 Asian Gymnastics Olympics! Where strength meets grace, and legends are born!"

Spotlights swept across the crowd. Delegates bowed. Athletes stood tall.

And in the center of it all, Lily waited — her uniform crisp, her gaze unwavering.

Fatty, seated with the rest of the allies, whispered to Chatty, "She's going to break the sky."

Chatty wiped a tear. "I brought tissues. For the judges."

Pharsa, who was seated beside Chatty, "I never thought my husband to be such a crybaby," she teased.

"Honey, this is only for family. Please don't make fun of me," Chatty replied, feeling aggravated, which amused Pharsa.

Lily's Performance: The Balance Beam

The arena fell silent.

Lily stepped onto the beam, her breath slow, her heart steady. The crowd leaned forward. The judges adjusted their glasses. Cameras zoomed in.

She began.

Her movements were fluid — each step a whisper, each turn a declaration. Then came the moment.

Lily launched into the double-tucked salto backward with two full twists.

The crowd gasped.

Her body spun — tight, fast, impossibly controlled. She landed with surgical precision, her feet kissing the beam, her arms slicing the air in perfect symmetry.

The judges blinked. One dropped his pen. Another whispered, "That's... not human."

The crowd erupted.

Cheers. Screams. Tears.

Fatty stood on his chair. "THAT'S MY GIRL!"

Even Coach Carlos, stoic as ever, allowed himself a smile.

But Lily didn't celebrate.

Because she felt it.

The Third Ironsworn

The girl appeared beside Lily like a ripple in reality — her form cloaked in mimicry, her aura masked. The third Ironsworn had been watching, waiting, studying Lily's rhythm, her breath, her qi.

Her plan was simple: during Lily's final pose, she would bind her spirit with a cursed thread, rendering her unconscious and vulnerable to her will. Solaris would then extract her soul fragment, severing her connection to the ancestral line.

But she hadn't accounted for the formation.

Ling Li's sigils flared.

The beam glowed.

The cursed thread snapped mid-air, recoiling like a wounded serpent.

The Third Ironsworn staggered, her illusion unraveling. The First Shah descended from the rafters like a blade, his seal already burning. The Second Shah emerged from the shadows, his palm glowing with containment.

The crowd didn't see.

But Lily did.

She turned, her eyes locking onto the Ironsworn's unraveling form.

"You're too late," she whispered.

The Ironsworn vanished in a burst of cursed smoke; her mission failed.

Aftermath

Lily bowed.

The crowd roared.

The judges scribbled furiously.

Ling Li exhaled, her formation pulsing with light.

Fatty sobbed into Chatty's shoulder. "She's going to need a dumpling throne."

Everyone "...."

'Who wants a dumpling throne?'

Even the young twins shook their little heads as if they couldn't fathom thinking about it.

—

And far beneath the city, Solaris screamed.

But the flame had not been captured.

It had been witnessed.

And it was rising.

The stadium was still vibrating from the roar of Lily's performance.

Judges were still scribbling, some with trembling hands. One leaned back in his chair, muttering, "I've never seen that land so clean. Not in twenty years." Another wiped his glasses, as if clarity might help him process what he'd just witnessed.

The audience was electric — cheering, crying, chanting her name. Flags waved. Cameras flashed. Commentators stumbled over their words, trying to capture the moment without diminishing it.

Lily stood on the mat, chest heaving, arms raised. Her eyes scanned the crowd — not for glory, but for her people.

She saw Fatty first, standing on his chair, fists in the air, tears streaming down his cheeks. "THAT'S MY GIRL!" he shouted again, voice cracking.

Chatty beside him was sobbing into a dumpling wrapper. "She's a celestial being! I'm emotionally compromised!"

Shi Min clapped with quiet pride. Shun and Ren exchanged a high-five.

El Padre bowed his head, whispering a prayer of protection.

Ling Li stood on the balcony, her silhouette framed by moonlight and the distant roar of the crowd. Her eyes never left the arena below, where Lily had just bowed to the world — a warrior cloaked in grace, no longer trembling, no longer hidden.

A single tear traced down Ling Li's cheek, silent and slow. It wasn't just pride. It was a memory. It was the echo of every sleepless night, every whispered prayer, every moment she had held Lily's hand through storms no one else had seen.

But her joy was tempered.

Because she felt it.

The air had shifted — subtly, darkly. A ripple in the qi. A whisper in the ether.

Solaris was watching.

Four Eyes stepped beside her, his presence grounding, his warmth steady. He didn't speak at first. He reached for her hand, lacing his fingers through hers with quiet certainty.

Chapter 326: SOLARIS: DO OR DIE

"Lily is magnificent," Four Eyes said softly.

Ling Li nodded, her gaze still locked on the arena. "He's here."

Four Eyes didn't flinch. He had already sensed it. He had been watching Ling Li's breath, the way her shoulders stiffened, the way her aura bristled like a blade unsheathed.

He turned to her, his voice low but firm. "Don't forget... we are all here too."

Ling Li looked at Four Eyes, then really took a look. His eyes held no fear, only resolve. The kind that had carried them through exile, through war, through the quiet battles of parenthood and prophecy.

She squeezed his hand, her voice barely a whisper. "I know."

And in that moment, the storm circling Lily felt just a little farther away.

Because Ling Li was not alone.

And neither was the flame.

Solaris: The Final Retaliation

Far beneath the city, in the catacombs carved from vengeance and bone, Solaris stood before the altar of fireglass. His cloak was torn. His eyes burned with fury. The Third Ironsworn had failed. The formation had held. The flame had danced beyond his reach.

But he was not done.

He raised his hand, and the altar cracked.

"I gave you shadows," he hissed. "Now I give you storms."

From the depths, he summoned his final weapon — a cursed entity born of fractured souls and bound to his will. It had no name — only hunger.

It would not infiltrate.

It would consume.

Solaris stepped into the circle, his body dissolving into a form of cursed qi. He would not send others. He would go himself.

Do or die.

The Final Flight: Uneven Bars

It was the fifth and last day of the Gymnastics Olympics. The stadium lights dimmed slightly, casting a soft halo over the uneven bars. The crowd hushed. The announcer's voice echoed through the arena:

"Next up — representing the Philippines — Lily Li!"

A ripple of anticipation swept through the audience. Phones lifted. Cameras zoomed. The live stream surged past a million viewers in seconds.

In the stands, Fatty clutched his dumpling box like a sacred relic, his eyes wide, his heart thudding. "She's going to fly," he whispered.

Coach Carlos stood near the judges' table, arms folded tightly, his jaw clenched. He had trained her for this moment — for this exact routine. But now, he could only watch.

Lily stepped forward.

Her fingers curled around the chalked bar. Her breath slowed. Her eyes locked onto the metal, but her mind was already beyond it — mapping the air, the angles, the rhythm.

She launched.

Her body arched into a toe-on Shaposhnikova, transitioning seamlessly into a Pak salto — her legs slicing the air like twin blades. The crowd gasped. She caught the low bar with a whisper of impact, then swung into a Maloney half, twisting mid-air before regripping the high bar with surgical precision.

Then came the storm.

She executed a full-twisting double layout dismount — two full rotations, her body stretched like a ribbon of steel, her twist so fast it blurred. She landed with a thud so clean it echoed.

Silence.

Then —

Explosion.

The crowd erupted. Flags waved. Children screamed. Commentators stumbled over their words.

"Lily Li just redefined the standard!" one shouted.

"She didn't land. She descended," another gasped.

The judges stared, stunned. One dropped his pen. Another leaned forward, whispering, "That was... that was textbook perfection."

The live stream chat exploded:

At home in Naga, Mr. and Mrs. Li sat surrounded by relatives, their living room glowing with the broadcast. Mrs. Li clutched her husband's hand, tears streaming down her cheeks. "She did it," she whispered. "She really did it."

Mr. Li nodded, his voice thick. "She's our granddaughter. And now she belongs to history."

Everyone in the living room happily cheered.

In another quiet home, Mr. and Mrs. Xu watched from their modest screen, wrapped in blankets, their health too fragile for travel. But their eyes sparkled.

"She's grown," Mr. Xu said softly. "She's become everything Ling Li hoped."

Back in the stadium, Fatty was sobbing openly, his face buried in Chatty's shoulder.

"She's a comet," he choked. "She's my comet."

Chatty, equally overwhelmed, nodded. "I'm emotionally dehydrated."

Coach Carlos turned away, wiping his eyes. He had never cried in public.

But today, he did.

Lily stood on the mat, chest heaving, arms raised. Her eyes scanned the crowd, locking onto her people — her flamekeepers.

Ling Li stood on the balcony, her hand over her heart, her aura glowing faintly. Four Eyes beside her whispered, "She's untouchable."

And for a moment, even Solaris — watching from exile, cloaked in cursed qi—was silent.

Because the flame had not just danced.

It had soared.

The Storm Breaks

Back at the stadium, the celebration was still unfolding. Lily had just stepped off the mat, her body trembling, her heart full. Coach Carlos embraced her, whispering, "You did it. You made history."

But then—

The lights flickered.

The air dropped ten degrees.

The formation flared.

Ling Li's eyes snapped open. "He's here."

The First Shah appeared beside her. "He's coming in full form."

The Second Shah was already moving, his subordinates activating the secondary seals.

Solaris emerged from the shadows of the rafters, his body cloaked in cursed flame, his eyes locked on Lily.

The crowd didn't see him.

But Lily did.

She turned, her breath catching, her aura flaring instinctively.

Solaris raised his hand, and the cursed entity surged forward — a wave of black fire aimed directly at her.

But before it could reach—

The Final Stand: A Dome of Flame and Will

Ling Li descended like lightning, her overcoat trailing golden fire, her eyes burning with ancestral fury. Her palm struck the air with a thunderclap, and the protective formation exploded outward — an incandescent dome of ancestral light that rippled across the stadium like a tidal wave of divine qi.

The cursed entity screamed, recoiling violently as its essence collided with the barrier. Its form twisted, shrieked, and began to unravel.

Solaris snarled from the rafters, his body cloaked in cursed flame, his voice a hiss of hatred. "You cannot shield her forever!"

But he was wrong.

Fatty leapt from the stands, dumpling box flying, tears streaking his cheeks. "You want her? You go through me!" he roared, planting himself between Lily and the cursed blast, arms wide, heart thunderous.

Chatty followed, the Enfield scarf wrapped dramatically around his neck, wielding a chopstick like a sword. "I've trained for this moment! I watched every martial arts movie twice!"

Chapter 327: WE'RE NOT HERE TO FIGHT. BUT TO FINISH

Goldie was already beside Lily, his blade drawn, his stance lethal. His eyes locked on Solaris with surgical precision. "You won't touch her," he said, voice like steel.

The First and Second Shah encircled Solaris, their seals glowing with ancient power, their eyes unblinking. Their subordinates moved like shadows, forming a ring of silent guardians around Lily.

Shi Min vaulted from the lower deck, his fists wrapped in qi-threaded cloth. "You don't get to threaten my sister," he growled, his aura flaring with protective rage.

Four Eyes stepped beside Ling Li, his hand on her shoulder, his other already forming a counter-seal. "We end this," he said, voice low, steady.

El Padre emerged from the far corridor, his ceremonial staff glowing with divine light. "You face not just warriors," he intoned. "You face a family."

El Capitan, his uniform torn from earlier skirmishes, stood tall beside Mushu, who had already begun channeling a disruption wave through the floor. "We're not here to fight," Mushu said, his voice trembling with power. "We're here to finish."

Solaris roared, unleashing a final blast of cursed qi — a spiraling inferno of hatred and desperation aimed directly at Lily.

But Lily, standing at the center of her allies, raised her arms.

The beam beneath her glowed, pulsing with her lineage, her will, her unbreakable spirit.

Her qi surged — resonating with the formation, with every soul who had ever protected her, with every ancestor who had ever whispered her name.

The cursed blast shattered against her aura like glass against stone.

Solaris staggered, his form flickering.

The First Shah struck — his blade slicing through the cursed veil.

The Second Shah sealed — his incantation binding Solaris's essence in a ring of light.

Ling Li stepped forward, her voice calm but thunderous. "You failed in Geneva. You failed in Shanghai. And now, you fail here."

She whispered the final incantation.

Solaris screamed.

And vanished.

Banished.

Broken.

But not destroyed.

Not yet.

The dome of light faded, leaving behind silence, breath, and the scent of scorched air.

Lily collapsed to her knees, trembling but untouched.

Fatty rushed to her side, wrapping her in his arms, sobbing openly. "You're safe. You're safe."

Shi Min knelt beside them, placing a hand on her back. "You're not alone."

Ling Li stood above them all, her robes still glowing, her eyes fierce.

Four Eyes beside her, his hand still on her shoulder, whispered, "She's more than ready."

And in that moment, the war paused.

Because the flame had not just survived.

It had burned through the dark.

The Awards Ceremony: A Crown of Flame

The stadium was bathed in golden light, its vast ceiling glittering with suspended lanterns and drifting confetti. The final scores had been tallied, the judges had conferred, and now the ceremonial envelopes — heavy with history — were held by dignitaries from across Asia.

Lily stood among the finalists, her red and blue uniform pristine, her posture regal despite the exhaustion in her limbs. Her breath was slow, deliberate. She wasn't waiting for validation.

She was waiting for closure.

The announcer stepped forward, voice trembling with reverence.

"And the gold medal for the Women's Overall... goes to..."

A pause.

"...Lily Li of the Republic of the Philippines."

The crowd erupted.

Cheers thundered through the arena. Confetti burst from the rafters like a sky rejoicing. The Philippine national anthem began to play, but it was drowned out by the sound of thousands chanting her name.

Filipinos across the globe who had journeyed to witness history—families, students, nurses, artists, OFWs, and elders wrapped in barong and shawl—rose to their feet as one. From the highest tiers of the stadium to the front rows near the mat, their voices united in a thunderous chant that shook the air:

"LILY!!!"

"LILY!!!"

"MABUHAY PILIPINAS!!!"

"MABUHAY SI LILY!!!"

Philippine flags waved proudly among them—large ones unfurled like sails, smaller ones clutched to hearts, stitched into jackets, painted on cheeks. The red and blue shimmered under the stadium lights, the golden sun and stars glowing like ancestral fire.

Some wept openly. Others clapped until their palms stung. A few knelt, whispering prayers of gratitude. And many stood in awe, watching Lily — their Lily — crowned in gold, her name echoing across continents.

In Dubai, Toronto, Tokyo, and Rome, Filipino communities gathered around screens in living rooms, cafés, and embassy halls, erupting in cheers as the live stream captured the moment. In Manila, jeepneys honked in celebration. In Mindanao, church bells rang.

She wasn't just a gymnast.

She was a symbol.

A daughter of the islands.

A flame that rose from the heart of the archipelago and lit the world.

Fatty leapt from his seat, arms flailing, tears streaming. "SHE DID IT! SHE'S A LEGEND!"

Chatty sobbed into a second dumpling wrapper. "I need emotional CPR! Someone hold me!"

Coach Carlos closed his eyes, a rare smile breaking across his face. His shoulders trembled. "She earned every breath of this," he whispered, voice cracking.

Shi Min stood with his fists clenched and his chin high, pride radiating from him like heat. "That's my sister," he murmured, eyes glistening.

Shun and Ren, always at Lily's side, embraced each other tightly. Ren whispered, "She did it," while Shun nodded, his throat locked with emotion, unable to speak.

Pharsa knelt beside Kim Kim and Chin Chin, her arms wrapped protectively around them. The twins were bouncing in place, their eyes wide with wonder.

"She's glowing!" Kim Kim cried.

"She's a phoenix!" Chin Chin added, clapping wildly.

Pharsa smiled, her voice gentle. "She's everything she was meant to be."

Up on the balcony, Ling Li stood tall, her coat catching the wind like wings. Her expression was unreadable, carved from years of discipline and war — but her eyes shimmered with pride, and her hand trembled slightly at her side.

Four Eyes stood beside her, silent, steady. He reached out and took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. "She's safe," he said quietly. "She's seen."

Ling Li nodded, her gaze locked on Lily. "She's ready."

Lily stepped forward, her hands steady as the medal was placed around her neck. The gold gleamed against her skin, but it was her eyes — sharp, clear, unyielding — that held the room.

She turned toward the crowd, toward her allies, toward her mother.

And she bowed.

Not just to the judges.

But to her family.

To her protectors.

To the war that had not yet ended.

And in that moment, the flame was not just crowned.

It was consecrated.

#### Chapter 328: SOLARIS: EXILE AND FURY

Far from the glittering stadium above, deep within the city's skeletal remains, Solaris knelt amid the ruins of his shattered altar, a once-hallowed place now steeped in despair.

The chamber sat in oppressive silence, the only sound the slow, rhythmic drip of cursed ichor from his wounds, each drop an echo of his torment. His tattered cloak billowed around him like shadows, scorched remnants clinging desperately to his frame. His body shimmered erratically with chaotic qi —

veins darkened like twisted roots, bones cracked and splintered, and his cultivation core lay fractured, glinting like shattered obsidian in the dim light.

The malevolent entity he had sought to summon had been repelled, and he was left with the bitter taste of failure.

His Ironsworns had faltered, their loyalty now a distant memory.

His carefully laid infiltration was exposed, his secrets laid bare.

Humiliation wrapped around him like a shroud, yet he stood firm, refusing to be undone.

Ragged breaths tore from his lips, each inhalation a dagger of pain. With trembling fingers, he pressed his palm against the cracked fireglass altar, whispering incantations in a tongue older than the stars, older than mercy. The altar responded with a feeble pulse — weak, like the last flickering beat of a dying heart — before it erupted into a sickly glow that illuminated the ruins with an eerie light.

Fragments of cursed qi slithered toward him like serpents — remnants of rituals gone awry, echoes of anguish, shards of forgotten souls. They clung to him with relentless desperation, festering parasites siphoning his broken essence.

With every agonizing moment, Solaris absorbed their twisted energy; his body convulsed as agonizing rapture twisted through him, his spine arching against the wrath of his own turmoil. His veins darkened further, and his aura faltered and flickered like a candle besieged by a tempest.

"I was denied," Solaris hissed, voice raw and laced with venomous determination. "But I was not defeated."

With slow, painstaking deliberation, he turned his gaze to the sole remaining Ironsworn — a childlike figure with hollow eyes and a voice that grieved with the sweetness of a past that once was. She stood there, frozen in time, her form wavering between illusion and reality, poised for his command.

Solaris's eyes blazed, fevered and unhinged. His obsession with Lily consumed him completely, a blinding eclipse over his mind that destroyed reason and drowned strategy in a torrent of madness. The woman once seen as a conquest morphed into an obsession, one that bound his very will.

"You will be my echo," he whispered, his voice trembling, tainted with insanity. "You will follow her footsteps. You will mimic her voice. And when the world cannot distinguish between us..."

A cruel smile, jagged and broken, crept across his face.

"...I will seize everything."

Yet, as the words left his lips, his body betrayed him. His legs buckled like rotten timber, and his qi sputtered like a dying flame. The altar's sickly glow waned, dimming as he fell to one knee, a bitter cough forcing blood laced with cursed ash through his lips. His cultivation had suffered severe wounds — perhaps beyond the reach of salvation. The core that once surged with vibrant energy now lay dormant, a lifeless husk begging for restoration.

Movement eluded him.

Not yet.

Solaris hammered his fist against the altar, the sound reverberating through the depths of the chamber, echoing like a fierce wail of despair. "I need time!" he growled, desperation clawing at his throat.

"Time to rebuild. Time to return!"

But time, the ever-merciless foe, stood against him.

With his abilities stagnated, he was rendered impotent. He could not strike; he could not possess; he could not infiltrate — and the thought gnawed at him, driving him deeper into madness.

Plans began to twist and coil within his mind — desperate, depraved, reckless. Mediums, proxies, echoes of his dark will. He envisioned cursed artifacts spiraling toward Lily, entwining themselves in her life. He would invade her dreams, whisper through mirrors, and poison the very air she inhaled if that was what it took.

Yet one truth bound him: he could not touch her.

Not yet.

And that cold, unwavering reality gnawed at him like an insatiable rot.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!"

A scream erupted from his throat, the sound fracturing the stillness of the catacombs, sending dust drifting from the ancient bones of forgotten walls.

The Ironsworn remained unwavering, unperturbed.

Solaris leaned heavily against the altar, breath shallow, eyes wild with a mixture of fury and desperation. "I will have her," he breathed, the words barely a whisper laced with fervent promise. "Even if it takes my last breath."

The altar pulsed once more, a heartbeat of its own.

And in that moment, the darkness listened, hungry for the chaos to come.

Backstage Reunion: The Flame Comes Home

Behind the scenes of the arena, a vibrant whirlwind of activity unfolded — staff darted about like busy bees, athletes stretched and cooled down, their muscles still pulsing with adrenaline. At the same time, reporters jockeyed for interviews, their notepads clutched tightly like lifelines.

In the midst of this energetic chaos, Lily stood still, her gold medal gleaming dully against her chest, its weight a tangible reminder of her triumph. She took a moment, savoring the soothing rhythm of her breath as it gradually slowed.

Suddenly, the door burst open with a bang.

"LILY!" Fatty's voice rang through the corridor like a firework shattering the quiet.

Lily barely had time to pivot before Fatty scooped her into his arms, spinning her in exuberant circles, crumbs from his beloved dumplings still sprinkled on his collar like confetti. "You did it! You actually did it! I was ready to faint, cry, propose, and scream all at once!"

A laugh tumbled from Lily's lips, breathless and filled with joy, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. "You're absolutely ridiculous."

"I'm your ridiculous," he replied cheekily, resting his forehead gently against hers, his eyes shining with pride. "And you're my legend."

As if summoned by that declaration, the rest of the family and friends cascaded in behind them, a tidal wave of elation washing over the room.

Shi Min reached her first, wrapping her in a tight, heartfelt brotherly hug, his voice a low and proud whisper. "You were fire, Lily. You were our fire."

Chapter 329: A VICTORY IN MOTION

Shun and Ren followed close behind, their arms laden with a Bounty of snacks and colorful, celebratory banners. With a cheeky wink, Ren handed her a water bottle. "Hydrate, champion," she quipped. Shun chimed in with a laugh, "We've already started planning your statue!"

Everyone laughed out loud.

"It has to be made of one hundred percent gold!" Chatty declared.

Coach Carlos approached last, moving slowly, his energy spent. His eyes glistened with unshed tears, his voice thick with emotion. "You didn't just win," he said softly, "you became."

Lily enveloped him in a tight embrace, whispering, "Thank you for believing in me when I didn't."

Pharsa entered with the twins, Kim Kim and Chin Chin, bouncing with glee. "Second sister! You were like a superhero!" Kim Kim exclaimed. "But prettier!" added Chin Chin, her eyes wide with admiration. "And you didn't fall once!"

Mushu, usually stoic, offered a rare smile, nodding silently from the doorway. El Padre and El Capitan exchanged looks of pride. At the same time, Goldie, ever the planner, began distributing celebratory sweets from a backpack prepared way earlier in Geneva, the sugary treasures spilling out like a treasure trove.

Four Eyes stood beside Ling Li, who had just arrived, her overcoat still aglow from the final flare of the event. She approached Lily without haste, her expression one of warmth and understanding.

Without a word, she placed both hands firmly on Lily's shoulders, peering deep into her eyes.

"You are safe, and congratulations, Champ!" Ling Li said, her voice steady and filled with love.

At last, Lily's tears fell freely, warmth pooling in her chest.

"Thank you, Mom, I couldn't have done it without you," she whispered, her heart swelling with gratitude.

The Journey Home: A Victory in Motion

The convoy rolled through the city like a parade of stars, bright and flashing against the twilight backdrop. Cars honked merrily, and bystanders waved enthusiastically, their smiles infectious. Philippine flags fluttered from windows and balconies throughout the Filipino community in Shanghai, transforming the streets into a vibrant tapestry of colors. The atmosphere was electric with celebration

— vendors handed out free \*taho, children twirled and danced in the alleyways, while joyous elders clapped from their porches, their faces beaming with pride.

Inside the lead van, Lily sat between Fatty and Shi Min, her medal resting securely in her lap, a radiant bond of past effort and current joy. Fatty was narrating the day's events to his parents on the phone with all the flair of a dramatic radio host, his voice animated and lively.

"And then she flew — I mean, literally — and the judges were like, 'We are not worthy!' And I turned to them and said, 'I told you she's a comet!'"

Fatty's father chuckled, his voice filled with good-natured banter. "You're lucky she didn't land right on you."

From the back seat, Chatty chimed in, "I'm still emotionally recovering. I need three dumplings and a hug!"

In rhythm with the bubble of joy, the twins sang victorious songs, Pharsa guiding them with a gentle sway, their laughter rippling through the air.

Shun and Ren were already glued to their screens, diligently editing a highlight reel that would immortalize this moment.

Coach Carlos sat quietly, a rare smile illuminating his face as he watched his star student bask in the golden glow she had earned.

In the second car, Ling Li and Four Eyes rode together, their fingers intertwined, eyes scanning the horizon — not searching for challenges, but dreaming of the bright future ahead.

Tonight, a grand celebration awaited them.

There would be an abundance of food, infectious music, rippling laughter, and countless stories shared.

But more than anything, what filled the air was love.

Because Lily wasn't just returning home with gold.

She was coming home as a fierce flame that had weathered the storm.

And everyone who had guarded her — who had fought for her, cried for her, and believed in her — was now enveloped by her radiant light, shining brightly together.

The estate shimmered with laughter and radiant light, a tapestry of joy woven into the evening.

Long tables sprawled across the garden, overflowing with a feast fit for royalty — succulent lechon glistening under the golden glow of lanterns, dumplings piled high like precious gems, and trays filled to the brim with \*kare-kare, crispy lumpia, \*dinuguan, savory pancit (noodles), chicken-pork adobo, bicol express, and balut, and many more.

Luscious mango tarts, halo-halo, and \*sorbetes ice creams for desserts, each one a delightful treasure. Tonight, a vibrant celebration of Filipino culinary artistry unfolded.

Champagne bubbled over in the glasses, the symphony of clinking resonating in every nook of the gathering. Fairy lights twinkled overhead, casting a warm, enchanting glow. At the same time, the air was alive with the intoxicating melodies of laughter, the sweet scent of jasmine intertwining with the savory aroma of roasted garlic.

At the heart of it all sat Lily, an effulgent smile lighting up her face, her medal cradled safely in a plush velvet box beside her plate, her cheeks glowing from the warmth of shared love and laughter. Fatty, ever the entertainer, sat beside her, comically reenacting her uneven bars routine with chopsticks and a napkin, gesturing wildly.

"She executed a double twist — like this!" he exclaimed, feigning grace before dramatically pretending to land, "and then descended like a goddess from the heavens!"

Chatty, blissfully indulging in his third plate of dumplings, added with mock seriousness, "I was so moved, I forgot how to chew!"

The twins flitted between tables, their voices ringing with joy as they sang spontaneous victory songs, while Pharsa, embodying a rare softness, kept a watchful eye over the exuberance around her.

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\*Taho is a beloved Filipino snack and breakfast dish made from fresh, silken tofu, sweet arribal (brown sugar syrup), and chewy tapioca pearls

\*Kare-Kare is a Filipino dish featuring a thick, savory peanut sauce. It is generally made from a base of stewed oxtail, beef tripe, pork hocks, calves' feet, pig's feet or trotters, various cuts of pork, beef stew meat, and occasionally offal.

\*Dinuguan, from the root word dugo meaning "blood," is a savory Filipino stew made with pork meat and/or offal simmered in a dark, rich gravy of pig's blood, vinegar, garlic, and chili. It is a classic comfort food in the Philippines, though its rich, dark appearance often earns it the nickname "chocolate meat" for those less familiar with the dish.

\*Sorbetes in the Philippines refers to a traditional ice cream originating in the country, uniquely characterized by the use of coconut milk and/or carabao milk.

### Chapter 330: THE GIFT RUSH

Suddenly, from the far end of the garden, Ling Li and Four Eyes appeared, moving with an elegant, almost ethereal grace.

They approached slowly, each holding a meticulously lacquered tray brimming with vibrant red packets — crimson envelopes adorned with intricate golden phoenixes and protective seals. As they entered, the atmosphere shifted, reverence washing over the crowd like a gentle wave.

"The moment has come!" Ling Li's voice echoed, clear and resonant. "Tonight, we honor not just Lily's triumph, but the unwavering loyalty, courage, and dedication of every heart that stood with us."

Four Eyes, his eyes glinting with sincerity, added, "You didn't just guard the flame; you became part of its very essence."

The couple began to distribute the red packets — each thick envelope handed over with care, a symbol of gratitude and shared triumph. At the same time, the treasury department of their group of companies was also busy distributing electronic red packets to all employees.

As the first recipient tore open their packet, a gasp sliced through the air. "Oh my God! Is this real?!"

Another voice rose, filled with disbelief and glee, "I got one too!!!"

A surge of excitement rippled through the crowd, as people leapt from their seats, laughter and tears of joy mingling freely, many bowing in gratitude for the unexpected blessing. The envelopes weren't mere gifts; they held the power to transform lives.

One security guard clutched his packet to his chest, eyes shimmering with emotion. "I can finally send my fifth daughter to college!"

"Who asked you to have seven daughters?" the second security guard quipped cheekily, dialing his wife to share the joyous news.

The first security guard could only stare in bewilderment.

"..."

Nearby, a kitchen staff member leaned over, whispering in awe, "This is beyond a bonus; it's a true blessing."

Ling Li allowed a gentle smile to spread across her face, her eyes glistening with warmth. "You earned every bit of it."

Four Eyes nodded solemnly, his gaze sweeping over the crowd, encapsulating the spirit of the moment. "And we will always remember."

Meanwhile, Shi Min and Ren, not wanting their parents to miss out, also sent red packets to their employees.

As news of the generosity reached company employees at home, shock and elation erupted in the digital realm.

"Ahhhh! I think I'm going to faint!" one office clerk exclaimed in a flurry of excitement on their group chat.

"This! This is real, right? I'm not dreaming?!"

"Somebody pinch me!" another cried out, disbelief twisting through the typing.

Even Mushu, typically composed, broke into a rare smile as he handed his packet to a young assistant, who nearly swooned from the surprise, almost fainting.

The courtyard shimmered — not only with lantern light but with the luminous glow of gratitude and shared joy.

And there was Lily, witnessing the tidal wave of happiness around her, feeling her heart swell with every moment.

This gathering was more than just a celebration; it was a profound experience.

It was a homecoming.

A triumph shared.

A promise fulfilled.

The Gift Rush: Peonies Castle in Bloom

The news crashed into Shanghai like a thunderclap, reverberating through the very heart of the city.

Lily Li — daughter of Ling Li, stepdaughter of the enigmatic Four Eyes — had just clinched Olympic gold.

In mere moments, the boardroom of the company's headquarters transformed into a whirlwind of chaotic excitement. Executives froze mid-call, their jaws slack and eyes wide with disbelief. One director fumbled, dropping his tablet onto the polished table, while another's cup of tea splattered over his crisp documents. The youngest board member, barely thirty, surged with exhilaration, exclaiming, "She did it! She really did it! No wonder we received such a big red packet!"

With a clap that cut through the tumult, the chairman, usually a paragon of composure, commanded, "Prepare the convoy. We're heading to Peonies Castle!"

"Wait, we can't go empty-handed!"

The upper echelon of Shanghai was summoned into a flurry as well.

Phones vibrated incessantly. Butlers and assistants darted through the corridors, their footsteps echoing against the marble floors. Storage rooms flew open as if the spirit of celebration demanded it. Velvet boxes were dusted off like precious relics, showcasing rare teas, antique scrolls, and gleaming jade pieces, all inspected, polished, and packed with reverence.

Within homes across the sprawling metropolis, wives and daughters were called into action.

"Xiao Mei! That designer's bag that was delivered yesterday — where is it?!" a frantic voice rang out.

"Lulu, fetch the pink clutch with the gold trim I just bought! It's Lily's age! Quick!"

At the exact moment, others rushed into high-end department stores, determined not to be outdone.

Designer handbags, luxurious silk scarves, and limited-edition accessories — anything youthful, elegant, and fitting for this grand occasion was snatched up in a joyous frenzy. Some items were still nestled in their boxes while others were hastily retrieved from the back of closets, fresh with dangling tags.

As the sun began its descent toward the horizon, Peonies Castle emerged as a spectacle of organized chaos.

Luxe cars lined the sweeping driveway, their polished surfaces gleaming in the fading light. Assistants, arms overflowing with gifts wrapped in jubilant crimson and gold, rushed up the grand steps. Drivers unloaded crates of celebratory champagne, abundant baskets of rare fruit, and glossy boxes filled with imported chocolates. One executive even arrived with a custom-made music box, tinkling the Philippine national anthem, its notes floating through the air.

At the top of the steps, Ling Li stood regal and poised, her hair cascading like silk, arms crossed, with a bemused smile gracing her lips.

Beside her, Four Eyes sipped tea, observing the spectacle unfold with an air of detached amusement. "They're trying to outdo each other," he remarked, a hint of dry humor in his voice.

Ling Li nodded knowingly. "They're terrified of being remembered as the one who brought nothing. This act is human nature."

Fatty peeked out from behind the door, his eyes wide with astonishment. "Are those... Hermès bags?!"

Chatty gasped, her hand fluttering to her chest. "I saw a Chanel clutch! I'm emotionally overwhelmed again!"