

PROTEGE 331

Chapter 331: FOR YOU, THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING

"Can you two not be so loud? It's embarrassing!" El Padre, who has seen the world, spat out.

Fatty and Chatty "...."

"We are just excited!"

"They are young, let them be. Don't be too grouchy!" El Capitan, standing by El Padre, said. "Don't let them discover you're old!" He jokingly added.

"Who dares to say I'm old!" El Padre sneered.

Chatty, eager to react, was held back just in time by Fatty. However, this did not escape El Padre's notice.

"Whoever dares will answer to my gun!" El Padre said with a snort before heading back inside the castle.

Chatty "!!!!!"

"Quan Ye, good thing you stopped me!" Chatty said as he patted his chest in relief.

"You need to learn how to control your chatterbox mouth!" Fatty said and followed the rest to go back in.

Inside, the celebration flourished, swelling with life and energy.

The kitchen staff, already flushed from the earlier feast, sprang back into action once more. Pots clanged rhythmically as steam billowed like a dance in the air. The rich, savory aroma of garlic rice mingled with the tantalizing scent of caramelized soy. Trays of freshly grilled inasal glistened, basted with vibrant annatto oil, while golden lechon kawali crackled enticingly in deep fryers. Pancit canton was tossed with precision, its noodles shimmering with calamansi and succulent shrimp. Kakanin — colorful sapin-sapin, sweet biko, and shiny palitaw — were arranged like precious jewels, while halo-halo stations brimmed with mountains of shaved ice and an explosion of rainbow toppings. The unmistakable scents of adobo, laing, and sinigang na baboy wafted through the halls, wrapping the festive atmosphere in warmth and nostalgia.

Kim Kim and Chin Chin twirled through the corridors, bursting into cheerful jingles that celebrated Lily's golden achievement and the growing "mountain of gifts." Pharsa floated through the crowd with grace, her arms filled with red packets, her eyes scanning the sea of arriving guests.

Shun and Ren meticulously organized the gift tables, categorizing treasures into opulent luxury, heartfelt sentimentality, delectable edibles, and miscellaneous-but-expensive curios.

Mushu, with surprising flair despite his usual stoicism, set up a photo booth adorned with a backdrop capturing Lily's winning pose, complete with props and a grand victory banner.

Shi Min, a pillar of pride, stood near the entrance, greeting each guest with a firm handshake, whispering a sincere "Thank you for coming" to everyone who crossed the threshold.

Coach Carlos, still clad in his training jacket, found himself cornered by three eager executives clamoring for autographs and selfies. He indulged them, smiling faintly, yet his gaze remained anchored on Lily, a protective watchfulness evident in his demeanor.

And at the heart of this jubilant whirlwind, Lily stood in her celebration dress, cheeks flushed with excitement, eyes bright with disbelief, enveloped in laughter, love, and a mountain of gifts she had never anticipated.

Turning to her mother, who had finally descended the steps with an effortless grace, she asked, half-laughing, "Is this normal?"

Ling Li brushed a stray strand of hair from her daughter's face, her own smile radiating warmth. "For you? This is just the beginning."

The Arrival: A Presidential Gesture

The celebration at Peonies Castle bloomed vibrantly, with laughter cascading through the sun-drenched courtyards and mingling with music that floated gracefully over the shimmering koi ponds. The fragrant aroma of lechon, pancit, and roasted garlic swirled around like a fragrant blessing, wrapping everyone in a warm embrace.

Then, breaking the joyous reverie, came the unmistakable sound of tires crunching against gravel.

Another convoy.

But this one carried an air of distinction.

The sleek, black vehicles glimmered in the twilight, adorned with discreet diplomatic insignias that whispered of importance. Security personnel poured out efficiently, their eyes sharp and scanning the surroundings with a practiced intensity. The lively chatter faded, and in an instant, an electrifying tension rippled through the gathered crowd. Even the twins, caught mid-song, stilled as they sensed the palpable change in atmosphere.

From the lead car emerged a tall, impeccably dressed man swathed in a tailored charcoal suit, his stance radiating authority, his expression an unmoving mask of composure. This was the Chinese Presidential Assistant, hailing from the bustling heart of Shanghai. His arrival was more than a mere protocol; it was a ceremonial act laden with significance.

With purpose, he strode into the central courtyard, flanked by aides who bore a beautifully lacquered chest, wrapped in luxurious silk and sealed with the regal presidential crest, as if presenting a treasure from a distant realm.

Ling Li and Four Eyes stepped forward, their vibrant attire catching the lantern light in a soft play of colors, their presence equally serene and majestic.

The assistant bowed deeply, then straightened with an expression of profound reverence. "Master. Madam. The President of the People's Republic sends his personal congratulations to Lily Li for her extraordinary victory at the Olympic Games."

He paused, allowing the weight of the moment to settle, before adding with solemn pride, "He asked me to deliver this gift on his behalf."

A graceful motion of his hand signaled his aides to step forward, revealing the chest's delicate contents. As it opened with the utmost care, a rare jade phoenix sculpture emerged, its wings unfurled majestically, its body carved masterfully from a single piece of imperial green stone, glowing softly with an otherworldly aura of protective qi. Next to it lay a scroll of silk, the President's message elegantly inscribed in flowing calligraphy.

Ling Li's gaze softened, the warmth in her eyes contrasting with her regal posture. "We are honored," she said, her voice unwavering and rich with gratitude.

Four Eyes nodded in affirmation, his sharp eyes drifting toward the sculpture. "This gesture will be etched in memory."

The assistant bowed again, his voice imbued with reverence. "The President believes Lily's triumph transcends borders, symbolizing unity and excellence that bind us all."

From his hidden perch behind a grand pillar, Fatty whispered to Chatty, "Did the President really just send a phoenix?"

Chatty gasped in awe. "I think I might faint. Again."

Shi Min stepped forward, his hands steady as he carefully placed the precious gift among the others, his expression one of deep respect. Shun and Ren hurried to adjust the display table, making room for the majestic sculpture at its center.

Chapter 332: A TABLE OF TITANS

The crowd erupted into hushed murmurs of admiration, and awe reflected on every face. Even El Capitan, usually unflappable, raised an eyebrow in surprise. His love for treasure was evident, and the protective energy emanating from the jade made his eyes shine.

In the kitchen, sensing the shift in atmosphere, a whirlwind of activity commenced once again — delicacies were artfully prepared, the bibingka adorned with shimmering gold leaf. At the same time, sinigang was served in elegant porcelain bowls. Crystal flutes overflowed with champagne, sparkling like gems in the evening light.

Lily, still adorned in her celebration dress, approached the gift with quiet reverence. Her fingers trembled slightly as they brushed against the edge of the scroll, the moment heavy with meaning.

Ling Li placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, her voice a soft anchor in the moment. "You are seen," she said, her tone rich with pride. "Even by those who rule."

Lily nodded, her voice barely a whisper, "I just wanted to make you proud."

A rare, warm smile broke across Four Eyes' face. "You have. And now the world knows."

"Thank you, Paps, thank you, Mom," Lily emotionally said.

As the music swelled once more and the lights glowed even brighter, Peonies Castle transformed into the vibrant heart of a continent's celebration, if only for a single unforgettable night.

The celebration had finally quieted.

The lanterns outside swayed gently in the evening breeze. The halls of Peonies Castle were hushed, the laughter and music now a distant hum.

Most guests had retired to their rooms or wandered into the gardens for late-night tea.

The Morning After: A Table of Titans

The sun rose gently over Peonies Castle, casting golden light through the stained-glass windows of the formal dining hall. The long mahogany table stretched the length of the room, adorned with fresh orchids, embroidered runners, and steaming platters of Filipino breakfast delicacies — tapsilog, longganisa, danggit, champorado, and pandesal stacked beside bowls of fresh mangoes and dragonfruit.

Everyone was present.

Lily sat at the center, still glowing from the previous night's celebration, her medal tucked safely in a velvet pouch beside her plate. Fatty was beside her, dramatically narrating the events of the day before between bites of taho.

Shi Min poured coffee for Coach Carlos, who looked more relaxed than he had in months. Shun and Ren passed around suman and tocino, while Chatty tried to balance three plates and a juice glass with theatrical flair.

Kim Kim, and Chin Chin sang a morning song they'd made up on the spot, while Pharsa calmly buttered toast and kept the twins from launching pandesal across the table.

Ling Li and Four Eyes sat at the head, regal and composed, quietly observing the joy around them.

Then the doors opened.

El Padre, the Godfather of the Mafia, entered with slow, deliberate steps. His suit was immaculate, his cane polished obsidian. Beside him strode El Capitan, the enigmatic boss of the underground world, his coat lined with hidden blades, his expression unreadable.

They approached Lily with solemn grace.

El Padre bowed slightly. "We didn't want to give it yesterday among the rest," he said, voice deep and deliberate. "Moments like yours deserve silence, not noise."

El Capitan placed a velvet box before her. Inside was a necklace — an heirloom from the Sicilian vaults, once worn by a queen who defied empires. "This is for your courage," he said. "And for the fire you carry."

Lily blinked, stunned. "I... I don't know what to say."

El Padre smiled faintly. "You already said it. On the beam."

The room was quiet for a breath, then erupted in applause.

Not long after, the gates of Peonies Castle stirred again.

A convoy arrived, led by Butler Oda, representing Otako. He stepped into the hall with crisp precision, bowing to Ling Li and Four Eyes before presenting a lacquered box filled with rare spiritual scrolls and a ceremonial blade forged in Kyoto.

"Master Otako sends his deepest respect," Oda said. "And his promise of protection."

Then came the international envoys.

Representatives from the Russian President, Colombia, Laos, Myanmar, and more entered in succession, each bearing gifts wrapped in silk and gold — handwritten letters, rare gems, ceremonial garments, and tokens of honor from their leaders.

One envoy from Laos presented a carved elephant tusk etched with Lily's name in ancient script. The Russian representative offered a crystal orb said to amplify qi resonance. The Colombian diplomat handed over a woven tapestry depicting Lily mid-flight, embroidered overnight by master artisans.

Ling Li accepted each with grace, her eyes never leaving Lily.

Four Eyes stood beside her, his hand resting gently on hers.

Lily, overwhelmed, stood and bowed to the room.

"Thank you," she said, voice steady. "I didn't expect any of this. I just wanted to make my family proud."

Fatty stood too, raising his juice glass. "You did. And now the whole world's proud of you."

The room erupted in cheers once more.

And as the morning light bathed the hall in warmth, Peonies Castle became not just a home of celebration—

But a sanctuary of legacy.

The Living Room Assembly: A Storm Beneath Stillness

The morning's tranquility had been disrupted by a lively cascade of interruptions — gift exchanges, the arrival of guests bearing laughter, and spontaneous toasts erupting like fireworks. Breakfast had meandered far beyond its customary hour, a symphony of clinking cutlery and warm conversations. But as the final cup of robust barako coffee was drained and the last piece of warm pandesal savored, Ling Li rose from her seat, her presence commanding the room with an unspoken authority.

"Everyone," Ling Li began, her voice slicing through the muffled buzz of chatter like a blade, "let's proceed to the living room. I have many important matters to discuss."

In an instant, the atmosphere shifted, thick with anticipation.

Chairs scraped against polished floors, and plates were cleared with hasty precision. Conversations halted mid-sentence, voices trailing off like a vanishing echo. The family and allies, steeped in curiosity, followed her grace through the grand hallway into the formal living room, where the morning light streamed through silk curtains, casting a soft glow upon the scene. The fragrant aroma of peonies serenaded the air.

Chapter 333: CHU YAN IS GOING TO COMBUST

Once everyone had settled onto plush velvet sofas and intricately carved armchairs adorned with embroidered cushions, Butler James glided in with practiced elegance, followed closely by a procession of servants bearing trays of steaming tea. Ceremoniously, they placed the delicate cups in front of each guest. The room fell into a reverent stillness, the air heavy with expectation.

Ling Li, positioned at the center like a queen surveying her court, possessed an enigmatic aura, her hair cascading around her shoulders like a flowing river, her expression an inscrutable mask.

"Alright, everyone, listen up," she declared, her tone transforming from warm hospitality to unforgiving steel. "I will be entering seclusion for ten days."

The room erupted in a tumult of emotions.

Gasps swept through the gathering like a gust of wind. Murmurs intertwined, some voices rising in protest. But none echoed louder than that of Four Eyes.

His face darkened instantly, the color draining from his cheeks. He had barely survived two weeks without his wife. They had just reunited. And now — again?

His fingers tightened around the teacup, knuckles blanched in a silent struggle.

Ling Li stood unyielding, an anchor amidst the storm.

"The 'Eye' is about to open in a month," she continued, her voice unwavering, commanding attention with every syllable. "I want everyone to be at their peak by then. I will be refining pills to strengthen your body's constitution. This is non-negotiable."

Fatty leaned toward Chatty, voice a conspiratorial whisper, "She's going full alchemist mode again."

Chatty's eyes widened in response, brimming with disbelief. "Ten days without her? Chu Yan is going to combust."

But Ling Li remained resolute, unfazed by the undercurrents of panic.

"Before that," she announced with an edge of urgency, "we must address Solaris."

An enveloping silence swept over the room, heavy and charged.

"He is badly injured this time. This is the perfect moment to eliminate him. While I'm in seclusion, El Padre, El Capitan, Shi Min, and the First and Second Shah will lead the hunt."

El Padre nodded solemnly, a weight of responsibility on his shoulders. El Capitan flexed his fingers, the anticipation crackling in the air. The Shahs, lingering in the shadows, shared a charged glance, their seals beginning to shimmer faintly, whispers of power rippling through the air.

"Solaris dared to attack in public," Ling Li said, her voice rising, fierce as a tempest. "Risking the lives of the innocent. That is forbidden. Martial artists retreat from the world. This is a consensus among cultivators and families alike. Even foreign supernatural entities respect this boundary. Solaris broke it. He or anyone like him must cease to exist. They are thorns to the martial artist realm."

Shi Min rubbed his chin, brow furrowed in contemplation. "Then we should return to the arena. There may be traces left behind."

Ling Li nodded gravely. "Oh, and bring your Paps. He'll assist you in locating Solaris."

All eyes turned expectantly to Four Eyes.

He blinked, caught off guard. "Me?"

Ling Li's lips curled into a playful smirk as she stepped closer, a warm presence enveloping him. "Oh, come on. You've leveled up so much. I witnessed your training with Shinsei. Your black aura — it's matured."

Her confidence was palpable. She turned to the rest of the room. "Chu Yan, with his black aura, can trace Solaris. Once he locates him, the Shahs will use their teleportation skills to take you directly to the target."

The air thickened with disbelief, an electrifying silence enveloping the assembly.

Even Mushu raised a single, inquisitive eyebrow.

Fatty, distracted, dropped his dumpling plushie from the sofa with a soft thud.

Chatty whispered in astonishment, "Chu Yan has a black aura now?"

Pharsa's eyes narrowed, intrigue igniting a spark within.

Jack scribbled frantic notes furiously, intent on capturing every moment of his boss.

Four Eyes cleared his throat, slicing through the tension. "Ehem... I haven't used this skill in the field. I'm still learning."

Ling Li stepped beside him, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder — a grounding touch in the swirl of chaos. "I have confidence in you."

Her contact anchored him, her words unwavering as a mountain.

Four Eyes searched her face, seeking affirmation amidst the storm brewing within. Ling Li met his gaze, steadfast and resolute.

In that moment, amid the tempest of uncertainty, Four Eyes nodded, determination blooming within him. "Solaris dared to hurt his family.' He silently thought.

"I'll do it." He said resolutely.

Ling Li's voice sliced through the gentle hum of conversation like a sharp blade, resonating with an authority that commanded immediate attention.

"Then that's settled," she declared, her piercing gaze scanning the assembled allies, each of whom hung on her every word. "My next focus will be on Ren."

Ren, poised beside Shun, felt a jolt of instinctive awareness surge through her. She met her mother's gaze, her eyes wide and filled with both respect and determination.

"I've arranged for you to train with Shensei," Ling Li continued, her tone unwavering. "He will teach you the needle techniques — not merely for healing, but also for self-defense."

A collective wave of astonishment rippled through the room, faces turning to Ren, who blinked in surprise.

"Needles?" she echoed, trying to fathom the implications.

Ling Li nodded, her expression a mix of seriousness and encouragement. "In the realms of alchemy, medicine, and poison, they are bound together like siblings. You've already grasped martial arts, firearms, and swordplay. But as a woman poised to stand beside Shun — the future President of this nation — employing overtly powerful symbols could draw unnecessary attention. It's too political, too dangerous."

Ling Li stepped closer, the air thickening around her as her voice softened, yet retained an unyielding edge. "The needle technique is subtle. It embodies elegance and can be deadly when the moment calls for it. You'll learn how to preserve life — and, if necessary, to extinguish threats."

Ren felt her throat tighten, her fingers nervously curling around the warmth of her teacup. "I understand," she whispered.

Shun's hand enveloped hers, a blend of pride and protectiveness flickering in his eyes. "You'll be brilliant," he said, his voice filled with unwavering belief.

Ling Li pivoted to address the rest of the room, a magnetic presence that drew their full attention.

Chapter 334: I NEED A REWARD AND YOU CAN'T SAY NO

"Shun and the rest of you — continue to strengthen your bodies. Engage in daily cultivation. Goldie and Rockie will oversee your training regimen. When I return from my time in seclusion, expect your training to become more rigorous."

Fatty let out a playful groan, his smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Do dumpling curls count as cultivation?"

Chatty shot him a teasing elbow, her laughter ringing out. "Only if you can lift the entire tray, you glutton!"

Shun responded with a cheeky smirk. "I'll double my reps, just for fun."

Goldie and Rockie nodded in silent agreement, already mentally crafting new and challenging routines. Jack leaned against the wall, arms crossed, his eyes alight with eagerness for the trials ahead.

Ling Li's gaze turned steely, her voice cutting through the room's playful banter with sharp clarity. "Everyone remains here in Shanghai for now. No exceptions."

The atmosphere shifted, the lightness dissipating as the weight of her words settled over them.

She wasn't merely preparing them for the battlefield; she was orchestrating their legacy.

The Final Agenda: A Mission of Shadows

Ling Li's voice, a steady and authoritative murmur, enveloped the room like a delicate layer of frost, quiet yet all-encompassing.

"Lastly," she announced, her keen gaze sweeping over the assembled allies, "Otako has meticulously gathered intelligence on Shun Chang — the president's son, whom our very own Shun will soon replace."

A palpable hush fell over the space.

Even the air seemed to freeze in anticipation.

"He's nothing if not predictable," Ling Li continued, her tone as sharp as a blade. "His daily rhythms, his favored haunts, his loyal companions — Otako's intricate network has mapped it all meticulously. What we require now is readiness. Strength. Precision."

She advanced, her whole being whispering softly against the polished marble floor, each movement purposeful and fluid.

"We must slip into the PSC and the Politburo like shadows in the night. Quietly. Efficiently. For Shun's election to proceed without turbulence, every thread of this intricate tapestry must be woven with care."

El Padre leaned forward, his fingers steepled like a cathedral spire. "You want us to thread the needle through the very heart of the state."

Ling Li met his gaze with unyielding resolve. "Precisely."

El Capitan's eyes sparkled with a predatory light. "Then we'll need more than just muscle. We'll need ghosts to dance through the corridors."

"The Shahs will don the mantle of diplomacy," Ling Li stated, her voice unwavering. "Shi Min will orchestrate the internal sweep. Pharsa will oversee the communications. And each of you — every single one — will play a vital role in this grand design."

Shun sat tall, his posture unyielding, an ember of determination burning brightly in his eyes. Ren reached beneath the table to take his hand, her grip firm and reassuring.

Fatty raised a hesitant hand, then let it fall. "I'm not entirely sure what part I'm meant to play, but I'm ready to make an entrance — dramatically, of course."

Chatty leaned in, whispering with a mischievous spark, "I'll be the distraction. Panic is my specialty in crowded spaces."

Pharsa remained silent, but her nod was resolute, a fierce commitment in her eyes.

Goldie crossed his arms, a determined scowl forming on his face. "Just give me a name, and I'll do what must be done."

Four Eyes, still reeling from the magnitude of the task ahead, exhaled slowly, grounding himself. "This is larger than anything we've dealt with before."

Ling Li turned to him, her expression steely. "Which is why it must involve all of us."

She paused, allowing the weight of her declaration to sink in deep into the fabric of their resolve.

"If you have any questions," her voice sliced through the silence, sharp and commanding, "now is the time to ask."

No one dared to speak.

Not even the twins.

The profound stillness was not born of fear.

It was readiness, palpable and alive.

Ling Li gave a single, decisive nod. "Then you are all dismissed."

She turned gracefully, her shadows trailing behind her like the aftermath of a fierce storm retreating, leaving the echoes of thunder in its wake.

As the room began to stir — not with chaos but with a resolute sense of purpose — it became clear that the flame was no longer merely defending.

It was poised to reshape the very world itself.

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

A Sweet Moment Before the Storm

Ling Li stepped into her room, the familiar scent of herbs enveloping her like a comforting embrace. Before she could reach her satchel, a sudden warmth captured her wrist — Four Eyes pulled her close, his eyes a tempest of emotion.

"How could you?" he murmured, his voice thick, almost breaking. "You just returned. I barely lived through those two weeks, and now you're leaving again — for ten torturous days."

His embrace was solid, trembling with unspoken fears. Their foreheads touched, and in that closeness, Ling Li glimpsed the storm brewing behind his gaze, a whirlwind of worry and longing.

"Honey," she replied softly, her fingers gliding against his cheek like a gentle caress. "I have to prepare the pills. For you, for everyone. And I can't shake off the fear about Shi Min's ascension. He could die."

At the mention of her son and the brutal image of him enduring the lightning tribulation, her heart struggled, and her breath hitched in her throat.

Four Eyes breathed out slowly, his grip easing — though not by much.

"Alright," he conceded, a hint of resignation in his tone. "But first... I need a reward, and you can't say no."

Before she could respond, he swept her off her feet with an effortless grace, cradling her against him as he carried her to the bed. The silk sheets whispered beneath them, the room bathed in a soft, golden light that streamed through the delicate curtains like a warm embrace.

He laid her down with a reverence that suggested she was crafted from starlight, his touch gentle but imbued with a fierce protection. Ling Li's eyes locked onto his — sharp, playfully teasing, but softened by the tides of love that surged between them.

"You're greedy," she chided, a smile breaking across her lips.

Chapter 335: WE FIGHT HARDER, TOGETHER

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

"I'm in mourning," Four Eyes declared dramatically, sliding beside Ling Li. "You're about to vanish into a haze of herbs and storms. Let me savor this moment."

His fingers traced the contours of her shirt, not to remove but to memorize every delicate curve. He peppered kisses across her temple, her cheek, exploring the arc of her jaw — each touch a silent promise, each kiss a pleading whisper.

Ling Li sighed, surrendering to the warmth radiating from Four Eyes, her body relaxing against his as if he were an anchor in a turbulent sea. "You're utterly silly." She said with a giggle.

"I'm yours," he breathed, his voice a low murmur, his lips grazing her ear. "And you're mine."

Their laughter intertwined, dissolving into a symphony of quiet gasps, tangled limbs, and tender confessions. The air thickened with desire, heavy with the bittersweet ache of stolen moments and the relentless march of time.

Four Eyes captured her lips in a kiss — slow, deep, and achingly lingering. A kiss that ignited fiery emotions and quenched a thirst for rain. A kiss that spoke the words she couldn't voice.

Gradually, their clothes unwound from their bodies, cascading to the floor like autumn leaves shaken from a tree.

"Honey, I can't wait any longer. May I?" Four Eyes implored, his voice thick with longing. His gaze, a deep well of emotion, glistened with unshed tears, reflecting a mixture of desire and urgency that seemed to fill the air between them.

Ling Li wrapped her arms around Four Eyes' neck and nodded her head in silence.

Four Eyes, gather Ling Li in his arms, buried his face on her neck, as he thrust his cock into Ling Li; he plunged it deep and stayed there just to feel the warmth of his wetness and to memorize the feeling, knowing he would be abstaining again for ten whole days. Thinking of this made him frustrated.

He initiated thrusting in and out, but his frustration got the best of him as he began to thrust wildly. Like a hungry wolf, every thrust is fast, full, hard, deep, and strong.

"Uggghhhhhh....

Uggghhhhhh...."

Four Eyes couldn't help but groan with each thrust.

Ling Li tightened her grip around him, her head pushing the pillows back forcefully. Her toes were curved as her hips rocked with Four Eyes' every thrust.

"Hhhmmmmmm...

Aaahhhhhh...

Chu Yan....

Aaahhhhhh..."

Ling Li moaned and cried like a baby. Clutching onto Four Eyes tightly.

"Tell me what you want..." Four Eyes whispered in between his thrusts and uneven breathing.

"You..."

I just want you...

Hhhmmmmmm..."

"I'm yours..."

All yours...

Ugghhhhhh...

Ugghhhhhh..."

"Chu Yan..."

Aaahhhhhh... I'm coming..."

"Let's come together... but I want more..."

In that suspended moment, the outside world — missions, foes, tribulations — faded into the background.

All that remained was this.

Two souls entwined by destiny, clinging fiercely to one another in a sanctuary carved from the chaos, poised on the edge of a storm.

A Quiet Moment: Lily and Fatty

Lily perched at the edge of the koi pond, her bare toes splashing playfully in the cool water. Sunlight cascaded over the surface, creating shimmering silver ripples that danced like fleeting stars across her reflection. The air was heavy with the sweet scent of peonies, their vibrant petals nodding gently in the soft breeze, painting the surroundings with splashes of pink and white, enveloping them in a cozy, ethereal ambiance.

Just then, Fatty ambled up beside her, his arms cradling two steaming bowls of tangyuan, the sweet glutinous dumplings glistening in the sun's embrace. A blanket was slung over his shoulder, and with a satisfied sigh, he settled down next to her, handing one bowl to Lily.

"No meat dumplings for you?" she teased, a playful smirk on her lips.

"I'm evolving," he replied with exaggerated solemnity. "Tangyuan is my food of contemplation."

She let out a soft laugh, but soon the gentle laughter gave way to a tender silence as they both lost themselves in the mesmerizing dance of the koi beneath the surface. Their scales sparkled like jewels scattered across the rippling water, a vibrant tapestry of color weaving through the tranquil pond.

"I still can't believe all of this," Lily whispered, her voice barely above a sigh. "The medal. The cheering crowd. The President's gift. It all feels like a vivid dream."

Fatty leaned back, propping himself on his hands, eyes drifting toward the vast expanse of sky, where fluffy clouds floated lazily. "You didn't just win; you transformed. I saw it happen. Everyone did."

Lily turned to him, her gaze softening as she searched his face. "Do you remember the nights I cried after every failed landing? The frustration and heartbreak?"

"I do," he replied, his expression somber. "And I remember how you'd rise at dawn, determined to try again, even when your hands were bruised and bleeding."

She glanced down at her palms, now healed, yet haunted by the memories etched within her skin.

"At first, I thought I was doing it all for the medal," she mused, her voice threaded with nostalgia. "But now... now I realize it was for all of you. For Mom. For Shi Min. For Ren and the twins. And for you."

Fatty lowered his voice to a gentle whisper. "You did it for yourself, too. Don't ever forget that."

She nodded slowly, tears shimmering in her eyes, catching the light like tiny crystals.

Fatty reached out, tenderly brushing one solitary tear away with his thumb. "You're allowed to cry now. You're safe here."

Leaning into him, Lily nestled her head on his shoulder, feeling the warmth of the blanket envelop them like a protective cocoon.

"I'm scared," she admitted, her words laced with vulnerability. "Of what lies ahead. Of the Eye. Of Solaris. Of potentially losing everything, or anyone I've fought for."

Fatty pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head, a silent promise of solidarity. "Then we fight harder. Together."

Beneath them, the koi swirled and danced, the reflection of the moon shifting like a secret shared in the twilight.

In that hushed moment — free from cameras, bolstered by the absence of crowds, and unencumbered by medals — Lily experienced something far more profound than mere victory.

She felt, for the first time, a profound sense of belonging and home.

Chapter 336: ABORT MISSION. DON'T DO IT!

Pre-Hunt Banter: Waiting for the Tracker

The courtyard hummed with a restless energy as Shi Min paced near the sleek, armored SUV, his arms crossed tightly against his chest and his eyes darting across the horizon like a hawk searching for prey. Sunlight spilled into the space, casting long shadows that danced around him.

"Wait," he muttered, his brow furrowing in confusion. "Where's Paps?"

Fatty, sprawled lazily on the hood of the vehicle, his fingers cradling a half-eaten steam bun, barely glanced up. "Oh, he went up with your mom," he replied, a hint of mischief in his tone.

Shi Min blinked, the gears in his mind turning. "Up where?"

Fatty wagged his eyebrows playfully, a smirk creeping across his face. "Upstairs. To their room."

Chatty, theatrically adjusting his scarf as if it were a dramatic cape, chimed in with a smug grin that could rival the Cheshire Cat. "He's probably venting his righteous anger and demanding a reward. You singletons wouldn't understand. Separation anxiety is real when you're married."

Shun lifted an eyebrow skeptically. "You're not married?" He asked, looking at El Padre and El Capital.

El Capitan waved a dismissive hand. "Details. I'm emotionally married to the idea of love." He said with a snort.

El Padre nodded solemnly, as if imparting wisdom. "He's been in a committed relationship with heartbreak since 2009."

"Shut up," El Capitan muttered, pulling his face mask to shield his face, as if hiding from the truth.

Shi Min groaned, rubbing his temples as if trying to relieve the pressure building up inside his head. "We're supposed to be preparing for a mission to hunt down a cursed lunatic, and you two are discussing emotional trauma and conjugal visits!"

Jack shrugged nonchalantly. "Hey, if I had a wife like Madam Ling Li, I'd be in seclusion too. Just not for alchemy."

Shun coughed discreetly into his fist, stifling a laugh. "Let's not imagine our parents like that."

"Too late," Chatty replied, eyes wide with horror. "The image is burned into my brain. I need therapy. And bleach."

Mushu, who had been quietly adjusting his gear, finally spoke up in a low voice. "You all realize you can't even start without Master Chu Yan, right? He's the only one with the skills to track Solaris."

"Exactly," Shi Min said, frustration bubbling to the surface. "We're wasting precious time."

Fatty leaned back, hands tucked behind his head, exuding an air of casual indifference. "Or we're giving true love the space it needs to flourish."

Chatty nodded earnestly. "Let's be real. If we interrupt them now, we might get hit with a flying teacup. Or worse — Madam's glare."

At this, everyone shuddered in unison, as if recalling a collective nightmare.

Even First Shah, who had just appeared with his blade sheathed on his back, halted in his tracks.

Pharsa, who was on the side, "I'm not going up there. I value my life," she declared, a teasing edge to her voice.

"Then we wait," Shi Min sighed, finally plopping down on the steps, the weight of impending doom settling around him. "But the moment he comes down, we move."

"Should we stretch or something?" Fatty asked, already lying flat on the grass as if it were a sun-drenched beach. "I don't want to pull a hamstring chasing cursed energy."

Chatty, ever the strategist, pulled out a deck of cards, the glossy surface glinting in the sunlight. "Stretch your luck. Let's play a round while we wait."

And so, beneath the rising sun, which cast warm golden rays upon them amidst the vast blue sky, the group settled into a strange mix of patience and camaraderie. They were half warriors, half clowns, laughing, teasing, and passing the time. Because even when faced with the creeping shadows of darkness, they remained united as family — the family that waited together.

The Return: Steam, Smirks, and a Mission Delayed

It was nearly four hours before Four Eyes finally emerged from the depths of their private wing, looking thoroughly satisfied, his steps light, his eyes gleaming with a smug, post-victory glow. Ling Li trailed behind him, her hair still damp, her cheeks flushed a delicate rose that had nothing to do with the morning chill.

She looked mildly aggrieved, her lips pursed in a pout as she tugged at the collar of her freshly changed robe. "You're impossible," she muttered under her breath.

Four Eyes only chuckled, scooping her up once more with infuriating ease. "You didn't seem to mind when you were calling me—"

"Shut up," Ling Li hissed, swatting his shoulder, though her fingers lingered there a moment too long.

Downstairs, the courtyard had transformed into a scene of mild chaos and mounting boredom.

Fatty was sprawled across a bench, a half-eaten steam bun in one hand and a deck of cards in the other. Chatty was dramatically fanning himself with a snack menu. At the same time, Shun sat cross-legged on the ground, meditating — or pretending to, judging by the twitch in his brow.

They had played at least six rounds of cards, eaten lunch and snacks, and were now dangerously close to staging a mutiny.

When the couple finally descended the marble steps, the entire group turned in unison.

Time froze.

Ling Li and Four Eyes looked freshly showered, suspiciously glowing, and entirely too serene for a pair who had just made everyone wait four hours on the cusp of a mission.

"What's with the look?" Ling Li asked, blinking innocently.

Four Eyes raised an eyebrow, as if genuinely confused by the stares.

Chatty opened his mouth. "Ah, did you two—"

Before he could finish, Fatty lunged, clapping a hand over his mouth and dragging him backward like a bodyguard intercepting a security breach.

"Nope. Nooope. Abort mission. Don't do it."

Chatty's muffled protests were ignored.

"Ehem," Shi Min cleared his throat, standing stiffly, his ears tinged pink. "We were planning to make a move on Solaris. We were only waiting for Paps."

Ling Li's face turned a deeper shade of crimson. She shot a glare at Four Eyes, who only smirked wider, clearly unrepentant.

Then came El Padre, arms crossed, his tailored suit immaculate despite the wait, his expression a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

Chapter 337: HEAVEN'S OWN PANTRY

"You two have such great energy," he said dryly. "Four hours of... exercise. While the rest of us aged a decade waiting."

A collective cough rippled through the group.

Even Goldie looked away, his ears suspiciously red.

Mushu adjusted his glasses, muttering, "I need to recalibrate my internal clock. I thought we were on a mission, not a honeymoon."

Ling Li, already flushed, turned redder than a cooked shrimp. She opened her mouth to retort, then closed it again, utterly betrayed by her own complexion.

Four Eyes, meanwhile, looked like a man who had just won the lottery and then been handed the deed to the moon. He adjusted his collar, his smirk now a full grin.

El Padre rolled his eyes. "Brat. You even look proud of making us wait. Worse than a proud peacock!"

"I am," Four Eyes said, utterly unapologetic.

"Dammit," El Padre growled, turning on his heel. "Let's go. Before I lose my appetite for vengeance."

The group, still blushing and muttering, fell into step behind him.

Ling Li lingered for a moment, shooting one last glare at her husband. "You're truly impossible."

Four Eyes leaned in, whispering, "But you love me." Giving Ling Li a quick kiss on her lips.

She shoved him lightly, but her lips twitched.

And with that, the hunt for Solaris began.

The laughter faded.

The smiles dimmed.

And the warriors of Peonies Castle stepped into the shadows — ready to finish what had begun.

Gathering the Essentials

Inside Ling Li's private chamber, the atmosphere shimmered with an almost palpable weight — rich with the intoxicating aroma of sandalwood incense, the earthy scent of aged parchment, and a faint metallic tang that hinted at the potency of sealed qi. The chamber exuded an aura of sacred purpose, serene yet vibrating with hidden energy. Silence enveloped the space, broken only by the soft whisper of silk as she glided across the polished wooden floor, each step deliberate, echoing the disciplined mastery that had been honed over centuries of practice.

She approached the secret alcoves, each one a sanctuary of treasures, her fingers brushing against the ancient runes etched into intricately carved drawers. A breathless anticipation coursed through her as she unlocked protective seals — each one dissolving with a soft, ethereal shimmer that mingled with the ambient air, casting fleeting sparks of light in graceful arcs.

What lay within these sanctums would leave even the most seasoned cultivator in breathless awe or perhaps even bring them to their knees, overcome by the sheer ethereal beauty, or die willingly, believing they had seen what seemed to be heaven's own pantry.

With reverence befitting a sacred ritual, Ling Li began to retrieve each precious item:

Panax Ginseng, its roots coiled like slumbering dragons, radiated a restorative warmth that seemed to pulse with the heartbeat of the earth itself.

Lingzi, fragile and translucent, resonated with a celestial hum, embodying clarity of spirit and thought.

Red Spider Lily, fierce and vibrant, wore its deadly petals like a crown, laced with a potent poison and whispering echoes of forgotten memories.

Thousand-Year-Old Black Jade, calm against her fingertips, seemed to carry the weight of millennia, whispering secrets of the underworld to those attentive enough to listen.

Ice Soul, a crystalline shard exhaling a delicate frost with every breath, promised an otherworldly chill that could freeze time itself.

Xirang, sacred soil imbued with life, whispered tales of immortals born from its nurturing depths.

Dragon Morrow, its golden density glinting with the light of a thousand suns, was harvested from the heart of a beast felled under the mystical shadow of an eclipse.

Gold Essence, a substantive liquid light, resonated with the warmth of the sun, carefully sealed within a vial that preserved its ethereal glow.

Millennium Ginseng, its qi so potent it shimmered like a starlit sky, was a testament to untold ages.

Millennium Ganoderma, a legendary fungus pulsating with the duality of life and death, exuded an enigmatic allure.

Ice Soul Dragon, a scale imbued with an anger as cold as the depths of winter, crackled softly in the stillness.

Marrow Soul, an extraordinarily rare compound, coursed with the essence of enlightened cultivators, offering the wisdom of ages past.

With meticulous care, she did not dare allow these extraordinary items to mingle. Each was cradled gently in her palm, examined under the watchful gaze of her intent, and carefully placed within her space ring — an intricate artifact layered with protective enchantments, spatial buffers, and qi stabilizers, ensuring their safety.

All these materials were gathered through time, effort, money, blood, and connections. Ling Li has a group dedicated to picking herbs. Additionally, there is the auction house owned by Ling Li's group and medical halls where small farmers send their medical herbs, whether rare or common.

These were not mere ingredients; they were sacred promises, treacherous risks, lifelines woven from the fabric of destiny. Soon, they would be transformed into elixirs capable of saving her family — or unleashing unimagined destruction upon her enemies.

The Twins

As Ling Li descended the staircase, a colorful commotion drew her toward the playroom. Inside, she found Kim Kim and Chin Chin immersed in their own fantastical world, a chaotic construction of plush pillows and shimmering enchanted scrolls spilling around them. The vibrant hues of the fabrics contrasted beautifully with the soft glow of afternoon light filtering through the window.

"Mom!" Kim Kim squealed, her tiny body launching into Ling Li's arms, warmth radiating from her cherubic form.

"Are you going to battle bad guys again?" Chin Chin forayed, wide-eyed and brimming with excitement.

Ling Li knelt, her fingers gently brushing their tousled hair as she wore a teasing smile. "Not this time, my little warriors. We're just going to... make medicine."

Kim Kim's face scrunched adorably in protest. "Will it taste bad?"

"Only if you misbehave," Ling Li playfully countered, her voice a melodic whisper.

Both twins gasped dramatically, eyes sparkling with mischief. "We'll be good!" they vowed in unison, raising their small hands in mock salute.

Ling Li planted affectionate kisses on their foreheads, feeling her heart swell with love. "I'll be watching you. Don't make me come out early."

With exaggerated gestures, they performed a theatrical salute, and she stepped away with a smile dancing on her lips, lightness in her heart.

Chapter 338: START OF SECLUSION

Ren and Shun

Making her way to the library, Ling Li discovered Ren curled up beside Shun, the two enveloped in a cozy bubble of companionship. A hefty tome on qi resonance lay open between them, its ancient pages whispering secrets of the universe. Shun, half-dreaming, rested his head against Ren's shoulder, the scene exuding an air of tranquility.

Ling Li entered quietly, avoiding disruption.

"Ren," she called softly, eliciting an instant response as the young woman sat up, eyes shimmering with alertness.

"I've arranged for Reginald and Dr. Joowon to escort you to Shensei in the coming days. Your needle training begins soon," she informed, her tone a blend of encouragement and authority.

Ren's eyes widened, excitement bubbling within her. "Already?"

Ling Li nodded, her expression earnest. "You'll need it. Not just for healing, but for protection. Nicu and Ailun will remain with Shun."

Ren's gaze slid to Shun, who was now fully awake, a hint of determination flickering in her eyes. "I'll make you proud."

Ling Li's smile was radiant, a beacon of reassurance. "You already do."

Lily and Fatty

Outside, the sun bathed the garden in warm golden light, casting a tranquil spell over the scene. Lily lay languidly on a woven mat, her eyes closed, a gleaming medal resting beside her like a precious talisman.

Fatty, with his playful grin, sat cross-legged beside her, feeding her slices of juicy mango while humming a triumphant tune that floated through the air like sweet perfume.

'They looked very peaceful.' Ling Li thought.

Ling Li approached the young couple, her shadow stretching over them like a protective canopy.

Lily stirred, her eyes fluttering open. "Mom?"

"I'm going into seclusion," Ling Li explained softly, her voice underlining the gravity of her words. "Focus on strengthening your body. No slacking. And look after each other, especially the twins."

Fatty sprang to his feet, placing a dramatic hand over his heart. "Ehem, my future mother-in-law, I swear upon my last dumpling and future abs — I will protect Lily, feed the twins, and cultivate like a monk possessed."

Ling Li burst into laughter, her eyes sparkling with appreciation and amusement.

"You're ridiculous," she said, bright-eyed, her laughter echoing like wind chimes in the breeze.

"But charming," Fatty added, shooting a playful wink her way.

Lily giggled, leaning affectionately into Fatty's side, her eyes shimmering with joy. "We'll be fine, Mom. Promise."

Ling Li's gaze lingered on them, the love for her daughter and her daughter's beloved radiating warmth within her. For a fleeting moment, the burdens of the world evaporated, replaced by a tapestry of hope and laughter.

Entering the Alchemy Chamber: Ling Li's Sacred Task

Ling Li wasted no time; her determination resonated through the air. The soft rustle of her robes against the polished stone echoed like whispers of ancient secrets as she made her way toward a hidden annex discreetly nestled behind the formidable castle — a solitary sanctum known only to her most trusted allies. This was her revered alchemy chamber, where silence reigned supreme and the very air thrummed with the weight of qi.

Outside, Mushu and his tactical team stood resolutely at attention, their presence a fortress of quiet vigilance flanking the entrance. Pharsa, with her calm demeanor and sharp gaze, had already begun reinforcing the perimeter, weaving intricate seals and illusion barriers that shimmered like ethereal silk under the faint light.

Just as Ling Li was about to step beyond the threshold, Mushu moved forward, his voice a low, steady murmur that cut through the stillness. "The Five Shah are already guarding in the shadows."

Ling Li acknowledged him with a single, imperceptible nod, her expression enigmatic as she replied, "Good." With that, she crossed into her sanctuary.

The chamber enveloped her like a long-lost friend, its dim illumination from gently floating lanterns casting a warm glow over walls adorned with ancient scrolls and luminous elemental crystals that seemed to pulse with an inner life. The air was dense with latent energy, thick enough to make even the most seasoned cultivators hold their breath in awe.

Standing at the heart of the chamber, Ling Li slowly raised her hand. From her mystical space ring, she summoned an array of magical materials, each appearing in a flash of light, resonating with powerful energy. As they settled into their designated spots, the floor lit up with a faint, radiant glow, creating a tapestry of vivid colors.

With a touch of reverence, she unclasped her necklace. From its depths, she drew forth two cauldrons — each crafted by her own hands from celestial meteorite fragments collected during a rare cosmic convergence. Their surfaces sparkled with embedded stardust, while their cores emitted a gentle, vibrant hum of spiritual qi, creating an aura that pulsed with the universe's heartbeat.

These were no ordinary vessels; they defied convention. Requiring no talisman carvings or external seals, they were self-sustaining, perfectly attuned to Ling Li's soul signature. Anything refined within them would emerge imbued with enhanced potency — medicines capable of healing across realms. These elixirs could challenge the very essence of death.

Cautiously, Ling Li placed the cauldrons upon the altar. From her ring, she summoned rare components: the Azure Bone, Ice Lotus, Snow Ginseng, and the Phoenix Heart Blood — each one vibrant with its own elemental resonance, pulsing and glowing as if infused with the spirit of life itself. She began to segregate the ingredients methodically, her movements fluid and precise, her mind adeptly calculating ratios and fusion sequences.

Her foremost and most pressing task: to create the Nirvana Elixir. This elixir was not simply a lifeline; it was a key to resurrection, a chance at rebirth. If Shi Min were to falter during his lightning tribulation, this potion would offer him a second chance to rise anew through the flames of Nirvana.

A shiver ran through Ling Li's fingers as they brushed against the Phoenix Heart Blood. Memories flooded her mind — of the hardships endured together, of Shi Min's quiet strength in the wake of Ling Li's separation from her husband, his unvoiced sacrifices, and the way he had felt compelled to mature

beyond his years to protect Ling Li from the world's cruelty. The haunting memory of Shi Min's small hands clinging to hers during those bleak times tightened her chest.

Chapter 339: SOLARIS: SELF-DESTRUCTION

Ling Li paused for a moment, allowing the memories to swirl before her like shadows. Her eyes closed briefly, and then, with a deliberate shake of her head, she cleared the emotions from her mind like smoke dissipating into the air. There was no space for sentimentality in this moment; she had other potions and elixirs to concoct — body conditioning, boosts to strength, enhancements, breakthroughs, and healing. But the Nirvana Elixir was her priority.

To achieve this, she would need:

Rare Alchemical Components for the Nirvana Elixir

Flame of the Universe: A primordial fire captured from the heart of a dying star, sealed within a crystal prism that shimmered with celestial light. Its flame burned with cosmic qi, capable of purging karmic residue and reigniting soul threads. Only those blessed with celestial clearance could harness its power safely.*

Four-Pole Floating Soil: A rare earth element collected from the sacred poles of the world — North, South, East, and West. Its texture transformed between sand and mist, responding to the user's intent while anchoring the soul during rebirth.*

Firewood of Yin and Yang: This dual-natured wood, painstakingly harvested from the Twin Flame Trees of Mount Wudao, possessed an extraordinary quality — one half burned with tremendous restraint, while the other blazed with infernal heat. When ignited together, they forged a harmonized flame capable of tempering volatile ingredients and fusing opposing energies.*

Fire of Nine Flavors: A legendary ignition method that artfully blended nine elemental flames — metal, wood, water, fire, earth, wind, lightning, ice, and void. This technique initiated a multi-phase refinement cycle, empowering the elixir to transcend its usual limitations and adapt to any constitution.*

Ling Li arranged each of these precious components within their protective arrays, activating seals that pulsated with a silent promise of safety. The chamber resonated with anticipation, as if the very walls understood the monumental undertaking about to unfold.

She inhaled deeply, centering herself amidst the rising energy, and began her sacred task.

The Hunt Ends: Solaris's Final Stand

At the same time, the arena lay cloaked in an eerie silence, the kind that whispered of ancient conflicts. Shi Min and his team found themselves at the heart of it, their feet resting on the cracked stone that still reverberated with echoes of past duels. Dust spun lazily in the air, caught in the dawn's golden light like forgotten dreams suspended in time.

All eyes were fixed upon Four Eyes, whose visage held a seriousness that belied his name. He blinked slowly, a deep breath escaping his lips as he recalled his purpose. The black aura swirling around him — both a gift and an ominous burden — pulsated with potential.

With a resolute nod, he lifted both hands to the sky, calling forth the mist that awaited his command. It poured from his palms like a living shadow, thick and dark, churning with potent qi. The air itself grew heavier, the temperature dropping as an unsettling chill crept over the arena. The mist slithered across the ground, undulating like serpents on the hunt, searching for its quarry.

The First Shah stepped forward, his movements deliberate as he uncorked a small, ornate vial within lay a solitary droplet of Solaris's blood, glimmering like a precious gem — a remnant salvaged from their last tumultuous encounter.

As he released it into the void, the droplet lingered momentarily, suspended in a fragile state before plummeting to the earth. The mist responded as if awakened from slumber, engulfing it in an eager embrace, swirling and pulsing like a pack of wolves zeroing in on their prey. It surged low across the arena floor, infiltrating every crack and shadow, seeking out the lingering traces of Solaris's essence.

Shi Min, El Padre, and El Capitan observed, their expressions a mix of astonishment and apprehension, as the mist continued to weave its intelligence around them — persistent, relentless, and hauntingly alive.

Then, as if it had found its target, the mist coalesced in a single spot, rising in a spiraling column of darkness like a beacon in the night.

"They've found it," Four Eyes declared, his voice a low murmur, yet imbued with certainty.

Without hesitation, the First Shah drew a teleportation talisman, its surface gleaming with ethereal power, and activated it with a flick of his wrist. The mist surged around them, enveloping them in a shroud of swirling darkness.

In the blink of an eye, they vanished.

Confrontation: Solaris's End

They materialized in a desolate ravine — jagged cliffs loomed overhead, their harsh silhouettes stark against the somber sky. The earth around them was scorched and barren, an acrid scent of sulfur clinging to the wind as it whispered mournfully through the ravine.

And there he was.

Solaris slumped against a jagged boulder, his robes tattered and his body trembling as if the weight of the world crushed him. Blood pooled along his side, a vivid reminder of his vulnerability. His once-radiant aura flickered sporadically, resembling a flame that waned with every passing moment.

His eyes widened in bewilderment as they met Four Eyes's gaze. "You..." he rasped, voice hoarse and incredulous. "How did you find me?"

Four Eyes stepped forward, the black mist still swirling from his fingertips, a dark halo of intent. "You left a stain on the world," he replied coolly. "I simply followed it."

Solaris attempted to rise, but his legs betrayed him, buckling beneath his weight. Shi Min unsheathed his blade, El Capitan cracked his knuckles with a sound like thunder, and El Padre's narrowed gaze bore into their adversary.

"You won't escape this time," Shi Min said, his voice low and resolute, like the stillness before a storm.

A broken laughter erupted from Solaris, bitter and twisted, echoing against the cliffs. "Escape? I'm already dead," he scoffed, the despair tainted with defiance.

His fingers twitched with dark energy.

The First Shah's eyes widened in horror. "He's going to—!"

Suddenly, Solaris unleashed a piercing roar, his body igniting with erratic waves of unstable qi. Flames erupted from within him, wild and chaotic, engulfing the air in a blistering inferno. The ground beneath them trembled violently, and an anguished scream reverberated through the ravine.

He was self-destructing.

Chapter 340: LING LI SHAKES THE MARTIAL ARTS REALM

Shi Min lunged forward, but the Second Shah yanked him back just in time, invoking a shimmering shield talisman. The world around them erupted into brilliant light as Solaris's body exploded in a cataclysmic surge of power — a final act of defiance that cast shadows across the ravine.

The earth itself shook, rocks splintering and cascading down the cliffs as flames soared into the sky, only to extinguish in the ensuing silence. And when the brilliance faded, nothing remained but a scarred landscape and the echo of Solaris's final stand.

Return to Peonies Castle

The team emerged back through the mist portal, stepping into the serene courtyard of Peonies Castle as the sun dipped beneath the horizon, painting the sky with hues of lavender and gold.

Lily awaited them, her figure illuminated by the dying light. She spotted Shi Min first, her heart racing, then Four Eyes, and finally El Padre and El Capitan. Her gaze flitted across their faces, searching for signs of conflict, her breath held tight in her chest.

Shi Min offered a curt nod, the weight of their journey evident in his posture.

"It's done," he affirmed.

Relief washed over Lily like a gentle wave, her shoulders sagging as she released a shaky breath. The ghost of her stalker — her persistent shadow — was finally vanquished.

Fatty appeared, his jovial nature undeterred, presenting her with a slice of mango. "Told you they'd handle it," he said with a grin.

A faint smile graced Lily's lips, tears brimming in her eyes as she savored the sweet taste of newfound freedom. "I can finally breathe," she whispered, the words carrying the weight of months of fear.

As they stepped into the Castle, the lanterns flickered to life, casting warm glows against the stone walls. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Peonies Castle exuded an air of safety, a sanctuary once again reclaimed.

The Alchemy Storm

The moment Ling Li ignited her cauldrons — those meteorite-forged vessels thrumming with celestial qi — the atmosphere shifted dramatically. A pulsating energy radiated from the chamber, sending tremors rippling through the very ground of Peonies Castle. It was a subtle quake, yet the world beyond took notice.

The Birth of the Nirvana Elixir

As Ling Li summoned the Flame of the Universe, shadows enveloped the skies above Shanghai, cloaking the city in an eerie twilight. A mesmerizing column of qi spiraled upward from the chamber, piercing the clouded heavens like a radiant beacon. Cultivators across the region halted in mid-motion; their training disrupted. Sects stirred like restless animals sensing a storm, and families gathered, their eyes drawn toward the incredible spectacle.

"What is that energy?" Elder Wu of the Jade Serpent Sect demanded, his eyes wide with awe and trepidation as he surveyed the unnatural phenomenon.

"It's alchemy," whispered a nearby disciple, his voice barely above a hush. "But it's not merely ordinary. It's... divine."

With movements reminiscent of an immortal being, Ling Li gracefully added the Four-Pole Floating Soil, anchoring the elemental balance. The Firewood of Yin and Yang ignited in perfect synchronization, casting dynamic shadows that flickered and danced against the chamber walls.

The Phoenix Heart Blood shimmered like molten gold as it melded with the elixir's essence, a sight captivating enough to draw gasps from all who beheld it.

Outside, the energy fluctuations grew wild and intoxicating, a pulsating call to the ambitious and the foolish alike. Some sects chose prudence, dispatching scouts to observe from the proverbial shadows. Others, blinded by unquenchable greed, surged forward, their intentions clear.

The First Wave of Attackers

Three shady sects — Crimson Fang, Hollow Sky, and the Bone Lantern Clan — conspired to launch a ruthless assault, driven by the belief that the elixir was on the cusp of completion and that Ling Li stood vulnerable. They could not have been more mistaken.

The legendary Five Shah moved through the chaos like whispers of the wind. The first assailant didn't even have the chance to cry out; his body collapsed mid-air, a silent testament to a soul severed by an unseen blade. The second fell prey to a malevolent time loop, doomed to relive his final moments over and over until the wreckage of his mind shattered completely. The third met an untimely fate, transformed into stone, his qi frozen in a crystalline prison wrought by the Shah of Ice.

Inside the chamber, Ling Li remained unyielding, her focus unwavering. She compressed the elixir's soul matrix, weaving it together with her own vital qi. The Fire of Nine Flavors ignited into a swirling vortex of elemental chaos and brilliance, and the cauldron roared like a mythical beast awakened. The Nirvana Elixir thrummed with pulsating energy of rebirth, a heartbeat echoing in the silence.

Ren's Training: The Temple of Needles

Meanwhile, as the morning mist curled around the ancient stones of Peonies Castle, Ling Li remained sealed within her alchemy chamber, her qi thrumming like a second sun beneath its weighty structure. Outside, the household bustled with a sense of quiet urgency, each member embracing their daily rituals.

The day began with the sacred art of cultivation. In the sun-drenched courtyard, Shun engaged in a fierce sparring match with Nicu and Ailun, his muscles glistening with sweat as he pushed his physical limits, each strike resonating with the rhythm of determination. Nearby, Fatty and Chatty raced energetically around the perimeter, the playful arguments about form and technique enveloped in the sound of thundering feet, yet beneath their banter lay a fierce competition. On the serene koi pond, Lily practiced her exquisite balance on stepping stones, her movements a graceful dance, focus sharp as a sharpened blade.

But Ren was elsewhere, her journey taking her far from the familiar walls of the castle. She had ventured to the revered Temple of Shensei, perched high in the mist-veiled mountains beyond the city. In this sanctuary, the air was imbued with ancient wisdom. The temple, a timeless fortress of stone, bore intricate carvings of needles and swirling patterns, its vast halls alive with the echoes of healers and assassins alike — a testament to the duality of life and death.