

PROTEGE 351

Chapter 351 351: ASSIGNMENT TO BEIJING: THE SPY BENEATH THE THRONE

Ling Li swept her silvery sleeve through the air like a wisp of cloud, an elegant motion that commanded attention. "Enough of the pleasantries," she said, her voice calm yet steeped in authority. "Given your condition, you must exercise utmost vigilance. I am assigning you to Beijing."

Pharsa straightened with instinctive resolve, her fingers brushing her abdomen where life stirred softly within her—a revelation still echoing in her mind like the resonant toll of a temple gong—triplets, no less. The weight of the news pressed heavily upon her, and now, with Ling Li's decree, the gravity of her situation deepened. The air thrummed with an intensity that belied Ling Li's serene demeanor.

"You will steer clear of combat and field operations," Ling Li continued, her piercing gaze locked onto Pharsa's, as if she could probe the depths of her soul. "Your primary responsibility will be to lead your team in extracting intelligence on the Politburo members, and you must arrange a discreet meeting with Fen Zhang."

Pharsa nodded slowly, still reeling. "I understand. But... you're sending Mushu with Shi Min. Who's going to stay by your side?"

Ling Li smiled slightly, her tone gently reassuring. "I'll be here. Managing paperwork. Or training with the others. I'll be safe — with Butler Oda and the Seven Shah looking after me."

Pharsa exhaled deeply, her shoulders relaxing just a bit as clarity began to emerge. Pharsa nodded, standing tall despite the tremors of surprise and anticipation coursing through her. Her fingers curled protectively over her stomach, a fierce instinct awakening within her. "Alright. I'll start packing and organizing the team. We'll coordinate with Fen Zhang once I arrive."

Ling Li leaned closer, her tone sharpening into a blade. "I need to discern what the Chinese President intends — especially following our bold maneuver of relocating Camp Phoenix to Myanmar without his prior knowledge."

A ripple of amusement flickered across Pharsa's face as she recalled the ramifications. "Madam, that maneuver was nothing short of seismic. He'll interpret it as a declaration of war."

Ling Li's lips curved into a subtle yet inscrutable smile. "He is already convinced of that. I suspect he views my actions as a direct challenge."

A tense silence enveloped the room, thickening the air until it felt almost palpable. Butler James, intent on arranging the delicate tea tray, paused mid-motion, glancing toward Ling Li with a hint of unease flickering in his eyes.

Pharsa's mind raced, grasping the implications. "Fen Zhang will be under intense scrutiny. If anyone even suspects his loyalty to you —"

"They won't," Ling Li interrupted, her voice cutting like ice through the air. "We ensured that. During his recovery, we allowed the world to believe his family had perished. It was the only way to erase suspicion. He is under my protection. Fen Zhang understands the price of betrayal. His loyalty is absolute, and he owes me everything."

Pharsa's face hardened, the burgeoning vulnerability ebbing away into a sea of tactical focus. "I'll initiate contact through the old channel. He will respond — he has no choice."

Ling Li's expression softened momentarily, the hardness in her eyes giving way to something more human. "You must tread carefully. Beijing is teeming with prying eyes."

Ling Li, her hair flowing around her like a veil of starlight, shimmering in the morning brightness. "Good. You leave in three days. Make sure to spend time with your husband while you can."

"Hmph! Who wants to spend time with him?!" Pharsa retorted, a hint of amusement creeping into her voice despite her earlier shock.

"I want a comprehensive report on Fen Zhang's meeting, the President's movements, and any indications of retaliation once you arrive in Beijing." Ling Li said.

Pharsa rose, her hand resting lightly on her belly, a silent promise echoing within her. "I will deliver."

Ling Li lingered at the doorway, her voice barely above a whisper now. "And Pharsa..."

"Yes, Madam?"

"Do not allow them to witness even a flicker of weakness. Not once."

Pharsa's eyes gleamed with fierce determination. "They won't."

"Don't faint again."

Pharsa cracked a smile, despite the tension. "I'll try not to."

"Ah, Butler James, would you be so kind as to deliver this to Mushu?" Ling Li asked, her emerald eyes shimmering with determination. With fluid grace, she reached into her glimmering spatial ring and produced several intricately designed pouches. Each pouch was a masterpiece, embroidered with delicate patterns that danced and sparkled in the soft light, hinting at the precious substances contained within. "I completely forgot to pass these on to him. Please tell him to soak his body in these for two hours every night. He must finish every last morsel within," she instructed, her voice laced with both urgency and an unmistakable tenderness.

"Understood, Lady Ling," Butler James replied, his demeanor as steady and unwavering as a well-polished statue. He accepted the pouches with utmost reverence, cradling them in his hands as if they held the secrets to a hidden treasure waiting to be unveiled.

"Lady Ling?" Ling Li raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued as she regarded Butler James with a playful glint in her gaze.

"Ehem," Butler James cleared his throat, a light flush creeping up his cheeks. "I just thought it sounded better than Madam."

Ling Li chuckled, the melodic sound brightening the air around them. "It does sound better," she agreed, a smile tugging at her lips.

"I know, right?" Butler James said, puffing out his chest with a sense of pride, as if he had just achieved a remarkable feat. The atmosphere crackled with camaraderie, woven through their playful exchange, as they savored a moment of levity amidst their duties.

Pharsa, her mood heavy with the weight of unexpected news, let out a disdainful snort that echoed her frustration. The revelation of her pregnancy hung in the air like a storm cloud, casting shadows over her previously carefree demeanor. She shot him a sideways glance, her eyes narrowing with a mixture of disbelief and irritation, as if daring him to breach the silence with a word of comfort or understanding.

Ling Li chuckled softly, finishing her breakfast with an air of quiet satisfaction. She turned toward the hallway, her steps light yet purposeful, as if the very essence of destiny propelled her forward.

Chapter 352 352: BETWEEN DUTY AND DESTINY

"I'm meeting Shi Min now. Pharsa, you go to the infirmary and make sure the baby is safe and sound, then no need to follow me. You prepare for your departure."

With that, she glided down the corridor, leaving behind a stunned Pharsa, a flustered Butler James, and the lingering, intoxicating scents of jasmine and destiny hovering in the air like an unspoken promise.

As Ling Li disappeared down the corridor like a shadow fading into twilight, Pharsa turned toward her tablet, fingers flying over the keys as she drafted a barrage of encrypted messages.

Beijing awaited, a labyrinthine stage for the intricate game beneath the throne that was about to unfold.

The Study

The morning light seeped through the towering windows of Ling Li's study, casting warm, golden rays that danced across the polished mahogany desk and the shelves lined with ancient scrolls, each whispering secrets of the past. The room exuded a sense of tranquil authority, its stillness punctuated only by the low hum of Shi Min's video conference and the rhythmic tapping of Ling Li's fingers as they glided across her tablet.

Ling Li entered the room like a gentle breeze, her presence calm and unobtrusive, yet commanding in its quietude. At the far end, Shi Min sat upright, his posture a testament to the weight of his responsibilities. His voice, clipped and professional, resonated with purpose as he engaged with his global board, a virtual mosaic of faces reflecting the vastness of his empire — a realm encompassing real estate, mining, vineyards, shipping, hospitality, and cutting-edge medical research.

Without a word of interruption, Ling Li settled into her chair, surrounded by the mountain of paperwork that had amassed during her ten-day retreat. Each document — a report, a contract, a proposal, a financial statement, a string of encrypted messages, cultivation logs, samples — demanded her undivided attention, a ceaseless tide of responsibility.

As Shi Min's meeting stretched on, the minutes slipped by like grains of sand. He meticulously finalized delegation protocols, orchestrating a transfer of authority to Wushing, his most trusted executive. Each nuance mattered deeply — asset protection, succession planning, contingency measures. It was a level of detail that could only be grasped by someone who had painstakingly built empires from the ground up.

And therein lay the reason for his prolonged immersion in work — the cultivation he had postponed for far too long.

Shi Min bore the immense weight of legacy upon his shoulders, not merely in terms of wealth but in the profound responsibility for the people entangled within his empire.

Ling Li glanced up, her gaze resting upon her son. A quiet pride shimmered in her eyes, reflecting the years of dedication and sacrifice that had shaped him.

After nearly three hours of deliberation, Shi Min leaned back in his chair, the last contract signed with a flourish that released a tide of relief. He exhaled slowly, the tension in his shoulders dissipating like morning mist.

"Mom, I'm done," he said, his voice transforming from the authoritative tone of a CEO to the softer essence of a son revealing his vulnerabilities.

Ling Li didn't divert her gaze immediately; she remained absorbed in the luminous report on her screen. "Alright," she replied, her voice steady and focused. "Give me a minute."

Shi Min nodded, a semblance of ease returning to his demeanor as he rose. "Take your time. No rush."

He ambled to the sideboard, pouring himself a fresh cup of coffee as the rich aroma swirled around him. Leaning against the counter, he watched the steam spiral upward, lost in contemplative silence.

The room settled into quiet once more, yet this silence bore a different weight. It was not the silence of diligent work, but rather the profound silence that heralded change.

Departure Orders: The Weight of the Azure Bone

Ling Li closed the final report on her tablet, her fingers lingering on the smooth surface a moment longer than necessary, as if reluctant to sever the connection. The silence in the study was thick — not with discomfort, but with electrifying anticipation. She looked up, her gaze unwavering, radiating authority.

"Shi Min," she beckoned, her voice steady, but beneath it lay the crackling tension of a storm waiting to break. "Come here."

Shi Min rose from the sideboard, cradling his steaming cup of coffee, the rich aroma filling the air with a bittersweet nostalgia. He crossed the room with deliberate steps, his heart heavy, and settled into the chair opposite his mother at the polished conference table. This gleaming expanse mirrored both the morning sun and the unspoken tension that hung between them like a fragile thread, ready to snap.

Ling Li reached into her ornate ring, her fingers glowing faintly with a soft azure light as she summoned several items from the depths of her inner world. One by one, she placed them on the table, a deliberate ceremony marked by reverence and a vulnerability that pierced through her composed demeanor.

"This," she announced, laying down a crystalline shard that pulsed with a captivating azure glow, "is the Azure Dragon Bone."

Shi Min leaned forward, eyes narrowing, captivated. The bone radiated a dense power — ancient, volatile, almost alive. He sensed its energy pressing against his skin, a soft but insistent pulse that felt like a silent roar echoing in his veins. It was beautiful and terrifying, a reflection of the immense burden it carried.

"You'll proceed to Hidden Valley ahead of us," Ling Li continued, her voice unwavering but laced with an underlying tremor. "We'll reunite two days before the 'Eye' opens. Mushu will accompany you — he's overdue for a breakthrough and needs to refocus."

Shi Min nodded, his heart swelling with determination, yet uncertainty gnawed at the edges of his resolve.

Ling Li's fingers hovered hesitantly above the bone, her expression sharpening with a mother's concern. "Once you arrive, seek out your great-grandfather. Reveal your purpose to him. He will guide you to a secluded cultivation chamber — one shielded from prying forces."

She paused, the silence pregnant with unspoken urgency. "The energy from this bone is immense. You must absorb it slowly and process it properly. If you rush..."

"I know," Shi Min interjected, pinching the bridge of his nose, tension coiling within him. "I could explode."

Chapter 353 353: COME BACK TO ME

Ling Li's lips curled into a faint smile at his self-awareness, but her heart felt heavy. "It's good that you understand." She reached into her ring once more and withdrew a pouch of herbs, the fabric embroidered with intricate protective runes that shimmered softly in the sunlight. "Soak in these for three hours. They'll prime your body for the bone's energy."

Shi Min took the pouch, inspecting its contents, his eyes trained and practiced, but the weight of the mission pressed heavily on his chest.

"After that," Ling Li added, the gravity of her words anchoring them in silence, "call me. I'll perform acupuncture to open your meridians and clear your dantian. You'll need every channel flowing freely for this."

A heavy silence enveloped them, and Shi Min's heart thudded in his chest as the magnitude of what lay ahead settled like a dark cloud. "Understood."

He reached out for the Azure Dragon Bone, his fingers grazing its surface. A faint surge of qi coursed through him, electrifying and invigorating, drawing a sharp breath from his lips that echoed his inner turmoil.

"Shi Min..." Ling Li's voice softened, trembling like a fragile leaf in the wind.

He looked up, meeting her gaze filled with a tempest of emotions, unspoken yet profoundly understood — love, fear, pride.

The words she wanted to say hung between them, heavy with the weight of her unexpressed fears — the burdens of death, war, betrayal she had carried throughout her life. Nothing, though, weighed more heavily than the thought of her son risking everything in pursuit of immortality.

Shi Min saw the worry etched in her features, and without hesitation, he rose and circled the table, enveloping his mother in a firm, protective embrace. The warmth of their connection wrapped around them, grounding them both in that moment, a fleeting balm against the storm brewing in their hearts.

"Mom," he murmured, the softness of his voice surfacing as a stark contrast to the turbulence within her. "Don't worry too much. I'll come back safely, I promise."

Ling Li closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of his embrace infuse her with a mixture of solace and dread, her hands resting gently on his back.

"How could I not come back?" Shi Min added, pulling back slightly to flash a mischievous grin, an effort to lighten the air thick with unshed tears. "I still need to torture my three little brothers when they come out," he said, pointing to his mother's bulging stomach.

Ling Li chuckled lightly, the sound bittersweet like the fading light of a sunset. She refrained from correcting him — she already knew the truth. Three little sisters were on their way, not brothers.

"Alright," she responded, her voice thickening with unshed emotion. "As long as you return safe and sound."

Her fingers lingered at his elbow, a tender gesture infused with the depths of their shared love and unspoken fears. "Go and prepare. Call me when you're done."

Shi Min smirked, stepping toward the door with a playful twinkle in his eyes as he tried to mask the weight of what lay ahead. "Aw, look at that, I'm being shooed by my own mother."

He exited with a light-hearted wave, leaving Ling Li alone in the study, the echoes of their conversation clinging to the air like a haunting melody.

She stared at the empty chair for a lingering moment, her heart aching with an intensity that felt almost unbearable, then turned to gaze out the window, where the wind danced among the garden's blossoms below.

In the quiet of her heart, she whispered, "Come back to me."

The Matriarch Walks: Ling Li and the Seven Shah

The door clicked shut behind Shi Min, the sound reverberating softly within the hushed confines of the study, like a bell tolling in a tranquil valley.

Ling Li walked back to her seat. She remained anchored in her chair, her graceful hands resting lightly on the polished wooden table, but her gaze had wandered far beyond the stacks of meticulously organized documents. It drifted into the recesses of her memories, where shadows of the past lingered, evoking a complex tapestry of emotions.

Her heart throbbed with a bittersweet nostalgia.

Ling Li could vividly recall Shi Min as a small boy of three, his fists clenched with youthful determination, brow furrowed in fierce concentration as he mimicked her martial stances in the sun-dappled courtyard. Even then, he had exuded an unyielding spirit. No matter how many times he stumbled, how harshly he was pushed to his limits, he never once let a tear fall. Not a single drop.

She had wielded her expectations like a blacksmith's hammer, forging him into something extraordinary. He took her rigorous training in stride, never uttering a complaint.

When the day had come to send him to Shinsei, she had braced herself for resistance, but Shi Min had surprised her. He bowed, gathered his belongings with the quiet dignity of a warrior, and departed with unshakeable resolve. He had understood, even in his youth, that strength was not merely a gift bestowed but an essential armor for life.

Now, the thought of Shi Min traversing the path toward immortality weighed heavily on her spirit.

Ling Li closed her eyes, drawing in a slow, deliberate breath, her chest tightening like a vice. She steeled herself against the tide of grief that threatened to overthrow her composure. This moment was not for tears. Not now.

This was the only path for Shi Min to safeguard himself — especially when her own time came to step back from the mortal plane and enter seclusion. She would not always be there to shield him from the perils of the world. He had to rise as a beacon of strength on his own.

With renewed purpose, she opened her eyes and glanced at the elegant watch adorning her wrist.

Three hours until the acupuncture.

Plenty of time.

Rising from her seat, she smoothed her clothes — a flowing garment that whispered secrets of tradition — and stepped into the vastness beyond the study. Her footsteps barely made a sound against the

gleaming floors, yet her presence commanded the room. Servants bowed deeply as she passed, their eyes wide with a mixture of awe and reverence.

Chapter 354: BONDS, BLADES, AND BEAST

Utilizing her qinggong, Ling Li soared towards the training grounds, her heart racing with electric anticipation.

The air shimmered around her, charged with qi that crackled like static electricity before a storm. The training grounds buzzed with frenetic energy. The Seven Shah, each a master of their element, moved with purpose, their disciples scattered across the terrain like pieces upon a celestial chessboard.

The Shah of Wind, perched atop a rugged stone pillar, commanded with an elegance that mirrored the billowing chaos of his cloak. His pupils leaped and twisted midair, their bodies dancing like autumn leaves caught in a tempest.

Nearby, the Shah of Flame raged at the heart of a scorched arena, barking commands that cut through the thick heat. His students were drenched in sweat, their faces set with determination as they endured relentless waves of fiery resistance training.

The Shah of Earth stood like an immovable mountain, his powerful aura anchoring the ground beneath him. Trainees struggled to maintain their balance on the ever-shifting terrain, legs shaking as the earth itself tested their resolve.

As Ling Li approached the training field, the very atmosphere shifted like a tide drawn by lunar pull.

Silence enveloped the space.

One by one, the Shah turned their attention to her.

They didn't bow.

There was no need.

Their subtle nods — those brief moments of acknowledgment — spoke volumes.

Ling Li reciprocated with a composed nod, her face an inscrutable mask of authority.

As she walked among the trainees, her gaze was sharp, penetrating like a blade concealed within soft silk. Some students instinctively straightened, buoyed by her presence, while others faltered, weighed down by her scrutiny. A few, emboldened, redoubled their efforts, driven by the challenge she represented.

She paused beside the Shah of Light, who was skillfully overseeing a group practicing intricate illusion-breaking techniques.

"How are they progressing?" she inquired, her voice steady yet laced with curiosity.

The Shah of Light returned her questioning gaze with a faint, encouraging smile. "They are raw, but their determination is fierce. The 'Eye' will test them."

Ling Li nodded, her expression one of fierce approval. "Good. Push them harder. The 'Eye' shows no mercy for hesitation."

She continued her observant sweep across the field.

This was her legacy, forged not only through Shi Min but also within the hearts of them all.

And she would ensure they were ready.

Cannonball's Dilemma

Ling Li's gaze swept across the expanse of the training grounds, her sharp eyes honing in on Four Eyes, who stood entranced under the watchful presence of the Shah of Dusk — Master Veyron. The air around Veyron shimmered with a dark aura that pulsed like a living entity, enveloping Four Eyes in a swirling, enigmatic mist. Each of his movements was a deliberate choreography of restraint and precision, a lesson in the discipline required to master the shadow arts.

Ling Li observed intently, her expression a carefully crafted mask. She noted the formidable strength Four Eyes had forged through years of relentless practice, yet beneath that surface lay subtle cracks — the slight hesitations in his transitions, a momentary falter in his modulation of his aura. He was tantalizingly close to mastery, but the final pieces still eluded him.

With a quiet resolve, she turned her attention across the field. There, Chatty was entrenched in a vigorous training session with the Shah of Steel, Master Kael, a titanic figure whose swordsmanship was a mesmerizing blend of brutality and grace. Chatty's Enfield, Cannonball, rested on his shoulder like a loyal guardian, each flick of its tail in sync with the powerful arcs of Kael's blade.

Ling Li approached stealthily, her presence blending into the charged atmosphere. Suddenly, the training session paused as Master Kael's gravelly voice cut through the silence. "Your stance is solid," he pronounced, the words resonating like distant thunder. "But your blade lacks conviction. You lean too heavily on your companion's channeling. Embrace the weight. Make it your own."

Chatty nodded, sweat glistening on his brow as he absorbed the wisdom. "Understood, Master Kael," he replied, determination igniting in his eyes as he prepared to dive deeper into his training.

Ling Li stepped forward, her voice slicing through the warm afternoon air like finely woven silk over tempered steel. "Murphy, I'm granting you three days off. Take this time to be with your wife; she departs for Beijing in just three days. Leave the Cannonball in Rockie's care."

Chatty's face erupted with excitement at the words' time off' — but that joy quickly turned to bewilderment as the latter part of her announcement struck him like a sudden gust of wind.

"Wait — what?" he stammered, his voice rising in pitch, tinged with panic. "Why? Why is Pharsa going to Beijing?"

His outburst rippled through the training field, drawing startled glances from onlookers.

Rockie, who had been engaged in an intense stretch nearby, groaned with exasperation. "And why am I stuck taking care of his Enfield?" he shot back, indignation lacing his tone. "He and I are nemeses!"

Ling Li raised an eyebrow, a small, amused smile gracing her lips at the delightful chaos unfolding before her. "Well, you can seek Pharsa later. She has good news to share with you," she said cryptically.

She chose not to mention the impending pregnancy; that was a secret Pharsa needed to reveal.

Chatty let out a dramatic groan, arms crossing over his chest in resignation. "No matter how good the good news is, it's still bad news that my wife is leaving me behind."

Fatty, his shirt damp from sparring, leaned in with a mischievous grin. "Oh, now you'll get a taste of what it's like to be separated from your wife," he teased.

Chatty huffed in displeasure, his expression a mixture of irritation and resignation.

Ling Li turned her attention back to Rockie. "Aren't you the one responsible for the Enfield whenever Murphy's unavailable?"

"No! I lost a bet!" Rockie protested, his voice rising, flaring with indignation. "That beast wrecked my room just because he couldn't grasp what I was saying!"

"Madam," Rockie added, his voice reaching near desperation, "why not send Cannonball back to Bear? He should train and break through. Murphy's due for a breakthrough too — he needs to catch up with his master!"

Chapter 355: HE'S SO WEAK

At the mention of his fate, Cannonball, the Enfield, perched on Chatty's shoulder, quivered nervously. In an instant, he leapt to Ling Li's shoulder, clinging to her as if she were a lifeline.

"Oh, Deity! My Beautiful Goddess! The Goddess of All Goddesses..." he began, his voice dripping with exaggerated reverence, his eyes wide and shining.

Ling Li blinked, taken aback and slightly amused, hovering on the edge of curiosity for where this would lead.

"The most generous Master and kind in the world," Cannonball continued, chest puffed out with pride. "You bestowed upon me, Young Master Murphy. I'm the one assisting him in cultivating! I channel spiritual essences to him — without me, knowing how foolish he is, he couldn't wield a sword properly! He's so weak!"

"Hey! Who are you calling foolish and weak?!" Chatty snapped, mistrust flashing across his features. "You just called me your Master, yet you're talking badly about me!"

Cannonball flicked his tail dismissively, a smirk on his snout.

Ling Li narrowed her eyes, pondering the implications of his claims. "Is what you're saying true?"

She had never deemed Chatty's cultivation foundation to be lacking — yet now seeds of doubt began to take root in her mind.

"Of course it's true," proclaimed Cannonball, standing tall. "Why not let him spar with Quan Ye?"

Ling Li nodded, exchanging a knowing glance with Fatty, who stepped forward, sword glinting in the sunlight. Chatty unsheathed his own weapon, adjusting his stance with renewed determination.

"Don't hold back," Ling Li commanded sharply. "Give it your all. I'm here — I won't let you get hurt. Begin!"

The clash of steel rang out like thunder, the two swords colliding with a fiery spark. In mere moments, Chatty's blade clattered to the ground, leaving him staring in disbelief at his own hand as if it had betrayed him. His grip faltered, his control shattered.

Chatty "!!!!"

Fatty blinked, confusion etched on his brow. "That... wasn't normal."

He scratched his chin, contemplating the revelation. "So it's true. The Enfield has been stabilizing his flow."

Chatty "???"

"I told you," Cannonball said proudly, puffing out his chest as if he had conquered a mountain.

Chatty "...."

He honestly couldn't find a single word to say.

Ling Li fell silent, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. Uncertainty danced in the air, thickening the atmosphere around them.

Rockie stepped forward, his voice gaining firmness. "Madam, Murphy won't train for the next three days. Since he no longer needs Cannonball, he should cultivate with Bear. He definitely can't remain with me."

Ling Li turned her gaze to the Enfield. "Cannonball. You're at level four. Once you reach level five, you can transform into a human. So tell me — will you remain as you are and assist Murphy, or will you choose to become human and leave?"

Cannonball froze, his eyes locking with Chatty's.

Silence enveloped the training ground, thick and tense.

Every beast dreamed of the day they could transform, yet it meant severing the bond they had forged. It meant choosing self over service.

"I..." he began, his voice trembling as uncertainty washed over him.

Sensing his inner turmoil, Ling Li interjected gently, "I'll grant you three days to ponder this. Go and spend time at Bear's camp. Return and give me your answer."

Cannonball bowed his head, gratitude shining in his eyes. "Thank you," his voice barely above a whisper, glancing back at Chatty one last time before leaping from Ling Li's shoulder and vanishing into the dense embrace of the forest.

An eerie quiet settled over the training grounds.

Ling Li turned to Chatty. "Murphy, go. Spend time with Pharsa. I'll devise a proper program to enhance your cultivation foundation." She deliberated about discussing this with Butler Oda later.

She pivoted toward Rockie. "Take him home."

With synchronized bows, the two disappeared, their footsteps echoing in the serene stillness left behind.

Ling Li turned back to the now-still field, commanding, "As you were."

And with that, training resumed, the air crackling with renewed energy.

A Moment Between Storms: Ling Li and Four Eyes

Four Eyes bowed slightly to Master Veyron, his presence still crackling with the remnants of shadow energy, like a fading spark in the twilight. The Shah of Dusk observed him depart in silence, the dark mist retreating like an ebbing tide under the weight of his gaze.

Ling Li stood at the perimeter of the training field, her hair swirling in the wind, resembling delicate petals drifting through the air. As she caught sight of him approaching, a warm and soothing smile bloomed on her lips — a gentle gesture capable of softening even the fight-hardened spirit of the most relentless warrior.

As Four Eyes crossed the distance to her, his breath labored and heavy from the morning's exertion, he paused, uncertainty flickering across his face. With a hesitant movement, he offered her a half-hug, acutely aware of the damp sweat that clung to his skin from the rigorous training. However, Ling Li stepped into his embrace completely, her arms encircling him without a trace of hesitation, igniting a warmth in his chest that made his heart skip a beat.

"Do I smell bad?" he asked playfully, glancing down at the crown of her head nestled against his chest, the scent of sweat mingling oddly with the sweetness of her presence.

Ling Li tilted her head back, her eyes glimmering like distant stars scattered across a velvet night sky. "You always smell incredible," she declared, her voice layered with playful confidence and a teasing lilt that danced in the air.

Four Eyes let out a hearty laugh, the tension in his shoulders easing for a fleeting moment. "But your scent is so intoxicating it makes me want to devour you whole," he whispered, his tone mischievous, yet the smoldering intensity in his gaze betrayed a more profound longing.

"You!" Ling Li exclaimed, a mock indignation flashing across her features as she playfully attempted to shove him away. Yet, Four Eyes held her close, his grip firm but gentle, as if savoring the very air between them.

But as the laughter faded, a more serious note filled the air between them. "Why are you sending Pharsa to Beijing?" he asked in a low, concerned tone. "Is something wrong in the capital?"

Chapter 356: SHI MIN'S REFLECTION

Ling Li's gaze turned distant, her expression softening with an unspoken weight. "I didn't tell Chatty — it isn't my secret to share. But Pharsa is pregnant. It's why I've assigned her a different task."

Four Eyes blinked in disbelief, processing her words as if they were a puzzle he had to piece together. Ling Li's lips curved into a gentle laugh, warm and echoing. "Honey, she's pregnant with triplets."

For a moment, Four Eyes stood frozen, his mind racing. "Triplets?" he repeated, rubbing the back of his neck in an attempt to grasp the reality of her news. "Must run in her genes... what a surprise."

He paused, then a tender smile broke through his astonishment. "Murphy will be ecstatic. I'm so happy for him. He's been alone for what feels like an eternity... longing for family."

Ling Li placed a gentle hand on his arm, her touch calming him like a soothing balm. "You and Fatty are his brothers, not by blood but by heart. We are here for him; we are his family. Shensei had previously revealed that Pharsa will indeed have triplets, indicating that his divination is quite powerful."

Four Eyes nodded slowly, emotion welling in his eyes as the truth of her words sank in. "Right... I know. We're all here for both Murphy and Pharsa. They'll never be alone again."

Ling Li stepped back, her demeanor shifting as focus replaced warmth. "You should return to your training. I need to head home and prepare Shi Min's acupuncture."

Reaching out, Four Eyes let his hand linger gently over her womb, an act filled with both tenderness and concern. "Be careful. Are the three boys behaving themselves?"

Ling Li smiled, placing her hand over his in a protective gesture. "I'm careful. The three beanies are quite well-behaved."

With a graceful reluctance, she peeled away from his embrace, a quiet resolve in her movement. "Go back. Don't keep Master Veyron waiting."

A heavy sigh escaped Four Eyes, his fingers lingering in the air where she had been before they fell to his side. "Okay," he murmured, glancing back to the path ahead.

Just as he turned to leave, Ling Li's voice called him back, a soft yet commanding whisper that cut through the air.

"Um... Honey."

He paused, looking over his shoulder, his heart quickening at the sound.

Ling Li's gaze sharpened, her voice now serious. "Be more decisive when you attack."

Before he could respond, she vanished in a dazzling shimmer of light, leaving behind the faint, haunting scent of lotus and the echo of her words lingering in the air.

Four Eyes remained still for a moment, the gentle wind brushing past him as if urging him onward. Then, with a newfound determination in his steps, he turned his focus forward. Master Veyron was waiting, and Ling Li's guidance resonated in the depths of his mind, sharpening his resolve.

The Bath of Preparation

Under the brilliant light of Peonies Castle, Shi Min emerged from Ling Li's study, his heart heavy and burdened. The conversation had reached its end, yet the echo of his mother's unease clung to him like a persistent shadow, weighing upon his chest.

He could feel her quiet turmoil—an invisible specter of fear that enveloped him—and it shattered him from within. Ling Li, his mother, had always been a pillar of strength, an unwavering fortress. But beneath her composed exterior, Shi Min recognized the depth of her struggles. He had witnessed the endless way she bore the weight of the world, how she offered a gentle smile even amidst exhaustion. It pained him to see her valiantly maintaining her facade, never allowing her children a glimpse of her faltering spirit.

His admiration for his mother was profound.

She had raised him and his siblings — Ren, himself, and Lily — with an unwavering grace that seemed almost ethereal. Their father, a fleeting presence in their lives, had vanished into the shadows of his own insecurities after Lily's birth, consumed by paranoia. Ling Li had sought annulment without bitterness, never once allowing a negative word to escape her lips about the man who had left them in the dark.

But Shi Min could not remain in ignorance.

Driven by a need for truth, he had delved into the depths of his father's past, unearthing a tale of manipulation, instability, and emotional warfare. If he were to distill the essence of that man into a single word, "psycho" would be a fitting description.

Thus, he and Ren had grown up too quickly, forced to mature under the weight of their mother's heartache. They had become shields for Lily, protecting her from the harsh realities they had faced, allowing her to revel in the joyous innocence of a childhood untainted by despair. In every moment, they supported Ling Li, managing the household tasks, guarding her precious time, and striving to keep her worries at bay.

With the precision of a seasoned general and the tenderness of a devoted mother, she had balanced work, family, and the demands of the Li clan.

As Shi Min entered his room, silence enveloped him like a soft, familiar shroud. He made his way to the bathroom where a wooden bathtub awaited him, its polished Hinoki Cypress surface gleaming warmly under the gentle glow of soft light.

With a reverent touch, he retrieved the small pouch that Ling Li had entrusted to him earlier. As he opened it, a cascade of crushed herbs and powdered roots danced into the tub, swirling together with the rising steam to create a heady, intoxicating aroma that filled the room.

He turned on the hot water, and as it trickled into the tub, the herbs began to unfurl in a vibrant display, blooming to life in a fragrant ballet.

While waiting for the water to reach the desired level, he stepped under the shower, rinsing away the remnants of sweat and grime that clung to him like a second skin. The warmth enveloped him, yet his thoughts remained cold and heavy, anchored by the reality he was steeped in.

After drying off, he sank into the tub, the water embracing him like a long-lost friend. Instantly, the scent enveloped him — rich, earthy, and ancient — a tapestry of his mother's love woven into each drop.

Chapter 357: THREE TINY WHITE DOTS

Shi Min recognized the rarity of the ingredients Ling Li had carefully hand-picked, each one a symbol of her dedication and foresight: Snow Lotus from the soaring peaks of Kunlun, revered for its qi-enhancing properties and its ability to stabilize the flow of spirits.

Black Spirit Ginseng, harvested only once every century, is renowned for fortifying the dantian and shielding against internal collapse.

Azure Nightshade, a forbidden herb Ling Li had likely procured through clandestine means, was known for amplifying absorption yet perilous if mishandled. Moonlight Orchid, a translucent bloom that unfurls only under the full moon's gaze, is cherished for its soothing essence that calms the soul flame and harmonizes elemental discord.

Shi Min inhaled deeply, allowing the steam to curl around his face, a veil of tranquility enveloping him.

"Ah... my mother truly devoted herself," he mused, eyes closed in reverence.

As the essences seeped into his skin, flowing into his very bones and spirit, Shi Min sank deeper into the comforting embrace of the water. His body relaxed, tension melting away, while his mind honed sharper, bringing clarity amidst the haze.

In that serene silence, he began to meditate.

The room held its breath.

Only the whisper of water.

Only the scent of legacy.

Only the heartbeat of a son poised to tread the path his mother had carved with immense sacrifice, ready to honor the legacy she had bestowed upon him.

Legacy and Preparation: Mushu's Quiet Resolve

In the dusky expanse of the west wing of Peonies Castle, Mushu sat before a sprawling monitor, his demeanor a serene blend of calm and intensity. The dimness of the room was pierced only by the soft, ethereal glow of the screen and the dancing flames of flickering lanterns that adorned the walls, casting playful shadows around him. Ahead of him, his team filled the grid of the video conference, each face a testament to the countless missions they had undertaken together — faces he had trained, nurtured, and guided through trials and triumphs alike.

Uncertainty loomed over the duration of his seclusion. As Ling Li's trusted first in command, the weight of responsibility pressed heavily upon him. He needed to toughen them for the challenges that lay ahead.

"Reginald will remain in charge of Ren's safety," Mushu declared, his voice steady, each word weighted with authority. "Leonard will assume my position temporarily. All reports go directly to Madam Ling Li. No exceptions."

A ripple of understanding swept across the screen, connecting them even in this digital divide.

Mushu's gaze settled on Leonard, whose strong features were etched with resolve, eyes gleaming like polished obsidian, ready to embrace the mantle of leadership. Memories surged as he recalled the day he found the twins, their frail bodies rummaging through refuse behind a bustling market stall, limbs as slender as twigs, their eyes deep and vacant, mirrors reflecting the harsh realities they had endured.

Their tale was one of heart-wrenching loss: a mother claimed by the perils of childbirth, a father succumbing to the ravages of tuberculosis, navigating a life forged in the unforgiving streets.

Mushu had not merely taken their stories at face value; he had delved deep, traversing the alleys, engaging with those who had known them, piecing together the mosaic of their lives. Each detail unfolded to be as poignant as the last, ringing true.

And so, he had opened his heart and home to them. He had trained them, provided for them, nurtured them. They had blossomed into stalwarts of his command — Reginald, a steadfast guardian of Ren, loyalty radiating from him like a beacon; and Leonard, poised and ready to step into his absence.

A swell of quiet pride enveloped Mushu, akin to a father witnessing his sons emerge as formidable men.

He methodically delved into a final overview of tasks, contingency protocols, and fallback plans, ensuring no detail was overlooked. With a decisive nod, he concluded the call, leaving the screen cloaked in darkness.

Turning away, he was met with an inviting sight on the table — pouches of meticulously prepared medical herbs bestowed upon him by Ling Li. Each pouch contained a carefully crafted blend, infused with qi-enhancing properties and stabilizers that sang of ancient wisdom.

Without a moment's hesitation, Mushu made his way to the bathroom, where a tub stood ready, carved from aged Hinoki Cypress. The surface gleamed softly, reflecting the flickering light as steam wafted upwards like a gentle invitation. He poured the herbs into the steaming water, marveling as they unfurled, releasing fragrant tendrils of earthy, bitter aromas reminiscent of an ancient forest.

Stripping off his robe, Mushu stepped into the bath, sinking into the depths with deliberate calm. The heat enveloped him like a protective cocoon, soothing the knots of tension in his muscles, quieting the tempest that raged in his mind.

Closing his eyes, Mushu let his thoughts wander.

He pondered Shi Min, the intricacies of his spirit. He contemplated Ling Li, the multifaceted layers of her wisdom. He envisioned the path ahead, winding and fraught with challenges yet to be faced.

Ling Li and Shisei trained him. He himself had trained warriors. He had led missions. But this journey — this intimate cultivation — was something altogether different. It was personal, underscored by a drive that pulsed as fervently as his very lifeblood.

As the water rippled gently around him, Mushu began to prepare, ready to face the depths of whatever lay ahead with the unwavering resolve that had guided him through countless battlefields.

The Ultrasound Revelation

On the far side of Peonies Castle, the warm morning air shimmered like gold dust, the sunlight pouring through the tall windows and casting a glow over the intricately tiled corridor. Pharsa emerged from the infirmary, her fingers tightly grasping a crisp printout — her ultrasound. She gazed at it, her heart racing, eyes wide with a mix of shock and wonder.

Three tiny white dots danced on the page.

Three lives.

Her babies.

Still enveloped in a surreal trance, a familiar voice broke into the peaceful air, shattering her moment of reverie like glass.

"Honey! Honey!"

Chatty's voice arrived before he did, a vibrant melody bursting forth like a trumpet's call, rich with excitement echoing down the hall.

Chapter 358: THREE ULTRASOUND: CHAOS, LOVE, AND TRIPLETS

Fumbling to hide the printout in her pocket, Pharsa's composure snapped back into focus, irritation blooming within her. "Why are you so loud? And who's your Honey?" she quipped, arching an eyebrow at his overly dramatic entrance.

In just two strides, Chatty closed the distance between them, arms splayed wide in a welcoming embrace. "Of course, you're my only Honey! The sweetest Honey in the world," he proclaimed cheekily, enveloping her in a warm, sweaty hug.

Pharsa wrinkled her nose, trying to suppress a smile. "Why are you here, o' melodramatic one? Aren't you supposed to be in training?"

"Oh, Honey," Chatty whined, clutching his chest theatrically. "Madam sent me home and insisted I should spend time with you because you're leaving in three short days! Why do you need to leave? How am I supposed to live without you?"

Pharsa snorted, unable to resist his charm. "You! How old are you? The Kim Kim and Chin Chin didn't even bat an eye when their Ling Li was away. Look at you — worse than a toddler!"

But Chatty was already shifting gears. "But Honey..." he began pitifully, then paused, recalling Ling Li's words. His eyes suddenly sparkled with a revelation. "Oh! Madam said you have good news for me!"

A mischievous smile tugged at the corners of Pharsa's mouth. The sudden shift from whining to curiosity was so typical of her man. "I'm not telling! Hmph! Find out for yourself," she teased, turning on her heels and striding purposefully toward the main house.

Unfazed, Chatty, stubborn as ever, trotted after his wife, tenacity akin to a puppy chasing after a favorite treat.

He exhausted every tactic in his playful arsenal — puppy eyes wide with remorse, exaggerated sighs, theatrical lamentations, even the most exaggerated of fake tears. "Honey! If you don't tell me, I'll lose sleep! I'll forget my sword skills! I'll cry in front of Fatty!"

Pharsa rolled her eyes but couldn't help giggling. His desperation was ridiculous — and endearing.

Finally, when they reached the sanctuary of their quarters, she handed him the ultrasound printout.

Chatty studied it, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Honey, what is this? Did you go for a check-up? Are you ill? Is everything alright? What did the doctor say?" he bombarded her with a flurry of questions, panic rising as he pulled her into a frantic embrace.

Pharsa narrowed her eyes, her patience waning as she pinched him sharply.

"OW! OW! OUCH!" Chatty yelped, hopping around like a startled bird.

"It's supposed to be good news! How is my becoming unwell good news? You're cursing me!" She wailed, her voice rising in pitch.

"No! No! Honey, listen... I saw in movies they hand out printouts like this and then talk about tumors or cancer," Chatty blurted, his eyes wide with innocent terror.

'Knowing how foolish and ignorant this man is, no wonder that's what's on his mind,' she thought. Pharsa's exasperation turned into a bubbling laugh, partly at his ignorance and partly out of sheer affection.

Her laughter froze him in place.

'Is she actually sick?' An anxious thought lodged itself in his mind. 'But no... she said it's good news. So she surely can't be sick...'

"Honey," he murmured softly, taking a tentative step closer. "Please, can you tell me what this ultrasound is about?"

With a heavy sigh, Pharsa snatched the printout back, pointing decisively at the three dots. "Look there! Can you see those three white dots?"

Chatty squinted, panic starting to creep back in. "Honey, are they tumors? Cease? Can they be removed?"

"Murphy!" Pharsa shouted, genuinely furious now, delivering him a swift kick to his bum.

"AH! Honey! I'm scared and worried about you! Please don't be mad! I love you more than anything! I love you more than myself! I'd trade my life for yours!" Chatty exclaimed, collapsing dramatically to his knees, his face a portrait of agony.

Pharsa froze, his heartfelt words crashing over her like an unexpected wave.

Staring at him, her heart thudded loudly in her chest. "Is what you said really true?"

Chatty rose, pulling her into a fierce embrace, his voice thick with sincerity. "Of course it's true. You're my wife. My only family. I've been alone my whole life. Having you made my life whole."

Pharsa, herself an orphan, felt her chest tighten. She leaned into him, her arms wrapping around his waist.

"I believe you," she whispered.

"So, Honey," Chatty murmured, holding her close, "can you please now tell me about this ultrasound report?"

Pharsa nestled against his chest, warmth blooming inside her. "Um... You're going to be a father."

Chatty blinked, confusion dancing across his features. "Huh? Honey! Honey! Say that again!"

Her gaze met his, a smile spreading across her face.

"I'm going to be a father! YES! I'm going to be a father!" Chatty erupted, his voice bursting forth with joy as he twirled her around the room like a child with a newfound treasure.

"Honey! Let me see again!" he cheered, grinning from ear to ear as he studied the printout.

"Murphy," Pharsa responded gently, "we're having — not one, not two — but three babies."

Chatty froze again, the revelation settling in like a gentle snow.

"Huh?" he whispered, shock painting his features.

Pharsa waved her hand in front of his dazed face. "Hey! Don't scare me like that!"

"Honey... Honey..." Chatty stammered, realization dawning on him. "You mean... we're having triplets too?"

Pharsa nodded, laughter bubbling to the surface.

Chatty puffed out his chest, a look of smug pride washing over him.

Pharsa burst into laughter, the sound light and carefree. "What's this? You look like a proud peacock!"

"Honey, not every man has the ability to produce three babies at once!" Chatty declared, his pride swelling with every word.

"Tsk!" Pharsa snorted playfully, making her way to her study to begin preparations with her team.

Left behind in their room, Chatty treasured the ultrasound printout like a precious gem, his face glowing with pride and joy. He looked so ridiculously proud and funny. The sheer silliness and exuberance of the moment made Pharsa peek back from the doorway, pulling out her phone to capture the memory.

It was a moment worth cherishing — a snapshot of joy amid a whirlwind of life.

Chapter 359: MISSION BRIEFING: PHARSA'S BEIJING DIRECTIVES

Pharsa stood in her brightly lit study, the air heavy with tension as she regarded the ultrasound printout still warm in Chatty's hands, which trembled with a mix of joy and disbelief. He had been left grinning like a child on Christmas morning, his face lit by a proud, goofy smile that seemed out of place in the gravity of the moment. But now, the ambiance shifted; her expression hardened into one of fierce determination and sharp focus as the weight of responsibility settled upon her shoulders like a cloak.

With a swift motion, she tapped her tablet, and the screen buzzed to life, activating a secure, encrypted channel. One by one, her teammates flickered into view on the screen — familiar faces etched with the experiences of countless operations, their features illuminated by the soft glow of their devices. Each operative sat upright, the atmosphere crackling with anticipation, sensing the impending storm in her steely gaze.

"Good morning," Pharsa's voice rang out, calm yet commanding, each word resonating with authority. "We have a new directive. In three days, we move to Beijing."

A ripple of surprise washed over the faces on the screen, eyes widened in apprehension. Beijing was no ordinary city; it was a nexus of power, a place where every move was scrutinized, every whisper meticulously recorded.

Pharsa's voice cut through the silence, steady and unwavering. "Our mission is intelligence gathering. We are to profile and monitor pivotal members of the Politburo and the Central Committee. Their movements, secret meetings, ever-shifting alliances, families, business interests — we need a comprehensive picture. We must ascertain who is loyal, who is plotting, and who's prepared for possible retaliation."

Her eyes narrowed into sharp slits. "This mission is also a direct response to Camp Phoenix's transfer to Myanmar. The Chinese President perceives this as a declaration of war. We must confirm his reaction. Most importantly, this is a major part of the preparation for Shun's ascension as President."

Juno, one of her trusted lieutenants, leaned closer to the screen, concern etched on his features. "Are we engaging with Fen Zhang?"

Pharsa nodded, her expression resolute. "Yes. Discreetly. He remains under surveillance but stays loyal to Madame Ling Li. He will provide critical insights into the President's mindset and any covert mobilizations."

"The risk of exposure is very high, don't you think?" Sora, another operative, frowned, her brows knitting together in worry.

"There's always risk," Pharsa replied, her tone unwavering. "But we've kept up the ruse that Fen Zhang's family perished. That cover remains intact. He'll meet us through the old channel."

Pharsa paused, the weight of her words hanging in the air. "I will be leading the mission personally."

A flicker of concern crossed her team's faces, their expressions a mix of respect and worry.

"Chief," Juno ventured carefully, "with all due respect... you're pregnant."

A faint smile played on Pharsa's lips. "Yes. With triplets."

Shock rippled through the pixelated faces on the screen like a wave breaking upon rocks.

"But I'm not stepping down," she continued, her gaze fierce and unyielding. "I'll avoid combat and exposure in the field. My role will be strategic and diplomatic. Murphy will stay behind, and the Supreme Commander, Ling Li, has entrusted me with full authority over this operation."

Sora nodded slowly, understanding dawning. "Understood."

Pharsa tapped her screen with renewed purpose, pulling up a detailed logistics map awash with routes and potential obstacles. "We'll take the northern route — quiet entry through the diplomatic corridor. Mushu's team will assist with encryption and communications until departure. Juno, you'll oversee external surveillance. Sora, you'll liaise with Fen Zhang's contact."

Her gaze swept across each member of her team, a fierce pride swelling within her. "We move in three days. Prepare your gear. Update your protocols. And remember — this mission isn't merely about intel; remember, it's about preventing war."

The screen fell silent, the gravity of her words sinking in. One by one, her team nodded in unison, their expressions resolute. "Understood, Chief."

Pharsa ended the call, her heart racing as she leaned back in her chair, her hand gently resting on her belly.

Three lives nestled within her, fragile yet strong.

And a nation teetering on the edge of chaos outside.

In that moment, she vowed to protect both.

Peonies Castle

Ling Li returned from the training field, her flowing hair still imbued with the fresh scent of wind and the lingering traces of sweat, when two exuberant voices burst through the quiet corridor like sunbeams piercing morning fog.

"Mom!" Chin Chin squealed, hurtling toward her like a tiny comet, radiant with joy.

Ling Li caught her deftly mid-air, spinning her in a graceful arc before settling her snugly on her hip, a smile blooming on her face.

"Mom, we were looking for you," Kim Kim said, her small frame exuding the poise of someone twice her age, her eyes alight with an ambitious spark.

"What's the matter?" Ling Li asked, her brow furrowing slightly as she studied their eager faces. "Are you finished with your lessons?"

"We're done and have completed all our homework!" Kim Kim declared proudly, her chest swelling with achievement. "And we want to join Dad for training. We were hoping you could take us there."

"Yes, Mom, we want to train too!" Chin Chin piped up, her tiny fists clenched with fierce determination, a warrior in the making.

Ling Li chuckled, the sound warm and melodious. "I just came from there. But now I need to help your brother with an acupuncture session. How about you observe instead? You might learn something extremely valuable."

Kim Kim's eyes widened with excitement. "Yes! I remember you saying that needle techniques can heal and can also be used as formidable weapons!"

Ling Li nodded wisely. "That's right. But remember, it requires patience, precision, and, above all, a deep sense of responsibility. You must never use it to cause harm unless it is to protect someone else."

"I understand, Mom," Kim Kim replied, her tone serious, the weight of her mother's words settling in her heart.

"I'll follow my sister's lead," Chin Chin echoed, nodding with exaggerated gravity, her youthful seriousness a delightful sight.

Chapter 360 360: HE'S THE HERO OF MY DREAMS

Ling Li took Kim Kim's hand gently, adjusting Chin Chin comfortably on her hip. "Both of you have photographic memories, which is a rare gift in acupuncture. I'm confident in your understanding — it's your hand control that I'm concerned about. I'll need to forge a set of needles designed for your smaller grips."

"Then we will trouble you, and thank you in advance, Mom," Kim Kim said sweetly, her tone sincere.

"Thank you, Mom!" Chin Chin added, planting an enthusiastic kiss on Ling Li's cheek that felt like a warm blessing.

"You two sweet talkers," Ling Li teased, amusement dancing in her eyes. "There's no need to be so formal with me."

Together they arrived at Shi Min's quarters. Ling Li knocked gently, and the twins' voices rang out in harmonious unison:

"Brother, open the door, it's us — me and Kim Kim!"

"Brother, open the door, Mom is here to give you a puncture!"

Ling Li erupted into laughter just as the door swung open. Shi Min stood there, a towel casually slung over his shoulder, his hair still damp from a refreshing bath. With a swift motion, he scooped Kim Kim into his arms, the embodiment of affection.

"It's acupuncture, not a puncture," he corrected her with a playful grin.

"Oh," Kim Kim said, cheeks flushing sheepishly. "A...puncture."

Shi Min chuckled heartily. "Close enough."

"What about Chin Chin? Can you say acupuncture?" he teased.

"Puc...ture!" she proclaimed confidently, her small face radiating pride.

Shi Min laughed even harder, shaking his head. "Never mind. Big Brother got both of you!"

Ling Li stepped inside, her demeanor shifting to that of a focused teacher. "Alright, let's begin. The herbs are still active in your system."

Shi Min nodded dutifully, setting Kim Kim down before disappearing into the bathroom. When he emerged, his upper body bare and glistening, Chin Chin gasped, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Wah! Big Brother's body looks awesome!" she exclaimed, unabashed. Her eyes were gawking at his brother's body.

Shi Min raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at his lips. "You're only two. How do you know what a man's body should look like?"

"I'm a girl! Of course, I can and should appreciate handsome men!" Chin Chin huffed defiantly, her little hands on her hips.

"Who taught you that?!" Shi Min chuckled, astonished.

"I read it in Second Sister's book!" Chin Chin pouted, her innocence endearing.

The Golden Thread: Acupuncture of the Nascence Soul

Ling Li cleared her throat, redirecting the focus. "Enough, Shi Min. Lie down. Girls, stand here. Watch closely."

She disinfected her hands with careful precision and summoned a velvet-lined case from her special ring, revealing a stunning set of golden needles within. Slender and gleaming, they sparkled under the light, etched with ancient runes that whispered secrets of healing and strength. The air was filled with anticipation as the art of acupuncture was about to unfold.

"These needles," Ling Li said, her voice imbued with reverence, "were passed down from our ancestors. Forged from celestial gold, mined from the luminous depths of the Skyfall Crater, tempered in the fiery breath of dragons, and blessed by the first Matriarch of the illustrious Li line. They're not mere tools — they are a legacy, a testament to our heritage."

The twins stared, wide-eyed and transfixed, as if witnessing a sacred ritual.

Shi Min lay face down on the exquisite jade-inlaid bed, exhaling slowly, his breath a whisper against the tranquil air. With a flick of his fingers, he released the layers of concealment that shrouded his true form. In an awe-inspiring surge, his aura flared into existence, aglow with the radiant brilliance of the Nanscent Soul stage.

The twins gasped, their hearts pounding with exhilaration.

"He's even more amazing than Wolverine!" Chin Chin whispered, her small hand instinctively covering her mouth as a grin spread across her face.

"I totally agree!" Kim Kim exclaimed, her wide eyes sparkling with awe, reflecting the wonder of the moment.

"Wait, you're only two, and you already know who Wolverine is?" Shi Min inquired, her eyebrows knitting together in disbelief.

"Of course I do! He's the hero of my dreams!" Chin Chin declared, her eyes glimmering with a fiery enthusiasm that lit up her cherubic face.

"...."

Shi Min lay there, speechless, his surprise hanging in the air like the fading echoes of their excited chatter.

Ling Li stifled a smirk; her mouth twitched at the twins' enthusiastic comparison, while Shi Min groaned inwardly. 'I need to have a word with Lily about her questionable book collection.'

"Now, quiet," Ling Li commanded, her voice transforming into that of a seasoned master. "Acupuncture at this level transcends mere placement — it's about resonance."

She held up the first needle, its gleam catching the light. "This needle targets the Tianmen point — at the crown of the head. It opens the spiritual gate, allowing qi to flow freely between the mind and the heavens."

As she inserted it with a precise, practiced flick, the needle hummed with a faint, melodic vibration, settling into place with an almost sentient grace.

"The next," Ling Li continued, her voice steady and authoritative, "is Shendao, positioned between the shoulder blades. It stabilizes the heart meridian and soothes the soul flame. Without this, the influx of energy could unleash emotional turbulence or hallucinations."

One by one, she applied the needles with meticulous care: Qihai, nestled just below the navel, anchoring the dantian; Zu San Li, on the leg, reinforcing stamina and preventing the dangerous deviation of qi; Yin Tang, delicately placed between the brows, sharpening mental clarity and shielding against spiritual backlash; and Baihui, which orchestrated the symphony of spiritual energy flowing through the intricate meridian network.

"With each needle," Ling Li elaborated, her tone thick with focus, "I must infuse a thread of my own spiritual energy. This harmonizes the patient's qi with the needle's frequency. If the resonance is off by even the slightest fraction, it could rupture a meridian or destabilize the dantian."

The twins stood frozen, captivated, ingesting every word as if it were a sacred teaching.

Meanwhile, Shi Min felt the needles sink into his flesh like warm, crackling lightning. Each insertion sent waves pulsing through his body — some soothing, others jarring — while he gritted his teeth, beads of sweat forming like tiny jewels upon his brow.