

Ghost 144

Chapter 144: meeting family

The Duke Manor sat beneath the soft glow of the afternoon sun, its red tiles warm and familiar. Yet, as Empress Lian An stepped onto the stone path leading to the main hall, the air felt strangely heavy—too still, too quiet.

Her heart tightened.

This was the consequence of her own hands.

Before she escaped the palace and faked her plague, she had sent her family a letter—

A lie coated in good intention—

saying:

"Do not worry for me. I am only resting. I need time."

A gentle lie.

A comforting lie.

But it had made them restless. More restless than silence ever would have.

Because she had not returned.

Because she did not write again.

Because the palace released no message.

So the Duke Manor had lived in suspended fear—

not knowing whether to trust the letter,

not knowing whether to believe the palace rumors,

not knowing if she was alive or secretly hidden away.

Her father.

Her mother.

Her younger sister Lian Hua.

Her eldest cousin Lian Rou.

They all had been waiting in dread.

And now, the Empress stood before them...

alive.

Fen Yu, Wei Rong, and Li Shen drifted invisibly behind her, whispering anxiously.

"Will they scold her?" Fen Yu bit her lip.

"They should," Li Shen replied calmly.

Wei Rong folded his arms. "Prepare for impact."

The Duchess Appears

Before the Empress could knock, the door slammed open.

"AN'AN!!!"

The Duchess rushed out, skirts flying, hair pins half-loose. Her eyes were rimmed with exhaustion, but the moment she saw her daughter standing there—

breathing, warm, real—

every emotion shattered into tears.

She crushed Lian An in a trembling embrace.

"My child... my poor child—! You wrote you were resting, but you never came home. You never sent word again! Do you know how frightened we were?"

The Empress froze for a heartbeat.

Then slowly returned the hug, her heart aching.

"Mother... I'm sorry."

"You should be!" The Duchess cried harder. "A letter saying you are resting is not enough! You vanished for days! People whispered terrible things—my heart nearly stopped!"

Fen Yu sniffled behind them.

"She really loves you..."

Wei Rong nodded.

"As she should. Parents are like this."

The Duke's Quiet Anger

Her father stepped into the courtyard next, hands clasped behind his back. He wasn't a man who showed emotion easily.

But today, his eyes betrayed the storm he had carried.

He stood before his daughter, silent, searching her face deeply.

"Are you harmed?" he asked quietly.

"No, Father."

"Did someone trouble you?"

"No."

"Did the palace mistreat you?"

"Not... this time."

Only after she answered every question did he finally exhale—a breath he seemed to have held since the day her letter arrived.

"You should not have hidden your whereabouts from us, An'an."

His voice trembled very slightly.

"You are our daughter. When you vanish, we cannot rest."

She lowered her head.

"I know... Father. I only wished to ease your hearts."

He looked at her long and deeply.

"That is the worst way to ease a parent's heart."

Lian Hua's Dramatic Entrance

"SIS—TER—!!!"

A small figure bolted across the courtyard so fast even Fen Yu yelped.

Lian Hua collided into her sister with the force of a flying rabbit.

"I knew you were alive! I told Cousin Brother you wouldn't die! I told him a hundred times!"

She clung tightly, sobbing loudly into her chest.

"You left your little sister alone! I ate vegetables for three days thinking maybe Heaven would pity me and bring you back!"

The Empress laughed softly despite the ache in her throat.

"You were supposed to eat vegetables anyway."

"I WAS MOURNING YOU!!" Lian Hua cried louder.

Li Shen whispered, "This child is dramatic."

Fen Yu elbowed him. "It's cute! Let her feel!"

Lian Rou, the Storm

Heavy footsteps approached.

Lian Rou, tall and broad-shouldered, stopped before her with a frighteningly stern expression.

He flicked her forehead.

HARD.

"Ow—!"

"Good," he said, arms crossed. "If you can feel pain, you're still alive."

Fen Yu covered her mouth, laughing.

Wei Rong smirked.

Lian An rubbed her forehead.

"Brother Rou—"

"No. Don't 'Brother Rou' me."

He glared.

"Do you know how Mother cried? Do you know Hua didn't sleep? Do you know Father paced outside every night?"

His voice cracked.

"You sent one letter—ONE letter saying you were 'resting.' Resting? RESTING?! If you were resting, why didn't you return home even once?"

The courtyard fell silent.

The Empress swallowed.

"I couldn't. If anyone saw me... everything I was working on would fall apart."

"What work is more important than your family?" Lian Rou demanded.

She met his eyes.

"A work that will protect the entire kingdom."

He froze.

Then slowly—

very slowly—

he sighed and pulled her into a tight embrace.

"You should still come home," he said, voice softer. "At least tell us you're alive."

Her eyes stung again.

"I'm sorry... Brother."

Inside the Manor

They gathered in the main hall. Tea was poured. Warm dishes were brought out.

The family sat close, as if afraid she might vanish if they looked away.

Her mother held her hand.

Her sister hugged her arm.

Her father stared at her every movement.

Lian Rou sat like a guard dog beside her.

Only then did the Duke speak.

"Tell us what happened."

The Empress explained carefully:

She was not sick

She needed to hide from palace eyes

She was helping a friend rebuild her life

She was building a restaurant for meaningful reasons

She could not risk her family being targeted

The Emperor was... complicated

When she finished, the hall was quiet.

Her mother sighed deeply.

"Even if you are the Empress... you are still our daughter first."

Lian Hua nodded vigorously.

"Yes! Even Emperor-brother-in-law cannot steal you from us!"

Lian Rou snorted.

"That man can't protect a chicken; how will he protect my sister?"

Fen Yu clapped quietly.

"I like this cousin."

Wei Rong looked offended for the Emperor on instinct.

"...He can protect a chicken. Probably."

Dinner Like Old Times

For the first time in a long while, she ate with her family:

Steamed fish with ginger

Soft pork belly

Lotus soup

Snow-peas stir-fried with garlic

Sweet rice cakes

Lian Hua fed her bite after bite, nagging affectionately.

"You lost weight! Why do you look so skinny? Is palace food terrible? Should I cook for you?"

Her cousin added,

"If the Emperor bullies you again, tell me. I'll come kick the palace gates."

Her mother wiped her tears every few minutes.

Her father simply looked at her as if memorizing every expression.

Her chest warmed painfully.

Here is the full novel-style continuation, matching EXACTLY what you asked:

After the long emotional reunion, after tears dried and laughter softened, they finally settled together in the warm lantern-lit hall.

The Duchess held her daughter's hand and said,

"An'an, now that you're safe... tell us everything honestly. What have you been doing outside the palace all this time?"

The Empress hesitated only a breath.

Then she told them.

Not in detail—she removed the cultivation, ghosts, and danger—but she revealed the truth of her worldly work.

"Mother, Father," she said gently, "I have opened a restaurant with Qing'er."

The entire hall went silent.

Lian Hua's eyes widened.

Lian Rou nearly choked on his tea.

The Duke blinked, stunned.

The Duchess leaned forward as if she had misheard.

"A... restaurant?" her father said slowly.

Lian An nodded.

"The Whisper Bowl. It grew quickly. Very quickly. And now..."

She smiled a little.

"...it will open branches across the entire kingdom."

Their Reaction Was... Not What She Expected

Lian Hua was the first to react.

She jumped to her feet, eyes sparkling like two little lanterns.

"I KNEW IT! I KNEW you would do something big! Sis, you opened a whole business while pretending to be sick?! You're amazing!"

The Duchess clutched her chest.

"A restaurant...? Across the kingdom...?"

Then she brightened suddenly.

"Is it the same restaurant where the princess said she ate something divine the other day?"

The Empress froze.

"...Possibly."

Lian Rou slammed his cup onto the table.

"You and Qing'er opened THAT Whisper Bowl? The one people line up for even at dawn?" His voice grew louder. "You should have led with this! Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

The Duke finally stood, beard trembling in disbelief.

"My daughter... the Empress of this nation... is running a restaurant empire?"

He looked equal parts offended, amazed, and proud.

"Father, is that bad?" she asked, amused.

The Duke's expression slowly softened.

"No. It is... admirable. Very admirable."

The Duchess clasped her hands together, eyes glowing.

"And Qing'er, that sweet child... She deserves success too. You two grew up like sisters. If you trust her, then I trust her."

Lian Hua hugged her mother, squealing.

"We must visit! We MUST! I want to eat everything!"

Lian Rou nodded firmly, as if making a royal decree.

"Tell us the opening date. We will all go."

The Empress nearly choked.

"You cannot simply appear as Duke, Duchess, young miss and eldest young master. It will cause chaos."

Lian Hua waved her hand dramatically.

"Fine! We'll wear commoner clothes! I don't care! I'm going!"

The Duchess gasped.

"That's right! We can disguise ourselves! A light powder on the face, plain robes—no one will know."

The Duke let out a long sigh but didn't deny it.

"If all three of them go, I must go too," he said reluctantly.

"Someone must maintain dignity among this group."

Lian Rou frowned.

"Are you saying we lack dignity?"

"I'm saying you all lack caution," the Duke corrected.

The Empress stared at them.

"You all truly want to come... like commoners?"

Lian Hua clasped her sister's hands, eyes glowing.

"Sis... you built this with your own talent. How can we NOT come?"

Lian Rou added proudly,

"It is our duty as your family to take the best seats—secretly, of course."

The Duchess nodded firmly.

"And to support Qing'er as well."

Even the Duke, who usually pretended to be stern, couldn't hide the small smile tugging at his lips.

"Tell us the date," he said.

"We will be there."

Empress's Heart Softened

Looking at them—

the eager sister,

the protective cousin,

the proud mother,

the quietly emotional father—

her heart warmed until it felt too full.

She didn't have much in her previous life.

She didn't have much in the palace.

But here...

Here she had everything.

A real family.

A place she belonged.

People who followed her without hesitation.

She blinked back the sudden sting in her eyes.

"Alright," she said softly.

"I will send word before the opening."

Lian Hua threw her arms up.

"We're all going—YES!"

Lian Rou nodded.

"I'll handle your security."

The Duke cleared his throat.

"I will— reluctantly —wear commoner robes."

And the Duchess squeezed her daughter's hand.

"We will always support whatever path you walk, An'an."

The Empress lowered her gaze, smiling.

"Thank you... all of you."

Behind her, unseen, the three ghost companions floated proudly.

Fen Yu sniffled.

"That's a good family."

Li Shen nodded.

"They are worthy of her."

Wei Rong simply crossed his arms and whispered,

"She is lucky. And they are lucky too."