

Ghost 151

Chapter 151: farewell full of tears

Morning light spread slowly across the street outside the Whisper Bowl, softer than usual, as if even the sun knew this was not an ordinary day. The sounds of the city were already waking—vendors calling out, carts rolling over stone—but around the restaurant there was a brief pocket of quiet.

The Duke's carriage stood ready.

The Duke and Duchess were already there, dressed in plain but elegant commoner clothes. They had helped until late the previous night, their hands sore, their backs aching, yet neither complained even once. Now, standing still, the exhaustion finally showed—not in their bodies, but in their eyes.

They did not want to leave.

Lian An stepped forward first.

The Duchess looked at her for a long moment, as if memorizing every detail—her posture, her face, the calm confidence she carried now. Then, without warning, she pulled her daughter into a tight embrace.

"So thin," the Duchess muttered, fingers gripping the fabric of Lian An's clothes. "You work too hard. You always did."

Lian An chuckled softly, resting her chin on her mother's shoulder.

"I eat well. You saw it yourself."

"That's because I was watching," the Duchess replied immediately. "If I wasn't here, you'd forget meals again."

The Duke turned away, pretending to examine the carriage harness, but his shoulders were stiff. After a moment, he cleared his throat.

"You've done something remarkable," he said, voice low and steady. "Not just a restaurant. Not just business. You built something with your own hands."

He finally turned back to face her.

"But no matter how capable you are... remember this—this house, this family, is still yours."

Lian An's smile softened.

"I know, Father."

Before the moment could settle, a small figure rushed forward and clung to her arm.

Lian Hua.

Her eyes were already red, lips trembling.

"Sister..." she whispered, then burst into loud sobs. "Why do you always leave like this?! First the palace, now this!"

Lian An froze for half a second, then laughed helplessly.

"I'm not disappearing."

"But you always do big things far away!" Lian Hua cried. "And I just hear about them later!"

Lian An gently wiped her sister's tears with her sleeve.

"Then next time, don't hear about them. Come see them."

Lian Hua sniffed hard.

"I will! Next time I'll help serve customers. I'll carry trays. I'll shout orders!"

The Duchess gasped.

"Absolutely not—"

Lian An laughed.

"We'll discuss it."

Nearby, Lian Rou watched quietly, arms crossed as usual. He looked calm, composed—until he finally stepped forward and knocked his knuckles lightly against Lian An's forehead.

"You scared everyone," he said. "Fake illness or not, that was cruel."

She winced.

"I know."

His voice softened just slightly.

"Don't do it again."

Then, unexpectedly, he reached out and patted her head—awkward, brief, but sincere.

"Come home more often."

Behind them, the Emperor stood silently, hands behind his back, observing the scene. He had seen courts, armies, betrayals—but family farewells were a different battlefield entirely.

He was just thinking he might escape unnoticed when the Duchess suddenly turned.

"You," she said sharply.

The Emperor straightened at once.

"Yes?"

She walked right up to him, eyes fierce.

"My daughter trusts you."

He nodded.

"I understand."

"If she skips meals—"

"I will remind her."

"If she overworks—"

"I will stop her."

"If she cries—"

He paused. "I—"

Lian Hua popped up instantly.

"I will haunt you!"

The Emperor blinked once... then bowed deeply.

"I accept full responsibility."

That finally seemed to satisfy the Duchess.

As the servants climbed onto the carriage and the reins were taken up, Lian Hua suddenly ran alongside it, clutching her skirts.

"WRITE LETTERS!" she shouted.

"VISIT!"

"DON'T FAKE ILLNESSES AGAIN!"

"I WON'T!" Lian An called back, laughing through the sudden tightness in her chest.

The carriage rolled forward.

Lian Hua jogged after it for several steps, waving dramatically, crying and laughing at the same time until Lian Rou grabbed her by the back of her collar.

"Enough," he said dryly. "You'll trip."

When the carriage finally disappeared down the street, silence settled again.

Lian An stood there for a moment, unmoving.

Then she exhaled slowly.

"That was... harder than reopening the restaurant."

The Emperor glanced at her.

"Families are like that."

Above them, unseen by anyone but her, Fen Yu sniffed loudly.

"Why are humans always crying during goodbyes? It's contagious."

Li Shen floated nearby, sighing.

"Emotions complicate existence."

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"Yet... they make it meaningful."

Lian An smiled faintly.

She turned back toward the Whisper Bowl, where voices were already rising again—orders being called, footsteps moving, life continuing.

The farewell was over.

But its warmth stayed with her, steady and grounding, as she walked forward into the day.

Farewell at the Whisper Bowl — Promises, Passes, and Unspoken Bonds

The grand reopening chaos had settled into a warm, satisfied hum—empty plates stacked neatly, customers drifting away with full stomachs and brighter moods, workers laughing as they wiped tables and reset chairs. The Whisper Bowl no longer felt like a newly opened restaurant. It felt alive. Rooted.

And now... it was time to leave.

Lian An stood near the entrance, her gaze lingering on every familiar corner—the wooden sign, the neatly arranged tables, the clean uniforms moving with practiced ease. Just two days ago, this place had been a construction site full of dust and noise. Now it was a heartbeat of the city.

Her friend stepped closer.

Yao Qing tried to smile, but it wavered.

"So... you're really going."

Lian An nodded.

"I have to. The palace can only be fooled for so long."

Yao Qing crossed her arms, then uncrossed them again, restless.

"You always leave when things finally feel stable."

"That's why I'm leaving now," Lian An replied gently. "Because it is stable."

She turned to the twins next.

They stood straighter than usual, no longer the mischievous helpers from the early days, but young leaders who had grown into responsibility almost overnight.

"Listen carefully," Lian An said, her tone firm but warm.

"The restaurant is in your hands now. Training, discipline, recipes, hygiene—don't loosen any of it. Fame ruins places faster than failure."

The girl twin nodded seriously.

"We won't disappoint you."

The boy twin added quickly,

"We'll guard the recipes with our lives."

Lian An smiled.

"I know."

The new man—quiet, capable, and still slightly overwhelmed by how quickly his life had changed—bowed deeply.

"Thank you for trusting me," he said. "I won't waste this opportunity."

Before Lian An could respond, another voice joined in.

"You won't have to worry."

The Emperor stepped forward.

He had been standing slightly apart, hands behind his back, observing everything with the calm authority he carried even in commoner clothes.

Yao Qing straightened instinctively. The twins stiffened. The new man nearly forgot to breathe.

The Emperor looked at them—not as subordinates, not as strangers—but as people his wife trusted.

"You've done well," he said simply. "This restaurant reflects discipline and integrity. That alone earns respect."

Then, without ceremony, he reached into his sleeve and produced four small, dark-gold tokens.

They were smooth, engraved with a discreet imperial seal.

Everyone froze.

"These are palace passes," the Emperor said.

Silence.

Yao Qing's eyes widened.

"P-Palace... passes?"

The twins stared as if he had just placed the sun in his palm.

Lian An turned sharply toward him.

"What?"

The Emperor placed the passes into Yao Qing's hands calmly, as if giving coins.

"With these, you may enter the palace at any time. No summons required. No questioning at the gates."

Yao Qing's hands trembled.

"Y-Your Majesty... even noble families—"

"Cannot enter freely," the Emperor finished. "I know."

Lian An stared at him in disbelief.

These passes were rarer than gold. Even high-ranking officials needed approval. Even relatives of the imperial family were restricted.

And he was giving four of them away.

"For... us?" the girl twin asked faintly.

"Yes."

The Emperor's gaze flicked briefly to Lian An, then back to them.

"You are important to her. That is reason enough."

Lian An's chest tightened.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

For once, she didn't know what to say.

Yao Qing swallowed hard, eyes shining.

"We... we'll treasure them."

"You may visit whenever you wish," the Emperor continued. "If you encounter trouble, speak my name. No one will dare obstruct you."

The twins bowed deeply, in perfect unison.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

As the Emperor turned away, Yao Qing leaned closer to Lian An and muttered under her breath,

"Do you realize how terrifyingly generous this is?"

Lian An exhaled slowly.

"...Yes."

And that was what frightened her.

As she looked at the passes again, another thought surfaced—quiet, heavy.

We have already stepped onto the same path.

The enlightenment.

The swords.

The sigil.

The book.

Ghost-human breeding.

The hidden cult.

The blood moon.

These people—her friend, the twins, the new man—were no longer just restaurant partners.

They were part of what came next.

She clenched her fingers slightly.

We will meet again. Not just as friends... but as allies.

The carriage arrived.

The Emperor stepped toward it first, then turned back and extended his hand.

Lian An hesitated only a moment before placing hers in his.

As she climbed in, she looked back one last time.

Yao Qing waved fiercely, blinking back tears.

"Don't disappear again!"

"I won't," Lian An promised.

The twins raised their fists.

"We'll make this place famous across the kingdom!"

The new man bowed once more, resolute.

As the carriage began to move, unseen by anyone else, three figures drifted closer to Lian An.

Fen Yu crossed her arms.

"Hmph. Giving away passes like snacks."

Li Shen smiled faintly.

"It binds them to the future."

Wei Rong nodded.

"And to the battles ahead."

Lian An closed her eyes briefly.

The restaurant was safe.

The people she loved were protected.

And the road ahead—dangerous, strange, filled with shadows—was no longer hers alone.

The palace gates waited.

And beyond them, a much larger war.