

Ghost 243

Chapter 243: home at last

The carriage slowed as it approached the grand gates of the Duke residence.

Tall red doors stood proudly, guarded by stone lions on both sides. The familiar sight made Lian An's heart tighten slightly.

This was not just a noble residence.

This was her home.

The moment the carriage stopped, the guards quickly stepped forward and opened the door.

The maid bowed.

"Your Majesty, we have arrived."

Lian An took a soft breath before stepping down.

The moment her feet touched the ground—

The main doors opened.

And people rushed out.

"An'er!"

The first voice came from a woman running toward her.

It was her aunt—Lady Lian Meiyu.

Behind her followed her uncle, the Duke—Duke Lian Zheng.

Then came her grandmother—Old Madam Lian Xiu, walking slower but with anxious eyes.

From the side, her younger sister Lian Hua ran forward almost immediately.

And behind them—

Her cousin, the groom-to-be—Lian Rou.

Lastly—

Her parents.

Her father, Lian Cheng, and her mother, Madam Su Yan, walked forward with trembling expressions.

For a moment—

Everyone stopped.

Just looking at her.

Lian An stood there, slightly stunned.

It had only been some time since she last saw them...

But it felt like much longer.

Then suddenly—

Lian Hua rushed forward and hugged her tightly.

"Jiejie!"

Lian An laughed softly and hugged her back.

"You've grown thinner."

Lian Hua shook her head.

"No! You're the one who became thinner!"

Before Lian An could reply, her mother, Madam Su Yan, stepped forward and held her face gently.

Her eyes were already red.

"My child..."

"Are you alright?"

Lian An smiled softly.

"I'm fine, Mother."

Her father, Lian Cheng, stood beside them, his usual calm demeanor shaken.

"You scared us."

His voice was low but heavy.

"When we heard what happened..."

He did not finish the sentence.

But everyone understood.

The rumors of her near-death had reached them.

Lian An lowered her gaze briefly.

"I'm alright now."

Her grandmother, Old Madam Lian Xiu, stepped closer.

Her voice was firm, but her eyes were full of worry.

"Come here."

Lian An stepped forward and bowed slightly.

"Grandmother."

Old Madam Lian Xiu held her hand.

"Let me see you properly."

She looked at her carefully from head to toe.

Then nodded.

"You've recovered... but you've become thinner."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"I will eat more."

Her uncle, Duke Lian Zheng, finally spoke.

"You should have told us earlier."

His tone carried slight blame, but also concern.

"We would have come to the palace."

Lian An shook her head.

"I didn't want to worry everyone."

Lady Lian Meiyu sighed.

"How could we not worry?"

"You are family."

Meanwhile, Lian Rou stepped forward, slightly awkward but smiling.

"You finally came."

Lian An looked at him and smiled.

"The groom looks nervous."

Lian Rou coughed lightly.

"I am not nervous."

Lian Hua laughed.

"He's been lectured all morning!"

Lian An laughed softly.

"I can imagine."

For a moment, the heavy atmosphere eased.

But then her mother held her hand again.

"Tell me honestly."

Her voice softened.

"Did they treat you well in the palace?"

The courtyard became quiet again.

Everyone looked at Lian An.

Waiting.

Lian An paused.

Then smiled gently.

"I'm fine."

Her father frowned slightly.

"That's not an answer."

Lian An squeezed her mother's hand.

"I really am fine."

She did not explain further.

But her calm expression reassured them slightly.

Old Madam Lian Xiu spoke firmly.

"You will stay here until the wedding is over."

"No one will disturb you."

Lian An nodded.

"I would like that."

Lady Lian Meiyu clapped her hands lightly.

"Enough standing outside."

"Come inside!"

"Yes, yes," Lian Hua said, pulling Lian An's hand.

"Let's go inside!"

As they walked through the familiar halls of the Duke residence, Lian An felt something she hadn't felt in a long time.

Warmth.

Comfort.

Belonging.

Behind her, the three ghosts floated quietly.

Fen Yu whispered softly,

"Your family is nice."

Wei Rong nodded.

"They care about you."

Li Shen added gently,

"This place feels peaceful."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"Yes..."

For the first time in many days—

She felt completely safe.

A Table Full of Memories

The grand dining hall of the Duke residence was filled with warmth.

Large wooden windows allowed soft winter sunlight to spill inside, lighting up the long dining table prepared at the center of the room. The table was already covered with dishes—steaming rice, slow-cooked meat, fresh vegetables, fragrant soup, and delicately prepared sweets.

But today—

It was not the food that mattered.

It was the people gathered around it.

Lian An sat between her mother Madam Su Yan and her younger sister Lian Hua.

Across from her sat her father Lian Cheng, her uncle Duke Lian Zheng, and her aunt Lady Lian Meiyu.

At the head of the table, her grandmother Old Madam Lian Xiu sat with her usual dignified posture.

Beside her sat Lian Rou, the groom-to-be.

The atmosphere was lively.

But beneath it—

There was relief.

Because she was here.

Alive.

Safe.

Old Madam Lian Xiu tapped her chopsticks lightly.

"Eat first. Talk later."

Everyone immediately obeyed.

Lian Hua leaned toward Lian An and whispered excitedly,

"Today's food is your favorite."

Lian An looked at the dishes.

Her eyes softened.

"It smells just like before."

Madam Su Yan smiled gently.

"I told the kitchen to prepare everything you used to like."

Lian An picked up a piece of braised meat.

The moment she tasted it—

Her expression changed.

"...This tastes exactly the same."

Her mother chuckled softly.

"Of course it does."

"You think I would forget?"

Lian An smiled, her heart warming.

Across the table, Duke Lian Zheng spoke,

"You should stay longer after the wedding."

"No need to rush back."

Lian Cheng nodded.

"Yes."

"Rest properly here."

Lian An glanced at them.

"I'll stay for a few days."

"That's enough."

Lian Hua immediately protested.

"Only a few days?!"

"You just came back!"

Lian An laughed.

"I can't stay forever."

Lian Hua pouted.

"You can."

Old Madam Lian Xiu cleared her throat.

"She has responsibilities."

Lian Hua lowered her head.

"...I know."

Lian An gently tapped her forehead.

"I'll visit again."

Lian Hua brightened slightly.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Meanwhile, Lian Rou was quietly eating when Duke Lian Zheng suddenly looked at him.

"You."

Lian Rou froze.

"Yes... Father?"

"Have you memorized the wedding rites?"

Lian Rou coughed.

"...Yes."

Lady Lian Meiyu immediately interrupted.

"He's lying."

Lian Hua burst out laughing.

"I saw him practicing this morning!"

"He forgot halfway!"

Lian Rou glared.

"You weren't supposed to say that!"

The entire table laughed.

Lian An leaned back slightly, smiling.

"You're really getting married now."

Lian Rou scratched his head.

"...It still feels strange."

Lian Cheng spoke calmly.

"Marriage always feels that way at first."

Madam Su Yan added softly,

"But it becomes something precious."

Lian An listened quietly.

Then she asked,

"Where is Chen Ruyi?"

Lady Lian Meiyu smiled.

"She will arrive tomorrow."

"She is still preparing at her family residence."

Lian Hua leaned closer.

"She's very pretty."

"And very gentle."

Lian An nodded.

"That suits him."

Lian Rou coughed awkwardly.

"Can we stop talking about me?"

Lian Hua laughed again.

"No."

Old Madam Lian Xiu spoke firmly,

"You are the groom."

"You have no choice."

Everyone laughed again.

The atmosphere became even lighter.

As the meal continued, the conversation slowly shifted.

Toward the past.

Lian Hua suddenly said,

"Do you remember when Jiejie tried to cook for the first time?"

Lian An froze.

"...Don't remind me."

Madam Su Yan laughed softly.

"You burned the entire kitchen."

Lian Cheng nodded.

"And blamed the firewood."

Lian An covered her face.

"I was young!"

Lian Rou smirked.

"You said the firewood was defective."

Lian Hua laughed loudly.

"And then you cried!"

Lian An pointed at her.

"You cried too!"

Lian Hua immediately protested.

"I was scared!"

Lady Lian Meiyu laughed.

"You both cried together."

Old Madam Lian Xiu shook her head.

"Children."

Even Duke Lian Zheng smiled slightly.

Lian An lowered her head, laughing.

"...I've improved now."

Lian Hua raised an eyebrow.

"Really?"

Lian An smirked.

"You can try my cooking later."

Lian Hua paused.

"...Maybe I trust the kitchen more."

Everyone laughed again.

The warmth of the room grew stronger.

Time passed without anyone noticing.

Dish after dish was shared.

Stories after stories were told.

Lian Cheng suddenly spoke again, his voice softer this time.

"When you were little..."

"You used to follow me everywhere."

Lian An looked at him.

"I remember."

"You taught me how to read."

Lian Cheng nodded.

"And you fell asleep on the book."

Lian Hua giggled.

"That still happens."

Lian An rolled her eyes.

"Only sometimes."

Madam Su Yan reached out and held her hand.

"You've grown so much."

Her voice was gentle.

"But to me..."

"...you're still that little girl."

Lian An smiled softly.

"I know."

For a moment—

No one spoke.

The warmth of the moment filled the room.

Behind her, the three ghosts hovered quietly.

Fen Yu whispered,

"This feels nice."

Wei Rong nodded slightly.

"...It does."

Li Shen added,

"A rare peace."

Lian An glanced at them briefly.

Then looked back at her family.

At the people who loved her.

Who worried for her.

Who welcomed her without conditions.

Her heart felt full.

For the first time in a long time—

She was not the Empress.

Not a political figure.

Not someone surrounded by danger.

She was simply—

Lian An.

A daughter.

A sister.

A cousin.

And as laughter filled the dining hall once more—

She realized something quietly.

No matter how complicated the palace became...

This place—

Would always be her home.