

Ghost 244

Chapter 244: Silks, Gold, and Family Laughter

The morning after Lian An's return, the Duke residence was already bustling with excitement.

Servants moved quickly through the halls carrying trays, fabrics, and scrolls. The wedding was only days away, and every corner of the residence reflected the urgency of preparation.

Inside the main hall, Old Madam Lian Xiu sat at the center, her posture straight and commanding as always.

Beside her were Duke Lian Zheng and Lady Lian Meiyu, discussing arrangements.

Lian An entered with her mother Madam Su Yan and younger sister Lian Hua, still adjusting her sleeves.

"What's happening?" Lian An asked, glancing around at the activity.

Lady Lian Meiyu smiled.

"We invited the best dressmakers in the capital."

Lian Hua clapped excitedly.

"They're here to prepare wedding dresses and jewelry!"

Lian An raised an eyebrow.

"For just the bride?"

Old Madam Lian Xiu tapped her cane lightly.

"For everyone."

Lian Hua grinned.

"That includes you."

Before Lian An could respond, a servant announced,

"The dressmakers have arrived!"

A group of skilled artisans entered, bowing respectfully.

Behind them, assistants carried bundles of fine silk—crimson, gold, ivory, jade green—each fabric shimmering under the light.

Another group followed, carrying trays of jewelry.

Necklaces, bangles, earrings, hairpins—each piece more intricate than the last.

The entire hall transformed into a display of elegance.

Lian Hua gasped.

"This is beautiful!"

The lead dressmaker stepped forward.

"We are honored to serve the Duke family."

Old Madam Lian Xiu nodded.

"Begin."

Immediately, fabrics were unfolded and displayed across long tables.

The dressmakers started presenting options.

"For the bride—traditional red silk embroidered with phoenix and peony patterns."

"For the groom's family—coordinated tones with subtle gold thread."

"For the younger ladies—lighter fabrics with delicate floral embroidery."

Lian An walked closer, touching one of the fabrics.

"This one is soft."

The dressmaker smiled.

"That is imported silk, Your Majesty."

Lian Hua grabbed her hand.

"Jiejie! Look at this one!"

She pointed at a bright pink fabric.

"I want this!"

Old Madam Lian Xiu frowned slightly.

"Too bright."

Lian Hua pouted.

"But it's pretty!"

Madam Su Yan laughed softly.

"Choose something more elegant."

Lian Hua sighed dramatically.

"Fine..."

She then pointed at a softer peach-colored fabric.

"This one?"

Lian An nodded.

"That suits you."

Lian Hua brightened immediately.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Meanwhile, Lady Lian Meiyu was already selecting fabrics for herself.

"This shade of blue."

"And this gold border."

Duke Lian Zheng sat nearby, watching the chaos with mild amusement.

"I don't understand any of this."

Lian Cheng laughed.

"You don't need to."

"Just wear what they give you."

The men quickly agreed to step aside.

"This is women's battlefield."

Duke Lian Zheng added.

"More dangerous than court politics."

Everyone laughed.

Soon, attention shifted to Lian An.

The dressmaker bowed slightly.

"Your Majesty, please choose."

Lian An looked at the fabrics carefully.

She didn't want something too extravagant.

After a moment, she pointed at a deep red silk with black undertones.

"This one."

The dressmaker's eyes lit up.

"Excellent choice."

"It is elegant and dignified."

Old Madam Lian Xiu nodded approvingly.

"That suits you."

Next came the jewelry selection.

Trays were placed in front of them.

Gold necklaces.

Jade bracelets.

Pearl earrings.

Hairpins shaped like flowers, phoenixes, and butterflies.

Lian Hua immediately rushed forward.

"I want this one!"

She picked up a delicate butterfly hairpin.

Madam Su Yan smiled.

"That's pretty."

Lady Lian Meiyu chose a jade necklace.

"This matches my dress."

Old Madam Lian Xiu selected a simple but heavy gold hairpin.

"Too much decoration is unnecessary."

Lian An stepped forward.

Her eyes moved across the tray.

Then she picked a simple jade bracelet and a phoenix hairpin.

"This is enough."

Lian Hua looked at her.

"That's too simple!"

Lian An smiled.

"I prefer it."

Meanwhile—

Behind her, the three ghosts hovered, watching everything with excitement.

Fen Yu gasped.

"So many pretty things!"

Wei Rong crossed his arms.

"...Too shiny."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves.

"The craftsmanship is impressive."

Fen Yu leaned toward Lian An.

"I want one!"

Lian An whispered under her breath,

"No."

Fen Yu pouted.

"You already bought me a hairpin, but I want more."

Wei Rong added,

"I don't mind another sword."

Lian An almost laughed.

"You already got one."

Li Shen nodded.

"One is sufficient."

Fen Yu glared at him.

"Of course you'd say that."

Lian An shook her head.

"You three are not getting anything else."

Fen Yu huffed.

"Unfair."

Meanwhile, the dressmakers began taking measurements.

Each woman stood one by one as fabrics were adjusted and marked.

Lian Hua kept talking nonstop.

"I want long sleeves!"

"No—short sleeves!"

"Wait—what about embroidery here?"

Madam Su Yan laughed.

"You can't decide anything."

Lian Hua groaned.

"This is hard!"

Lian An smiled quietly, watching her.

This lively chaos—

This warmth—

She had missed it.

Even Old Madam Lian Xiu, though strict, allowed a faint smile to appear on her face.

The house was filled with laughter.

Discussion.

Excitement.

The wedding preparations were not just about ceremony.

They were about family coming together.

As the dressmakers packed up after finalizing the designs, Lady Lian Meiyu clapped her hands.

"Everything is decided!"

"Now we just wait for the final dresses."

Lian Hua stretched happily.

"I can't wait!"

Lian Rou, who had been hiding in the corner, sighed in relief.

"Finally over."

Lian An looked at him and smirked.

"This is just the beginning."

Lian Rou froze.

"...What do you mean?"

Lian Hua laughed loudly.

"Tomorrow is rehearsal!"

Lian Rou covered his face.

"I want to run away."

Everyone burst into laughter.

Lian An leaned back slightly, watching her family.

Her heart felt full again.

The laughter from the women's hall slowly faded into the distance as evening settled over the Duke residence.

Lanterns were lit one by one along the corridors, casting warm golden light across the stone paths.

Inside a quieter study room at the far end of the residence—

Two men sat facing each other.

On one side was Duke Lian Zheng, his expression calm but serious.

Across from him sat his younger brother, Lian Cheng—the Empress's father.

Between them lay several opened scrolls.

The atmosphere was completely different from the lively hall outside.

Heavy.

Thoughtful.

Dangerous.

Duke Lian Zheng tapped one of the scrolls lightly.

"This came from the northern border."

Lian Cheng picked it up and read silently.

His brows slowly furrowed.

"Entire village... unconscious?"

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"No signs of injury."

"No poison."

"No illness."

"They simply... collapsed."

Lian Cheng lowered the scroll slowly.

"...And then?"

Duke Lian Zheng's voice lowered.

"They woke up three days later."

"But..."

He paused.

"...not the same."

Lian Cheng looked up.

"What do you mean?"

Duke Lian Zheng leaned back slightly.

"They became stronger."

"Faster."

"Almost... unnatural."

Silence filled the room.

Lian Cheng's grip tightened slightly on the scroll.

"This sounds like..."

He didn't finish.

But both of them knew.

Duke Lian Zheng nodded slowly.

"...Yes."

Another scroll was pushed forward.

"This one is from the western province."

Lian Cheng opened it.

His expression darkened further.

"People disappearing?"

Duke Lian Zheng spoke quietly.

"Not just disappearing."

"They vanish overnight."

"No struggle."

"No witnesses."

"No trace."

Lian Cheng placed the scroll down carefully.

"That's not normal."

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"And this—"

He pointed at a third scroll.

"Came from the southern region."

Lian Cheng read it slowly.

His face stiffened.

"Children... born with strange strength?"

"Some... not entirely human?"

The room fell silent again.

Outside, distant laughter from the women's quarters could still be heard faintly.

But inside—

The air felt heavy.

Lian Cheng exhaled slowly.

"This is no longer coincidence."

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"It's spreading."

Lian Cheng looked at him directly.

"Why hasn't this been reported to the Emperor?"

Duke Lian Zheng did not answer immediately.

Instead, he stood up and walked toward the window.

The night sky stretched beyond the courtyard.

After a moment, he spoke.

"Because I am not sure who to trust."

Lian Cheng's expression hardened.

"You suspect someone in the palace."

Duke Lian Zheng turned back slowly.

"Yes."

Lian Cheng remained silent.

Then he asked quietly,

"...Does this relate to what An'er experienced?"

Duke Lian Zheng's gaze deepened.

"I believe so."

He walked back toward the table.

"You remember what we discussed earlier."

"The incident at the palace."

"The strange control over her body."

"The same thing that happened to Princess Zhi."

Lian Cheng nodded slowly.

"And now this..."

Duke Lian Zheng placed his hand over the scrolls.

"These are not isolated events."

"They are connected."

Lian Cheng leaned back slightly.

"Dark cultivation..."

Duke Lian Zheng finished his thought.

"...or something worse."

Silence.

The weight of the situation pressed heavily between them.

After a moment, Lian Cheng spoke again.

"If this is true..."

"...the kingdom is in danger."

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"Yes."

"And if the source is inside the palace..."

"...then sending this information carelessly could alert them."

Lian Cheng understood immediately.

"If the wrong person reads these reports..."

"They will hide their tracks."

"Or strike faster."

Duke Lian Zheng looked at him firmly.

"That is why I have not presented this to the Emperor yet."

Lian Cheng frowned slightly.

"You don't trust the Emperor?"

Duke Lian Zheng shook his head.

"It's not that."

"He may not even be aware."

"But the palace is not just him."

Lian Cheng nodded slowly.

"...The concubines."

"...The Dowager."

"...Servants."

"...Officials."

"Anyone could be involved."

Duke Lian Zheng sat down again.

"I need more proof."

"Clear evidence."

"Before I present anything."

Lian Cheng picked up one of the scrolls again.

His voice lowered.

"And until then?"

Duke Lian Zheng answered calmly.

"We watch."

"We prepare."

"And we protect our family."

Lian Cheng's expression hardened.

"Especially An'er."

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"Yes."

For a moment, both men fell silent.

Then Lian Cheng spoke again.

"There's one more thing."

Duke Lian Zheng looked at him.

"What?"

Lian Cheng's voice became heavier.

"If this is connected to what she experienced..."

"...then she may still be a target."

Duke Lian Zheng's gaze sharpened immediately.

"I know."

The room fell into silence again.

Outside, laughter continued.

Inside—

The truth slowly formed.

Something was moving beneath the surface of the kingdom.

Something hidden.

Something dangerous.

And until they understood it fully—

They would say nothing.

Because sometimes—

Silence was the only way to survive.

There were no dark shadows.

No palace tension.

Only laughter, silk, and the simple joy of being together.