

Ghost in the palace

Chapter 34: the breakfast with the duke family

The morning sun had just reached the upper eaves when the Duke's estate came fully alive.

Servants hurried through the corridors with trays of steaming buns and bowls of rice, the smell of tea leaves and warm soup filling the air.

By the time Emperor Zhao Rui entered the dining hall, the Duke's household had already gathered — polite, but unguarded.

Duke Lian rose immediately, bowing. "Your Majesty honors this humble house."

"Please," Zhao Rui said, raising a hand, "today I am only a guest. Let's not drown breakfast in ceremony."

The Duke smiled, glancing toward his wife. "You hear that? His Majesty wants no ceremony. Bring the congee before it cools."

The Duchess chuckled softly. "Yes, yes. Our guest speaks like our own child."

Zhao Rui froze for a moment — our own child.

No one had ever called him that before.

The dishes were simple — steamed buns, pickled vegetables, eggs sprinkled with herbs, and warm fish porridge.

Nothing rare or gilded, yet the room smelled of comfort, not ambition.

The Duchess set a bowl before him herself, smiling. "You must be tired, Your Majesty. Too many late councils, I imagine. Eat more — this will warm your stomach."

Zhao Rui blinked. "You serve me yourself?"

She laughed. "In this house, we don't let guests serve themselves — and we certainly don't treat them like strangers."

For a moment, he forgot to speak.

The Duke's wife's easy tone, her motherly affection — it felt foreign, disarming.

Across the table, Ananya watched in silence, her chopsticks hovering midair.

Her younger sister, Lian Hua, leaned forward with bright curiosity. "So, Your Majesty, do you really work every day? I heard the Emperor of the East only appears for audiences once a week!"

Zhao Rui nearly choked on his tea. "I suppose I'm not as fortunate as he is."

Her laughter rang like bells. "Then you should rest more! You look too serious — just like my sister when she scolds me."

Ananya shot her sister a glare. "Hua."

But Zhao Rui smiled — truly smiled.

"She's right," he said lightly. "You both could run this empire together — one with reason, the other with cheer."

The Duke laughed heartily, clearly pleased. "If Your Majesty wants cheer, you're welcome here anytime. We don't know politics, but we do know how to eat and argue properly."

For the first time in years, Zhao Rui relaxed.

Everywhere else, people spoke to him with measured tones and false smiles.

Every gesture was flattery; every word was calculation.

But here — laughter came without fear.

Every dish was served not for favor, but for care.

He caught himself thinking: So this is what it feels like to belong to someone's home.

When he looked up, his gaze brushed against Ananya's.

She wasn't smiling.

Her expression was carefully neutral, but her eyes — dark, distant — carried something sharper.

Jealousy.

The realization made something twist inside him — amusement, maybe curiosity.

So he decided to test her.

He picked up another bun from the tray and placed it on the Duke's plate. "You favor this kind, don't you, my lord?"

Then, with the same easy tone, he took another and placed it gently in front of Lian Hua.

"And you should eat too, Lady Hua. You're thin as a reed."

The two thanked him with cheerful smiles.

When he reached for the last one, his eyes flicked to Ananya.

But instead of offering it to her, he turned and set it before the Duchess. "And for you, Madam — to thank you for the meal."

Lian Hua giggled, "Sister, His Majesty forgot you!"

The Emperor didn't correct her.

He only glanced at Ananya — just long enough to see the flicker of irritation in her eyes before she lowered her gaze.

It was a small, silent victory — but it warmed him more than the meal.

He'd never thought he could enjoy seeing her jealous.

Yet the look on her face — calm on the surface, quiet storm underneath — was strangely satisfying.

Maybe it was revenge for her sharp words earlier.

Maybe it was curiosity — to see how far her control went.

Either way, he found himself smiling faintly.

The Duchess noticed and said warmly, "Your Majesty smiles rarely — this meal must suit you."

He nodded. "It does."

His eyes flicked toward Ananya again. "Everything here... tastes different."

She finally met his gaze, calm again, but her voice carried quiet edge. "That's because it's seasoned with honesty, Your Majesty. Something rare in the palace."

Her father chuckled awkwardly, trying to ease the tension, but Zhao Rui only smiled wider — not offended, not angry.

He was amused.

When the meal ended, the Duchess pressed more tea into his hand, the Duke spoke openly about border affairs, and Lian Hua kept laughing at everything.

Zhao Rui listened, spoke lightly, and for once, didn't feel the weight of his crown.

But when he stood to leave, his eyes lingered one last time on Ananya — the only person in the room who hadn't laughed.

As he turned away, he thought quietly,

So even the jealous heart of an empress has warmth left in it.