

Ghost 54

Chapter 54: awakening

The morning sun poured gently through the silk curtains of Duke Lian's chamber. The scent of incense and fresh herbs still lingered in the air, mingling with the faint sound of sparrows outside.

Lian An had drifted half-asleep beside her father's bed, her head resting on her folded arms, when a faint cough broke the silence.

"An... An'er," came a low, hoarse whisper.

Her head shot up immediately. "Father?"

Duke Lian's eyes were open — tired, pale, but alive. He blinked slowly, focusing on the faces hovering near him: his wife clutching the edge of the bed with trembling fingers, his daughters frozen mid-breath.

"Don't cry," he rasped weakly, a ghost of a smile tugging his lips. "You'll make me think I'm already dead and being mourned."

Duchess Xiu's tears spilled anyway as she pressed his hand to her cheek. "You foolish man, you nearly were!"

Lian Hua sobbed outright, throwing her arms around him, while Lian An could only laugh and cry at once, relief flooding her like sunlight after storm.

The news spread through the estate like wildfire — The Duke has awakened!

Servants ran through corridors, laughter echoing from one courtyard to the next.

Duchess Xiu wasted no time; she ordered trays of sweets and spiced tea to be prepared and distributed among the household and even the neighboring servants' quarters. "Let everyone know," she said, voice still trembling with happiness, "the master lives! Heaven has been merciful."

Cookmaids cried openly in the kitchen; even the guards at the gates smiled for the first time in days. The whole estate bloomed with sound — the sound of life returning.

But when Lian An and her sister tried to stay by their father's bedside, he raised one brow, still stern even in weakness. "You two," he croaked, "look worse than I do. Go rest. I'll have no daughters turning into ghosts before I can scold them properly."

"Father—" Lian Hua began, but he silenced her with a weak wave.

"Go. If you want to help me heal, stop hovering like anxious sparrows. Let your mother and the physicians handle the rest."

Lian An pressed her lips together to keep from crying again. "Fine. But if you faint again, I'm not leaving your side for a month."

He chuckled, a soft, dry sound. "If I faint again, I'll deserve your scolding."

At last, the two sisters bowed obediently and left the room, glancing back one more time before closing the door quietly behind them.

At that very hour, in the imperial court, the Emperor sat upon the Dragon Throne. His robes of deep crimson pooled around him like molten fire, and the hall was filled with rows of ministers kneeling on cold marble.

The tension was thick enough to choke on.

Zhao Rui's expression was calm but unreadable. "You all know why we are gathered," he said, voice steady, carrying across the hall. "The border chaos has been contained. Duke Lian's evidence has confirmed corruption in our supply lines. I now hold proof that forged seals and false orders came from within Chen Valley."

A murmur spread through the officials like ripples through water. Several heads turned sharply toward the Chen family's ranks.

Among them, Chen Tai, the elder brother of Lady Chen, stepped forward hastily, bowing deeply. "Your Majesty, my sister's family is innocent! My uncle managed the trade routes, yes, but he acted on old imperial decrees. If false seals were used, he was deceived by others. Our family's loyalty to the throne is unquestionable!"

The Emperor's gaze slid toward him, cold as frost. "Loyalty is proven by actions, not words, Lord Chen. Your uncle's trade records show shipments that never reached the border. Grain wagons vanished under his command. Men were paid to spread lies and provoke riots. Do you call this deception or treachery?"

Chen Tai swallowed hard, sweat glistening at his temple. "Your Majesty, I swear upon the ancestors — we knew nothing. My uncle handled his own affairs. The Chen household has always stood beside the crown."

"Then why," Zhao Rui asked softly, "did your family send riders toward the western road last night, before my order to arrest your uncle reached them?"

The entire court froze.

Chen Tai's face turned white. "I— Your Majesty— those were guards! To ensure my uncle's safety after hearing false rumors of his arrest!"

The Emperor's lips curved faintly, not in amusement but disdain. "Safety? Or escape?"

He rose slowly from the throne, the golden dragons embroidered across his robe seeming to stir in the torchlight. "If the Chen family is innocent, they will prove it through the law. If they are guilty, no name, no rank, and no beauty will protect them."

The court dropped to their knees as his words thundered through the hall.

As the session ended, Zhao Rui stood at the dais, staring into the sea of bowed heads.

"Bring Lord Chen before me at dawn tomorrow," he said quietly. "I will judge him myself. Until then, seal every Chen estate and seize their ledgers. No one enters or leaves the valley."

The eunuchs and generals bowed deeply. "By Your Majesty's command."

When the hall emptied, the Emperor remained alone, his gaze drifting toward the open doorway, where sunlight spilled across the tiles. For a moment, his mind wandered — not to the corruption or the court, but to the woman who had stormed into his chamber days before, eyes blazing with fury and love for her father.

You said you'd kill us all if your father fell.

The memory made him exhale a quiet, humorless laugh. "I would rather face an army than that woman's wrath again," he muttered.

But beneath the small smile, his chest tightened. He thought of the Duke, still lying wounded, and of how much of that strength burned in his daughter's blood.

Back at the Duke's residence, the incense had burned halfway down when the physician rechecked his patient and smiled. "He is out of danger."

In the adjoining room, Duchess Xiu offered prayers of thanks, her fingers moving slowly through her beads, lips murmuring blessings for the Emperor who sent help and for the daughter who refused to break.

Outside, the city prepared for another dawn — one that would bring judgment to the guilty and uneasy calm to those who had survived.