

Ghost 58

Chapter 58: gentle lies

The midday sun shimmered warmly over the courtyards of Duke Lian's estate, turning the tiled roofs gold and the air fragrant with the scent of freshly brewed medicinal tea.

Inside the main hall, servants bustled in excitement. Crates of silk and porcelain were being carried in one after another — golden seals marking each box with the imperial emblem of the dragon and phoenix intertwined.

The long-awaited convoy from the palace had finally arrived.

When the steward announced the contents, Duchess Xiu could hardly contain her joy. "Imperial gifts!" she exclaimed, eyes shining. "Herbs from the southern mountains, jade boxes of medicine, even sea rubies! The Emperor truly has a generous heart."

A dozen servants gathered at the doors, whispering in awe as they glimpsed the glittering treasures — tonics, silver, even rolls of soft brocade.

"Look, Madam," said the housekeeper, bowing as she opened a lacquered chest. "The imperial physician has sent a letter himself — His Majesty ordered that these herbs are to be boiled twice daily for the Duke's recovery."

Duchess Xiu clasped her hands, her eyes misting. "He is a true son-in-law, Heaven bless him! Even if he cannot come himself because of his duties, he still remembers his elders. Such filial piety..."

Her voice softened, trembling with gratitude. "If he had not sent the physician that night, I fear our Duke would not still be breathing."

Across the room, Duke Lian, still pale but sitting upright now, smiled faintly at her words. "He is indeed thoughtful," he admitted. "Though I did not expect him to act so swiftly. The Emperor may wear a crown, but he still knows the weight of family."

He turned toward his daughter — toward Lian An, who sat quietly beside her sister. "An'er," he said, voice steady but kind, "your husband has shown respect beyond duty. You must learn to return it with gentleness. The palace is a pit of tigers; a single word can turn affection to frost. Remember this and take care of him. Do not let pride or temper undo what Heaven has mended."

Lian An pressed her lips together, her expression composed. "Yes, Father," she replied softly. "I'll remember."

Her younger sister, Lian Hua, giggled, teasing. "Sister, Father is right! His Majesty really seems to care about you now. Sending such gifts—who wouldn't envy that?"

Duchess Xiu nodded approvingly. "He is young, powerful, burdened with responsibility. It's not easy to show affection, but actions speak louder than words. You mustn't let small misunderstandings come between you. When he visits next, receive him warmly. He has proven himself a worthy husband."

The Duke smiled faintly at his wife's sentiment and raised a hand. "Enough," he said, though there was no harshness in his tone. "We are all safe now, and that is what matters. Gratitude is owed to him, yes, but let us not forget to thank Heaven for sparing our family."

Everyone nodded. The maids lit new incense, and the air filled with a faint trace of sandalwood.

To anyone looking in, it was a perfect scene — warmth, gratitude, and harmony.

But Lian An's heart was quiet.

She bowed her head to hide the flicker in her eyes. Filial pity, her mother called it. Kindness. But she remembered clearly — the night her father had been struck down, the Emperor had not been by her side. He had been in Lady Chen's chamber, smiling, whispering, their laughter echoing through the empty halls while she bled worry and grief.

He had not sent the physician out of love — he had done it because she had threatened him. Not out loud, not in anger — just the truth spoken cold and sharp enough to pierce him. If my father dies, I will drag your name into his grave with him.

It wasn't something she could tell her family. To them, the Emperor was still the noble son-in-law, the ruler of benevolence.

She forced a smile, smoothing her robe. "Yes, Father. His Majesty has been... very generous."

Her mother beamed, mistaking the irony in her tone for fondness. "Good, good. Keep that heart. You mustn't speak harshly to him anymore."

Lian An only nodded, her thoughts already wandering far from the hall.

A Change of Conversation

Duchess Xiu, wiping her tears with her sleeve, finally smiled. "Enough of all this heavy talk. An'er, Hua'er, your cousin wrote yesterday — he will be arriving soon from the academy! He's been asking about you both."

At that, Lian Hua's eyes lit up immediately. "Brother Zhen is coming? Really? Oh, it's been years since I last saw him!"

"Yes," her mother laughed softly. "He'll be staying for a few weeks before heading back to the capital for his post. You both should keep him company while he's here."

Lian An's composure softened, her smile genuine this time. "It's been so long since I've seen Cousin Zhen. He always used to bring sweets when we were little."

Her sister leaned close, eyes sparkling with mischief. "He still does! I heard from his letters that he's bringing something from the southern fair."

Lian An chuckled, shaking her head. "He still hasn't changed."

Duchess Xiu clapped her hands gently. "Good, good. Once he arrives, we'll visit the fair together. The lantern festival is only two days away."

At once, Lian Hua gasped. "The fair! Sister, do you remember how Father used to win us those paper cranes? We must go again this year!"

The Duke smiled, stroking his beard, a shadow of his old strength returning to his face. "I can't hold the stick steady anymore, so you'll have to win your own cranes this time."

Everyone laughed — a sound that filled the chamber like sunlight after rain. Even the servants at the door smiled quietly, the tension of the past days easing at last.

Lian Hua clapped her hands together. "Then it's settled! When Cousin arrives, we're going to the fair together!"

"Agreed," Lian An said softly, the laughter reaching her eyes at last.

The Duchess smiled fondly. "Ah, look at you two — finally laughing again. That's what I've been waiting for. After so much sorrow, the house needs laughter."

For a fleeting moment, all was peaceful.

The Duke leaned back against his cushions, his eyes soft as he looked at his daughters — both radiant in their own way, both unaware of how deeply he worried for them. "Yes," he murmured, "the fair will be good for all of us. Go, breathe some air, see the city lights. And An'er..."

She looked up.

"Your husband may wear a crown, but he is still a man. And a man who has power must have someone who dares remind him of mercy. Be that person."

Lian An smiled faintly, but her eyes glimmered with quiet irony. "I'll try, Father."

He chuckled, satisfied with her answer. "Good girl."

Outside, the laughter of the household spilled into the courtyard, where the servants hung fresh lanterns and children ran between trees. The warm hum of life returned to the Duke's home — a home that, for the first time in weeks, felt alive again.

But somewhere far away, in the palace draped in silk and gold, another woman held a vial of forbidden elixir close to her chest, whispering the same man's name like a prayer — or a curse.