

## **Ghost 61**

Chapter 61: blade

That Flew

The Duke's estate burst to life that morning.

Carriages rolled into the courtyard one after another, their wheels grinding against cobblestones as horses snorted and servants shouted greetings.

The air shimmered with energy, perfumed with sandalwood and the faint scent of southern spices.

From the first carriage stepped a tall, broad-shouldered man with sun-darkened skin, laughter in his voice, and dust from a long journey still clinging to his boots.

Lian Ruo, nephew to the Duke, beloved son of the Duke's younger brother, and known throughout the provinces for both his sword and his charm, had finally come home.

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A Grand Return

"Uncle! Aunt Xiu!" he called, bowing deeply as servants began unloading crates behind him. "Father sends greetings from the southern province and these humble gifts. Mother insisted I bring half the coast with me—she said Aunt's tea tasted lonely without proper company."

Duchess Lian Xiu laughed brightly, clapping her hands. "That woman! Always exaggerating. But if this is 'humble,' I fear to see what she calls 'grand!'"

Behind him, servants hurried to display the treasures:

— Rolls of shimmering southern silk, dyed in deep ocean hues.

— Boxes of honeyed fruit and pickled lotus seeds.

— Sacks of rare spices and fragrant tea leaves.

— Chests of coral jewelry, pearls, and rubies from the coast that caught the sunlight like captured fire.

The Duke beamed with pride. "Your parents spoil us as always! Come, come in!"

But Lian Ruo only laughed, his eyes bright with mischief. "Not before I greet my sisters."

From the veranda came Empress Lian An, dressed simply but with the quiet authority of someone who had stared down the entire imperial court and won.

Beside her stood Lian Hua, her younger sister—gentle, curious, and full of warmth.

When Lian Ruo saw them, his grin widened. "Ah! My two fiercest opponents since childhood! Look at you—one's tamed an Emperor, and the other still looks ready to stab one!"

Lian An rolled her eyes but smiled. "I see your tongue survived the southern heat."

Lian Hua giggled. "Brother Ruo! You didn't forget us this time, did you?"

"Forget?" he gasped in mock offense. "I brought you both something better than sweets."

He motioned, and one of his men stepped forward with two long, silk-wrapped bundles.

With a playful flourish, he unveiled them — two elegant swords, their sheaths engraved with cranes in flight and lotus blossoms curling at the hilt.

"One for each of you," he said proudly. "A lady may carry kindness in her heart—but steel at her side."

Lian Hua's eyes went wide with delight. "Truly? For me?"

"For both my sisters," he said, handing the shorter one to her, the longer to Lian An. "You may be surrounded by luxury, but never forget—the world bows only to those who can stand unshaken."

Lian An ran her hand along the blade, smiling softly. "And here I thought the pen was mightier."

He grinned. "The sword's for when the pen fails."

The Duke laughed from behind them. "Hah! You two are cut from the same stubborn cloth!"

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Unseen Thieves

As the family exchanged laughter and gifts, three invisible figures drifted unnoticed through the courtyard — their auras shimmering faintly in the morning light.

Fen Yu, the fiery ghost girl, floated upside down near the gift crates, eyes sparkling. "Look at all that food! Honeyed buns! Plum wine! Candied lotus!"

Wei Rong, the old general ghost, crossed his arms like a commander assessing a battlefield. "We are guests. Not beggars."

Li Shen, the scholar ghost, sighed. "That's what you said last time. We still ended up stealing from the Duke's pantry."

"Borrowing," Fen Yu corrected primly. "We borrowed calories."

And before the other two could stop her, she darted forward — and the feast began.

One by one, steamed buns began to float into the air, wobbling like jellyfish.

A jar of fruit wine lifted itself gracefully, as if by invisible hands.

A plate of sesame cakes drifted slowly toward the garden.

"Operation Snack Storm successful," Fen Yu whispered proudly.

Wei Rong tried to grab one too, and his ghostly sword accidentally hooked three. "A soldier must eat to fight."

Li Shen groaned, rubbing his forehead. "You're both a disgrace to the afterlife."

But the universe, as always, had perfect timing.

A maid turned around at that exact moment.

She froze. Her tray clattered to the ground.

"G-GHOST!!!" she screamed, pointing at the floating buns wobbling through the air.

The entire courtyard went silent.

The Duke's jaw dropped. "What did she say?"

The maid stammered, pale as paper. "The—the buns, Master! They're flying!"

Everyone turned toward the direction she pointed.

Nothing. Not a bun, not a crumb.

The ghosts had already vanished—buns and all.

The servants exchanged glances.

The Duchess sighed gently, patting the maid's arm. "You've been working too long without rest, child. Go drink some tea."

"Yes, yes," another maid whispered. "She's seeing things. The sun's too strong today."

The Duke chuckled. "Ghosts stealing buns? Impossible!"

The maid was ushered away, muttering apologies.

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The Empress's Deadly Side-Eye

Not everyone was fooled.

From her seat near the tea pavilion, Lian An sipped calmly, her sharp eyes drifting toward the shadowed corner behind a stack of boxes.

And there they were.

Three shimmering heads poking out from behind the crates like guilty children caught mid-crime.

Fen Yu froze, cheeks puffed with stolen bun.

Wei Rong stood stiffly, holding a honey jar like a trophy.

Li Shen pretended to read a stolen scroll upside down.

Lian An didn't say a word.

She simply tilted her head and gave them the side-eye of imperial doom.

The air went still.

Fen Yu whispered, "She saw us."

Wei Rong hissed, "No, she didn't."

Li Shen sighed. "She absolutely did."

Then the Empress raised one eyebrow — just slightly.

And that was all it took.

The ghosts vanished instantly, leaving behind the faint sound of guilty munching fading into thin air.

Lian An exhaled through her nose, muttering under her breath, "One more stolen dumpling, and I'll have them sealed in a spirit urn."

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## Sisterly Steel

Once the chaos was forgotten, Lian Ruo took both sisters to the garden for their first sword lesson. The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow across the bamboo grove, and laughter filled the air once again.

"All right," he said, adjusting Lian Hua's grip. "Feet apart. Balance. The sword doesn't swing by force—it flows with your breath."

Lian Hua puffed her cheeks in concentration, swinging too fast and nearly toppling.

"Ah!" he caught her elbow, laughing. "You've got spirit! But remember—grace before strength."

Then he turned to Lian An. "And you, my Empress cousin? Still remember how to fight?"

She smirked, unsheathing the blade. "I've been fighting courtiers for a year straight. Surely that counts as training."

He grinned. "Let's test that."

Their blades clashed. The sound rang through the garden—clean, bright, and full of energy.

Her movements were elegant yet cautious; his were teasing, light, pushing her just enough to make her move faster.

Lian Hua clapped her hands. "Sister! Hit him! Hit him!"

Lian An lunged. He sidestepped easily. "Too slow."

She smiled. "Not twice."

She fainted left, spun, and caught him on the arm with the flat of her blade.

Lian Ruo laughed, bowing dramatically. "Well struck, Your Majesty!"

Lian Xiu, watching from the veranda, beamed with motherly pride. "My daughters make me proud today."

The Duke laughed heartily. "And give me more gray hairs tomorrow."

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A Feast of Warmth

That evening, the estate glowed with lanterns. The family gathered under the moonlight, tables overflowing with food, laughter, and the scent of roasted duck.

Lian Hua showed off her new sword, insisting she'd protect her sister someday.

The Duke told stories of his youth. The Duchess laughed until tears glistened in her eyes.

And Lian Ruo promised to train them both every morning while he stayed.

For one precious night, Lian An forgot the cold marble halls of the palace. She forgot suspicion, rank, and whispers.

Here, she was not an Empress—she was simply Lian An, daughter, sister, cousin.

As the laughter faded into soft night, she looked toward the rafters, where faint whispers of the ghosts lingered.

"Next time," Fen Yu's voice whispered faintly, "we're stealing the duck."

She smiled, shaking her head. "You try, and I'll exorcise you."

Their laughter echoed softly, mischievous and alive.

And for once, so was her heart.