

## Ghost 62

Chapter 62: little escape

The morning after Lian Ruo's return began with the clang of wooden swords.

The courtyard echoed with laughter and shouts as sunlight spilled across the dew-slick stones.

In the garden, Lian An and Lian Hua stood opposite each other, hair tied back, sleeves rolled up, their practice blades glinting in the golden light.

"Again!" Lian Ruo's voice rang out like a whip. "Lian Hua, don't hesitate. Your enemy won't wait for you to think."

"I'm trying!" she protested, cheeks flushed, her sword trembling slightly under the pressure of her sister's parry.

Lian An grinned, sweat beading at her temples. "You said the same thing five minutes ago."

Her sister huffed, pushed forward—and nearly lost her footing again.

Lian Ruo stepped in, catching her wrist and redirecting her stance. "Breathe from here," he said, tapping her chest lightly. "Strength doesn't come from anger, it comes from control."

Lian Hua exhaled slowly, focusing. Her next move was smoother—clean, precise. She caught her sister off guard for the first time that morning.

"Good," Lian Ruo said approvingly, lowering his blade. "You'll be stronger than me soon if you keep this up."

Lian Hua's eyes sparkled. "You really think so?"

He smiled. "I'd bet my sword on it."

"Then I'll take it when I win!" she declared proudly.

Lian An chuckled, tossing her blade aside. "If you win, you'll deserve it. Until then, I'll enjoy watching you trip over your feet."

"Unfair!" her sister cried, chasing after her as Lian Ruo burst out laughing.

From the veranda, Duchess Lian Xiu watched with her husband, both smiling quietly. "They laugh like when they were little," she whispered.

The Duke nodded. "Let them. The world outside won't always give them reason to."

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### Festival Preparations

By noon, the air buzzed with anticipation.

The servants hung crimson lanterns from the trees, ribbons fluttering like dragon tongues in the breeze. The aroma of fried sweets, roasted chestnuts, and sugar-glazed lotus filled the estate.

It was the Lantern Festival—the one night every household, noble or poor, forgot sorrow and bathed in light.

Lian Hua was practically glowing with excitement, tugging at her sister's sleeve. "Sister, please! Let's go to the market! Cousin promised to take us!"

Lian An raised a brow. "You plan to drag your Empress sister into the common streets again?"

"Please! You haven't smiled properly in weeks. Let's just walk, no guards, no titles—just us."

Lian Ruo entered, holding three lanterns—one shaped like a rabbit, one like a lotus, and one carved into a phoenix. "Already packed," he said cheerfully. "We'll blend right in. No one will recognize the royal troublemaker."

Lian An rolled her eyes but couldn't hide her smile. "Fine. But if the Emperor hears of this—"

"He'll send his guards to fetch us?" Lian Ruo grinned. "Let him. I'll duel them off."

Lian Hua giggled. "Then hurry before he changes his mind!"

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## The Streets of Light

By evening, the city below the Duke's hill estate was unrecognizable.

Every street glowed with lanterns—red, gold, jade green. Stalls lined the roads selling candied fruit, sticky rice balls, fireworks, and silk ribbons that shimmered like moonlight.

Children ran with rabbit-shaped lanterns, their laughter echoing like bells.

The trio moved quietly through the crowd in plain robes and veils—ordinary faces among thousands.

Lian Hua clung to her sister's hand, eyes wide in wonder. "It's so beautiful! Sister, look—sky lanterns!"

Hundreds of lanterns floated upward, carrying wishes written on paper slips.

"May my family be safe."

"May love find me this year."

"May debts vanish before my mother finds out."

Lian An smiled faintly. "I used to write those as a child."

"What did you wish for?" Lian Hua asked curiously.

"Freedom," Lian An said softly, her voice nearly lost in the noise. "To live without fear of anyone's will but my own."

Her sister's grip tightened gently. "Maybe you'll have that one day."

Lian An smiled, though the ache in her chest lingered. "Maybe."

Their cousin, walking a few steps ahead, turned back and called, "You two! Come see this! The dumpling stall here claims their soup can cure heartbreak!"

Lian Hua laughed. "Let's test it!"

"I'm not heartbroken," Lian An said dryly.

"Then you can pay!" her sister chirped.

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The Ghostly Companions

Of course, peace never lasted long—not with them around.

Fen Yu peeked out of Lian An's lantern, her translucent face squished against the paper. "Oooh! Look at all the sweets! I want that one! And that one! And that one!"

Wei Rong floated beside the stalls, puffing out his ghostly chest. "Lanterns of fire and paper. Hmph! In my day, we celebrated with real torches!"

Li Shen adjusted his invisible scholar's hat. "Because in your day, writing paper was a luxury."

Fen Yu elbowed him. "You're just mad because you can't eat!"

"I can eat," Li Shen retorted. "I just... can't digest."

Lian An sighed under her breath, keeping her veil low. "You three behave. If anyone sees floating lanterns talking, we'll have a riot."

Fen Yu grinned. "Don't worry, Your Majesty. We're invisible!"

Seconds later, a man screamed as his hat flew off by itself.

Lian An pinched the bridge of her nose. "Invisible, not idiotic!"

The ghosts giggled, darting off between stalls, stealing bits of paper offerings and terrifying fruit vendors. Lian Hua spotted one stall owner shrieking at his "possessed dumplings" and whispered, "Sister, should we help?"

Lian An's eyes narrowed. "No. Let them suffer. They deserve it."

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## A Quiet Escape

The night deepened; the crowd thickened. Music floated on the air—flutes, drums, laughter.

Lian Hua tugged her sister toward a side street. "Come on! There's somewhere I want to go."

Lian Ruo, noticing their whispering, raised an eyebrow. "What are you two plotting now?"

"Nothing," Lian An said innocently. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

She leaned closer. "Women's business."

He groaned dramatically. "That's cheating!"

Before he could press further, Lian Hua pointed to a group of children setting lanterns afloat on the river. "Brother Ruo, look! Isn't that the girl who sells ink by the bridge? She's waving at you!"

Lian Ruo froze, startled—and blushed slightly. "Ah—no—just someone I once—"

Before he could finish, Lian Hua pushed him toward the bridge. "Then go say hello!"

"Wait! You little—!"

But she was already running, laughing, dragging her sister into the crowd. "Hurry, Sister, before he realizes we tricked him!"

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## The Secret Restaurant

They weaved through the lantern-lit streets until they reached a quieter corner of the city — where a modest restaurant stood, its sign freshly painted.

"Moon Pavilion Tea & Eatery."

The soft glow from inside revealed familiar faces — the Empress's old friend Xiang Mei, now dressed in simple working clothes, bustling behind the counter.

The two young orphans Lian An had once rescued carried trays, smiling shyly at customers.

Lian Hua gasped. "This is the shop you opened! It's beautiful!"

Lian An smiled, pride softening her face. "They've done well."

Xiang Mei looked up—and nearly dropped her ladle. "Your Majesty! You—you shouldn't—"

"Shh," Lian An whispered, lowering her veil. "Tonight, I'm not a queen. Just a friend."

Xiang Mei's eyes shimmered. "Then... welcome home."

They sat by the window, sharing tea and quiet laughter. The dishes were simple — rice porridge, lotus root soup, sweet sesame buns — but Lian An had never tasted food so full of warmth. Every bite tasted of memory.

Fen Yu popped up beside the tray, stealing a bun and whispering, "You cook better, but this one has more sugar."

Wei Rong nodded solemnly. "I approve. Needs more spice, though."

Lian Hua giggled softly, pretending to cough to hide her laughter.

When they left, Xiang Mei pressed a small wrapped parcel into the Empress's hand. "Dried herbs," she whispered. "For your health. And my prayers."

Lian An squeezed her hand in return. "You've done well. Keep the shop open — one day, it will feed half the city."

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A Sky of Lanterns

By the time they stepped back into the main street, fireworks lit the sky.

The night was alive with color — gold, crimson, violet streaks exploding above the lantern sea. People laughed, shouted wishes, and released sky lanterns into the heavens.

Lian Hua released hers, closing her eyes. "I wish for happiness—for all of us."

Lian An released hers silently.

It drifted upward, glowing softly against the stars.

Beside her, Lian Ruo returned from the bridge, face flushed, holding a small red pouch in his hand. "You two... disappeared."

Lian Hua smirked. "We went sightseeing. You?"

He cleared his throat. "Sightseeing."

Lian An's eyes flickered to the pouch. "That sightseeing gives gifts now?"

He grinned, slipping it into his sleeve. "Maybe the lanterns are generous."

Lian An smiled knowingly but said nothing.

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A Moment of Peace

As they walked back to the estate under the moonlight, laughter trailed behind them.

The ghosts floated overhead, humming tuneless songs.

Fen Yu twirled around, her golden hairpin (the Empress's gift) glinting in the moonlight.

Wei Rong marched ahead like a general escorting royalty.

Li Shen scribbled invisible poetry on the wind.

And for once, everything felt... right.

Lian Hua clung to her sister's arm, resting her head on her shoulder. "I don't want this night to end."

"Neither do I," Lian An whispered.

But she knew it would. It always did.

Because the lanterns may burn bright — but they eventually fade.