

Ghost 63

Chapter 63: moonlight secret girls in dark

The night sky over the capital burned with a thousand lights.

Lanterns rose into the heavens like drifting prayers—tiny suns made of silk and flame. The reflection of their glow shimmered on the slow-moving river, turning the dark water into a ribbon of gold. Laughter, music, and the gentle hum of flutes filled the air, weaving through the scent of fried sweets and sandalwood.

For the first time in months, Lian An felt light.

She and Lian Hua stood at the river's edge, the cool wind tugging playfully at their sleeves. Behind them, the city was alive with the pulse of the Lantern Festival; ahead, the water rippled beneath a sea of floating lights.

Lian Hua held up a small lantern shaped like a lotus flower, its petals glowing soft pink. "Sister, what will you write for your wish this year?"

Lian An smiled faintly, dipping her brush into the ink and writing slowly on the slip of paper. "Peace," she murmured. "For my family."

Her sister grinned. "Mine is easier — I wish for sweets every day!"

Lian An laughed softly, tucking her own lantern under her arm. "Ambitious, aren't we?"

"Sweet dreams need sweet goals," Lian Hua said cheerfully.

The two sisters crouched by the riverbank, lighting their lanterns with careful hands. The flame flickered, catching the reflection of their smiles.

"Ready?" Lian Hua whispered.

"Together," Lian An said.

They released them at once. The lanterns floated gently out onto the water, drifting between dozens of others until they were indistinguishable from the sea of glowing prayers.

The sisters stood in silence for a moment, watching their lights vanish downstream.

Then Lian Hua tugged at her sleeve. "Let's go watch the shadow play! I heard the puppets move like real people!"

Lian An's eyes softened. "You've been wanting to see that since you were ten."

"Exactly! You owe me this, sister."

"All right, all right. Let's go."

The Cousin's Excuse

Their cousin Lian Ruo followed behind, juggling three cups of sweet rice wine and wearing a grin that could charm a nun. "Are my two little sisters still upright? Or have the lantern fumes made you dizzy?"

"Very funny," Lian Hua said, snatching one of the cups. "You're late."

"Unlike the two of you, I had to stop five people from fainting at my handsome face."

Lian An raised a brow. "More like you scared them with your arrogance."

He laughed, draining his wine. "Maybe both."

They reached the edge of the crowded riverside, where the puppet show was about to begin — a large silk screen illuminated by torches. Children squealed in delight as shadow figures danced across it, telling tales of dragons and heroes, of gods who fell in love with mortals.

Just as Lian An was about to sit, Lian Ruo suddenly straightened.

"Ah—I'll be back," he said quickly, handing her his empty cup.

"Where are you going?" Lian Hua asked suspiciously.

He hesitated, scratching his neck. "Ah... nature calls."

Lian Hua burst out laughing. "Go, go! Don't pee here like a baby!"

Even Lian An snorted. "You could have gone before we left."

"Would you rather I demonstrate here?"

"Disgusting!" both sisters said in unison, swatting him away.

He grinned. "Be right back. Don't start the play without me."

"Go relieve your heroic bladder," Lian Hua teased, waving him off.

As he disappeared into the maze of narrow alleys behind the food stalls, the sisters turned back to the stage, giggling.

The Alley of Moonlight

The laughter of the crowd faded as Lian Ruo walked deeper into the alley. The noise of drums and chatter gave way to stillness, broken only by the distant whistle of the wind.

The lanterns here hung dimmer, their colors muted. The air smelled faintly of rice wine and river mist. A stray cat darted past, brushing against his leg before vanishing into the shadows.

He frowned slightly. He wasn't truly seeking privacy.

He was seeking her.

He turned another corner — and stopped.

There she was.

A young woman stood half-hidden in the glow of a single lantern, her face partly veiled by a simple scarf. Her robe was plain, the kind worn by servants, yet she held herself with the grace of someone who did not belong to the shadows she stood in.

Her head lifted at the sound of his footsteps.

"Ruo..." she whispered.

And then, before he could speak, she ran to him and threw herself into his arms.

The faint scent of wild osmanthus clung to her hair.

He froze only for a heartbeat before wrapping his arms around her tightly, pulling her close, as though afraid she would vanish with the mist.

"You came," she breathed, voice trembling. "You really came..."

"I always come," he murmured against her hair. "Though you make it harder each time."

She pulled back just enough to look up at him — her eyes glimmering, the lantern light catching the wet shimmer of tears.

"I thought... I thought I'd never see you again."

His thumb brushed her cheek gently. "Foolish girl. You know I'd find you even if you were buried under a thousand lies."

She smiled weakly, her voice shaking. "It's not lies anymore, Ruo. My father... he's decided."

His expression tensed. "Decided what?"

Her hand gripped his sleeve, desperate. "He's sending me to the palace."

"The palace?" he repeated slowly, as though the word itself poisoned the air.

She nodded, biting her lip. "To replace my sister."

His jaw clenched. "Replace—? But your sister—"

"She failed," she said softly. "And now, my father says it's my duty to restore our family's favor. He's preparing the papers now. I'm to enter as a companion, and later..." Her voice broke. "...perhaps a concubine."

He went still. The flicker of lantern light caught the storm behind his eyes. "No."

"Ruo—"

"No!" he said sharply, stepping back. "You can't. You know what your family did—what they tried to do to the Duke, to the Emperor himself! Do you think they'll let you walk into that palace unharmed?"

Tears fell freely now, glistening on her cheeks. "It doesn't matter. I can't refuse him. He says it's for redemption, that I'll bring back honor to our blood. But Ruo... I don't want honor." Her fingers tightened on his robe. "I just want you."

He closed his eyes for a long moment, his chest rising with the weight of his breath. "You'll destroy yourself if you go."

"I'll die if I stay."

"Then let me take you away."

She shook her head fiercely. "You can't. Our families are enemies. My father would hunt you to the ends of the earth. He still believes your uncle ruined us."

Ruo let out a bitter laugh. "Perhaps he's right. Perhaps honor kills more people than swords ever will."

She reached up, cupping his cheek. "You speak like a poet again."

He caught her hand and pressed it to his heart. "And you — still like a fool who makes me one."

Her lips trembled into a small, broken smile. "If I enter the palace, I'll never see you again."

He leaned closer, his forehead touching hers. "Then I'll break heaven itself to find you."

"Don't promise that," she whispered, tears spilling down. "Promises are heavy things."

He laughed softly, though the sound cracked at the edges. "Then I'll bear it."

For a long moment, they stood in silence, the world narrowed to the rhythm of their hearts and the quiet flutter of the lantern above them.

The Memory of Their First Meeting

It had been two years ago — by the southern sea.

She had been traveling with her family to oversee a trade inspection, and he had been stationed near the coastal garrison. A storm had trapped her caravan for days, and he had found her wandering near the cliffs, staring at the waves as though searching for answers in them.

"You'll catch a fever standing there," he'd said then.

She'd smiled, eyes bright despite the wind. "Then you'll have to cure me."

That was how it began — a soldier's son and a merchant's daughter, stealing hours between tides and duty. They'd spoken of books, dreams, and rebellion against the roles carved for them by others.

They had parted with promises neither could keep — until fate twisted their paths again.

And now, here they were — standing in an alley, on opposite sides of war and blood.

A Vow Beneath the Lanterns

He drew her closer again, voice low, urgent. "Tell me where you'll be kept when your father sends you."

She hesitated. "The Chen estate still holds servants under his control. I'll be trained there until the palace accepts me."

"Then I'll send word," he said. "Through my men. If there's a way to take you out—"

"There won't be."

"There will," he insisted. "You just have to wait."

She shook her head, her voice trembling. "I've waited too long already."

Her tears fell against his hand, hot even through the chill night air. He caught them with his thumb, his heart twisting painfully.

"I'll come for you," he said again, softer now, almost to himself. "Even if it costs me my life."

The lantern flickered between them, its flame bending in the breeze like a witness to their defiance.

She looked up at him, memorizing his face — the sharp line of his jaw, the stubborn fire in his eyes, the warmth that had once made her feel safe.

"Then at least let me go remembering this," she whispered.

And before he could respond, she rose on her toes and kissed him — softly, fleetingly, as though afraid the world would punish her for it.

When they broke apart, her tears glimmered under the lantern light.

"Go," she said quietly. "Before someone sees."

He stood there for a heartbeat, torn between duty and desire, before finally stepping back.

The alley swallowed her as she turned away, her figure fading like a wisp of smoke.

He stared after her until the sound of the crowd returned, until the laughter from the river reached his ears again. Only then did he whisper, "I'll find you... I swear it."

The Sisters by the River

Meanwhile, back by the riverbank, Lian An and Lian Hua were laughing at the end of the puppet show, surrounded by flickering lantern light.

"Where is Brother Ruo?" Lian Hua said between giggles. "He's been gone long enough to flood the river."

Lian An chuckled, sipping her tea. "Perhaps he got lost."

"Or fell in the river," her sister teased.

They laughed again, unaware that just streets away, fate had already begun to weave another tangled thread — one that would soon draw their world into fire once more.