

## Ghost 69

Chapter 69: lanterns and new path

The first rays of dawn crept gently over the Duke's estate, brushing the tiled roofs with soft gold. Birds chirped among the peach trees, and a faint chill lingered in the morning air.

Inside the training courtyard, the sound of clashing wood broke the calm.

"Your stance is wrong again!"

Lian Ruo's voice rang out firmly, though amusement colored his tone.

Across from him, Lian An gritted her teeth, adjusting her footing. The wooden sword felt heavier than usual, but determination shone in her eyes. She stepped forward, blocking his strike with surprising precision.

Lian Hua, standing nearby, clapped her hands in excitement. "Sister! That was perfect!"

Lian Ruo blinked once, lowering his blade. "Not bad," he said with a half-smile. "You didn't flinch this time."

"Are you praising me or insulting me?" Lian An asked, a faint smirk forming.

"Both," he said easily. "But mostly praising. You've improved faster than I expected."

Their laughter drew the Duke himself to the courtyard balcony. He stood watching quietly, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

When Lian An noticed him, she lowered her sword and bowed slightly. "Father, forgive us for disturbing your rest."

"Disturbing?" he repeated, chuckling softly. "Hearing my children's laughter is better medicine than any physician's tonic."

The Duchess, Lian Xiu, appeared beside him, draped in a light shawl. "So early in the morning, and already practicing swordplay? You three will make the neighbors think our daughters plan to join the army."

Lian Hua stuck out her tongue playfully. "Why not? If anyone bullies us, we'll fight them together!"

The Duke laughed heartily. "Good spirit! But remember, young lady, your sword should protect, not provoke."

Lian Hua nodded, puffing her chest proudly. "Of course, Father!"

As the siblings continued their playful sparring, the Duke leaned toward his wife and whispered, "Look at her, Xiu'er — our An'er's smile is different now. Stronger."

Lian Xiu nodded softly. "Peace suits her."

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#### Preparations for the Festival

By midmorning, the estate buzzed with excitement. Servants carried baskets of pastries, seamstresses hurried with last-minute stitches, and the sisters' chambers echoed with laughter and fabric rustling.

Lian Hua rummaged through a chest of robes, muttering to herself. "No, too bright. Too silk. Too Empress."

"Are you criticizing my wardrobe?" Lian An teased, watching from the mirror as her sister threw another elaborate gown aside.

"I'm protecting you from attention!" she declared. "We'll blend in with the crowd, not shine like the sun!"

Lian Ruo entered then, his hair tied simply, wearing the modest robes of a scholar. "You two aren't ready yet?"

Lian Hua whirled around. "Almost! Don't rush us — we have to make Sister look plain but elegant."

Lian Ruo raised an eyebrow. "Plain and elegant? That's contradictory."

"Not for me!" Lian Hua said proudly.

Lian An laughed, shaking her head. "She's right, you know. I'd rather not draw every eye in the market."

Finally, after much fussing, they were ready.

Lian An wore a soft gray-blue cotton robe, her hair tied loosely beneath a light veil. Lian Hua dressed in soft peach, lively and cheerful, and their cousin in dark brown robes that made him look every bit the wandering scholar.

When they appeared in the front hall, the Duke looked at them with quiet pride. "You look... ordinary," he said, then smiled. "Which is exactly what you should be."

"Father," Lian Hua said sweetly, "we'll bring you candied fruit!"

"I prefer peace over sugar," he chuckled. "But go, all of you. Enjoy the day."

With his blessing, the three slipped out through the side gate — just as any normal family might.

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## The Festival's Splendor

The streets of the capital were transformed.

Every alley was strung with colorful banners and bright silk streamers that fluttered in the wind. Stalls overflowed with dumplings, rice cakes, roasted chestnuts, and sugar figurines shaped like dragons. The hum of music, laughter, and the rhythm of drums filled the air.

"Ah! It's so lively!" Lian Hua exclaimed, eyes wide.

"Stay close," Lian Ruo reminded them, but even he couldn't hide a smile.

They joined the flow of people moving through the main square. Children ran with spinning toys, couples lit lanterns for luck, and foreign performers juggled flame under the archways.

"This is what life should feel like," Lian An thought silently. No court, no power — just people being alive.

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## The Rides of Joy

As they wandered further, a large wooden structure drew the crowd's attention — a rotating wheel with swinging seats tied to its arms.

"What's that?" Lian Hua gasped.

"The Sky Carousel," Lian Ruo said, hiding his grin. "It's a ride from the western provinces. They say it feels like flying."

"Flying?!" Lian Hua turned to her sister instantly. "We have to try it!"

Lian An blinked, unsure. "That looks... dangerous."

"Come on, Sister! Don't be scared!"

Before she could protest, Lian Hua dragged her forward, laughing. Lian Ruo followed, shaking his head.

Minutes later, all three were seated, the wheel beginning to spin.

Lian Hua screamed — half in terror, half in delight — while Lian An clutched the side rails tightly, her veil fluttering in the wind. Lian Ruo laughed from the next seat, calling, "You're supposed to enjoy it, not hold your breath!"

"I am!" Lian An shouted back, though her laugh betrayed her.

When the ride finally stopped, they stumbled off, laughing breathlessly. Lian Hua's hair was a mess, Lian Ruo's robe was askew, and Lian An's cheeks were flushed from laughter she hadn't felt in years.

"This was madness," she said between giggles. "Let's do it again."

Lian Hua gasped in mock horror. "The Empress of the realm wants a second round!"

Her sister smiled mischievously. "Maybe I'm not an Empress today."

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Across the City — Another Arrival

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a grand imperial carriage rolled quietly through the crowd, the golden crest of the dragon half-hidden beneath red silks.

Inside sat Emperor Rong Zhen, expression unreadable, and beside him, Lady Chen, radiant in crimson.

She peeked out through the curtain, her eyes lighting up at the colorful chaos outside. "Your Majesty! The festival looks so beautiful. Let's walk among the people!"

He glanced at her, mildly surprised. "You want to join the common crowd?"

"Why not?" she said with a laugh. "It's been years since we've gone out together like this. Don't you remember our last outing, before we entered the palace?"

His gaze softened faintly at the memory.

She smiled brighter, sensing his change in mood, and leaned closer. "Let's relive it. Just for an hour."

He hesitated only a moment before sighing in defeat. "Very well."

The carriage stopped at the edge of the market. Lady Chen hopped out first, holding her skirts, her eyes shining with excitement. The Emperor followed quietly, his guards dispersing subtly into the crowd to watch from afar.

They walked side by side, blending almost seamlessly among the festival-goers. Laughter surrounded them, bright and carefree — a world far removed from the palace's cold marble halls.

Lady Chen pointed eagerly toward a puppet show. "Look! They're reenacting the founding emperor's battle!"

Rong Zhen's lips curved slightly. "You still remember every tale."

"I remember everything about you," she said softly.

For a moment, silence passed between them — soft, nostalgic, almost peaceful.

And yet, somewhere else in the same bustling city, his Empress — unaware of his presence — was laughing freely among the crowd, her veil catching the wind, her smile brighter than the lanterns above.

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Evening Approaches

As the sun dipped low, the city began to glow with the light of a thousand lanterns.

Lian Hua bought paper sweets, Lian Ruo carried parcels of trinkets, and Lian An lingered behind, gazing at the floating lanterns rising into the dusk sky.

For this one day, she had been free — not as the Empress, not as a symbol of power, but as a daughter and a sister.

Yet, destiny was already weaving invisible threads in the crowd — leading her closer, unknowingly, to the very man she had vowed to forget.