

Ghost 72

Chapter 72: the banquet

The evening sky melted into gold and crimson as the festival came to its end.

The lanterns on the Jade River floated gently downstream like scattered stars, carrying the laughter of the crowd away with them.

From one corner of the city, a quiet carriage rolled toward the palace gates.

Inside, Emperor Rong Zhen sat relaxed for once, the edge of formality gone from his shoulders. Beside him, Lady Chen leaned against the window curtain, still glowing from the day's excitement.

"That was lovely," she sighed. "It's been so long since we could walk among people without anyone bowing every few steps."

He nodded faintly, still half lost in thought. "It was... refreshing."

She smiled at him, her eyes soft. "You even laughed, Your Majesty."

He looked away, hiding the small curve of his lips. "Occasionally, laughter is necessary."

Lady Chen chuckled. "The girl who danced—what was her name? Heira? From... the Whisper Bowl?"

At that, his mouth twitched. "Ah. Yes. That one."

"She was brilliant. I couldn't believe she wasn't a trained dancer. If she truly runs a restaurant, I want to send for her one day."

"Perhaps you will," he said smoothly. "Though I suspect she is quite... busy."

"Busy?" Lady Chen tilted her head.

"Mm." He looked out the window, hiding the humor dancing in his eyes. "People who create trouble often are."

Lady Chen laughed, not catching his double meaning. Their carriage turned through the palace gate as night settled in, and for a brief, perfect moment, the Emperor almost forgot the politics waiting beyond those walls. He carried the image of the veiled dancer in his mind — graceful, fearless, and lying through her teeth about her restaurant. He found himself smiling again before sleep.

The Duke's Estate — That Same Evening

Meanwhile, laughter echoed all the way to the moonlit courtyard of the Duke's estate.

Three riders returned from the city, arms heavy with parcels and hearts lighter than air.

Lian An climbed down from the carriage first, pulling her veil loose and shaking out her hair. "I haven't laughed like that in years."

Behind her, Lian Hua twirled in the courtyard. "Sister, you were the star! Everyone kept talking about the girl from the Whisper Bowl!"

Her cousin Lian Ruo followed, a dry smile on his face. "You've caused a phenomenon. If a restaurant by that name opens tomorrow, half the city will come."

Lian An gave him a playful glare. "Then perhaps you should open it and donate the profits."

He raised a brow. "So you admit it was a lie?"

She brushed past him, still laughing. "A necessary one."

The sound of footsteps drew their attention.

The Duchess, elegant even in her night robe, came out to greet them. "Back already? Did you enjoy yourselves?"

Lian Hua threw herself into her mother's arms. "It was amazing! The river was glowing, there were fire dancers, and Sister even danced on stage!"

The Duchess blinked. "Danced? Our Empress on stage?"

Lian An coughed delicately. "Just a little moment. Nothing dramatic."

Her mother's expression softened into fondness. "It must have been a sight. Your father will be glad to hear it—he's been asking after you all evening."

They entered the main hall together, where the Duke sat with a blanket around his shoulders. His health had improved steadily; the color had returned to his cheeks, and his smile came easier now.

"My daughters," he said warmly as they entered, "I can tell from your faces you've enjoyed the day."

"We did, Father," Lian Hua said, beaming. "There were performers from the neighboring kingdoms and a lady who danced like flowing water! You should have seen her!"

Lian An lowered her gaze, hiding a smirk.

The Duke chuckled. "Ah yes? And did your cousin behave?"

"Perfectly," Lian Ruo said smoothly, before Lian Hua could answer otherwise. "We even brought gifts."

He lifted a small chest onto the table—fine cloth from the western stalls, a carved flute, a pot of honeyed wine.

The Duchess clapped her hands softly. "How lovely! What a thoughtful day you've had."

Then her eyes softened toward Lian An. "An'er, you'll have to start preparing. The day after tomorrow, you return to the palace."

The room quieted for a beat.

Lian An's smile faded just slightly. "So soon?"

"You've stayed nearly a fortnight," the Duke said gently. "We're blessed to have had you this long. But you have duties, my child."

She bowed her head in acknowledgment, though a thread of melancholy pulled at her heart. "Of course, Father."

The Duchess reached across to squeeze her hand. "That's why — before you go — we'll hold a small banquet tomorrow. For your last night here ... and for your father's continued recovery."

At once, the mood brightened again.

"A banquet!" Lian Hua clapped her hands. "I can help decorate!"

"And I'll handle the wine," Lian Ruo offered.

The Duchess smiled at their enthusiasm, then turned to Lian An. "And you, my dear? Any ideas for food? You've developed such a refined palate in the palace."

Lian An blinked—and then a mischievous glint sparked in her eyes.

"Well," she said lightly, "I did come across a wonderful restaurant in the city today. The Whisper Bowl. Their cooking is said to be divine."

Her cousin nearly choked on his tea. "The Whisper — what?"

She continued serenely. "If we invite them to provide dishes for the banquet, everyone will surely be pleased."

The Duchess brightened. "What a splendid idea! I've heard nothing of them, but perhaps they're new. We'll send a carriage in the morning."

The Duke nodded approvingly. "Do that. It will be good to have something fresh and lively. And if their food is truly excellent, they may earn royal attention."

Across the table, Lian Ruo stared at his cousin, his expression halfway between awe and disbelief.

"You made that name up," he mouthed silently.

Lian An took a slow sip of her tea without meeting his gaze. "And now," she murmured under her breath, "it's real."

Later That Night

The household buzzed with preparations. Servants lit lanterns in the courtyard; cooks discussed menus; the Duchess ordered flower garlands for the hall. The sound of life filled every corridor.

Lian Ruo found his cousin later, sitting beneath the plum tree, humming softly while sharpening a small blade.

"Cousin," he said, folding his arms. "Be honest. Are you truly planning to conjure a restaurant overnight?"

She looked up, all innocence. "Why not? You saw how well the name fits."

He sighed, amused despite himself. "Do you realize you just volunteered us to find cooks who can match a lie?"

"I already have an idea," she said, smiling. "I'll ask the kitchen staff to prepare the dishes. We'll call it The Whisper Bowl Banquet. If the Duke and Duchess enjoy it, they'll remember the name. It will make them laugh."

"And if they ask to meet the owner?"

"I'll say she's busy running her restaurant."

He rubbed his temples. "You're impossible."

"Resourceful," she corrected.

Meanwhile — The Palace

Back at the imperial palace, Rong Zhen stood at the highest balcony overlooking the darkened courtyards. Lanterns glowed faintly in the distance where the city still celebrated.

He held a single red paper fan he'd bought earlier—a souvenir of the day—and turned it slowly between his fingers.

A soft voice approached behind him. "Your Majesty," said his trusted attendant. "You seem in good spirits tonight."

He smiled faintly. "Do I?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. It's rare."

He gazed toward the horizon where the festival fires flickered faintly. "I saw a ghost today," he said absently.

The attendant blinked. "A ghost?"

"Someone who reminded me that laughter still exists beyond the palace gates." He placed the fan down and turned away, his tone lighter than it had been in weeks. "Tell the kitchens to prepare a meal for Lady Chen. She enjoyed the outing."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the servant left, Rong Zhen allowed himself one final, quiet chuckle.

"The Whisper Bowl," he murmured. "That woman..."

The Next Morning

Dawn spilled through the Duke's estate like warm milk. Lian Hua darted through the halls with ribbons, shouting orders at servants twice her age; the Duchess supervised flowers and fabrics; Lian Ruo checked deliveries from the market.

In the kitchen, the cooks argued cheerfully about the new restaurant that was supposedly providing tonight's feast.

"Have you ever heard of the Whisper Bowl?" one asked.

"No, but Her Highness says their food is heavenly!"

Another whispered, "Maybe they're royal chefs in disguise!"

Lian An listened from the doorway, hiding her grin behind a fan. When her cousin appeared beside her, he whispered, "You've created chaos."

She looked utterly pleased. "It's productive chaos."

He sighed. "When this banquet ends, you'll return to the palace and leave me to explain that the Whisper Bowl never existed."

"Exactly," she said cheerfully.

Evening Comes

By twilight the main hall was dazzling—silk banners, flower garlands, lanterns shaped like lotuses.

The Duke sat at the head table, color healthy again, while the Duchess greeted guests from the neighboring estates. Music floated through the air, and laughter spilled like wine.

When the dishes arrived—steamed fish with ginger, sweet lotus buns, spiced wine—the servants proudly announced, "From the Whisper Bowl, by order of Her Highness!"

The Duchess beamed. "How wonderful! Their flavors truly are extraordinary."

The Duke nodded, savoring the broth. "Whoever these cooks are, they have my gratitude."

Across the room, Lian Ruo hid his smile behind a cup, murmuring, "You're getting away with this far too easily."

Lian An smiled serenely, watching her parents' joy. "For their happiness," she said softly, "a little lie is nothing."