

Ghost 73

Chapter 73: banquet of mask

The Duke's estate shimmered like a jewel that night.

Hundreds of lanterns hung from carved beams, their golden light spilling across marble floors and silk banners. The air smelled of sweet wine and lotus blossoms; laughter mingled with the steady rhythm of flutes and drums.

It was a night of celebration — for the Duke's recovery, and for the Empress's final evening before returning to the palace.

Courtiers, nobles, and officials from every corner of the capital had come to pay their respects.

They filled the grand hall with color and chatter, their jeweled robes and laughter bouncing off the polished walls.

At the center of it all sat the Duke and Duchess, radiant with pride.

Beside them, the Empress Lian An, serene and smiling, glowed like moonlight caught in silk.

A House of Pride

"Truly," said one nobleman, raising his cup, "the Duke's family stands as the empire's blessing. The Empress herself — grace incarnate! And your nephew, Duke Lian Ruo — what a young man! The court speaks of little else."

The Duke laughed modestly. "Ruo has his father's discipline and his mother's patience. But he's still young. He'll stay here for now — study the estate, learn the people, and when he's ready, he'll go south to his parents. A man must understand the foundation before he rules upon it."

The nobles nodded in approval.

But the women — oh, the women — whispered behind their fans.

"That face! The Emperor himself might be jealous." "Such composure — no wonder the capital adores him." "Did you see how he bowed? Heaven sculpted him kindly!"

Even the Duchess, hearing the giggles, couldn't help but smile behind her cup.

Her nephew, though unaware of it, had become the quiet storm of attention that evening.

The Kitchen's Heat

Meanwhile, behind the silken walls of the banquet hall, the kitchens were alive with clamor. Steam clouded the air, spices burned in the pans, and the scent of honeyed duck filled the corridors.

The Empress stood there amid the heat and noise, her sleeves neatly tied, a faint smile playing on her lips.

Her friend Min Zhi, who had been managing the entire service like a general in battle, was shouting orders.

"Move those plates! Taste the broth again — it's too strong! No, not that spoon, the gold one!"

When she saw Lian An enter, she nearly dropped her ladle. "Your Majesty! You shouldn't be here — you'll ruin your dress!"

Lian An chuckled. "I came to see my general at work. Everything smells wonderful."

Min Zhi huffed, red-faced. "Only because I followed your recipes from that ridiculous restaurant name you made up."

"The Whisper Bowl," Lian An corrected sweetly. "It has a charming ring, doesn't it?"

Min Zhi gave her a suspicious look. "It sounds made-up."

Lian An smiled wider. "Because it is."

The maid stared at her for a full second before bursting into laughter. "You're incorrigible."

Lian An tapped her arm playfully. "You've done well. My mother and father will remember this night thanks to you."

Min Zhi softened, pride gleaming in her eyes. "Then it was worth the sweat."

The Empress left the kitchen amid the laughter, her heart light. For a brief while, she felt not like the Empire's ruler, but a daughter at home.

A Polite Invasion

The music swelled again as Lian An returned to the hall. The tables were alive with chatter, the cups filled to the brim.

Just as she took her seat beside her mother, the herald's voice echoed from the entryway:

"Announcing Lord Chen Guiren of the Western Council — accompanied by Lady Chen, their son, and their younger daughter!"

The Duchess's smile faltered for the briefest moment.

Even the Duke's fingers stiffened on his wine cup.

But they could not rescind what had already been done.

The Duke had sent invitations to every major noble house in the capital, including the Chens — for form's sake, to keep politics clean and faces neutral.

And so, the snake slithered in with a polite smile.

Lord Chen entered in dark navy silk, his posture stiff and regal. Beside him, his wife wore a polite expression that didn't quite reach her eyes. Their son followed, jaw tight with pride, and behind them, the younger daughter Chen Yue, delicate and graceful, her gaze lowered.

They bowed formally before the Duke and Duchess.

The Duke smiled thinly. "Lord Chen. I didn't expect you to honor us tonight."

Lord Chen returned the smile, though his tone held ice beneath it. "Your Grace was kind enough to send an invitation. My family thought it wise to attend."

A pause — then he added quietly,

"After all, they say it is wise to keep one's enemies close."

A ripple of whispers fluttered through the hall like wind over reeds.

The Duke's smile didn't waver. "Enemies, Lord Chen? I recall no war between us — only justice."

The older man's jaw twitched, but he said nothing further. His wife touched his arm lightly, and he moved aside to take their seats.

The Duchess exhaled slowly, her eyes sharp with unspoken warning. But the music rose again, covering the tension with beauty.

Laughter and Praise

As the evening went on, the hall regained its warmth.

The guests toasted, musicians played, and servants moved swiftly through the crowd, refilling cups and clearing dishes.

The Empress sat serenely at the center table, her presence calm and magnetic. The courtiers flocked near her like moths to a candle flame.

"Your Majesty, your beauty could calm storms," said one aging general.

A noble lady added, "The Emperor is fortunate to have such grace by his side."

Another chimed in, "The palace must shine brighter with you there."

Lian An smiled politely. "You are too kind. I am simply my mother's daughter."

At that, all eyes turned to the Duchess, who laughed softly, pretending to scold. "Flattery will not earn my favor, gentlemen. You'll have to speak to my husband first."

The Duke raised his cup in mock surrender. "I am already outnumbered by beauty in this house. What more can I do?"

Laughter broke out again, filling the room. For a while, even the Chen family's shadows faded into the background.

A Glance Across the Room

By the far corner of the hall, Lian Ruo stood quietly near the wine tables, his composure flawless as ever. His presence drew the gaze of half the women in attendance, though he remained politely distant.

He was conversing lightly with a young court scholar when he felt a sudden gaze on him.

He turned — and met Chen Yue's eyes.

She froze instantly, as if caught doing something forbidden. Her hand trembled, the fan in her fingers slipping slightly.

For a heartbeat, time seemed to hold its breath between them.

He gave a small, controlled bow, the faintest trace of surprise in his eyes.

She looked down quickly, pretending to fix her sleeve.

Beside her, Lord Chen's wife leaned in and whispered something. The girl nodded mechanically, her face pale.

Lian Ruo's jaw tightened. He set down his cup quietly and excused himself from the crowd.

He slipped through the side corridor — to clear his thoughts, or perhaps to keep his composure.

He'd thought he'd buried that Chapter of his heart long ago.

But seeing her here — with her father's venom in the same room — was a cruel trick of fate.

Whispers and Masks

"Such a gathering," murmured one court lady behind her fan. "Enemies and allies all under one roof."

"Politics," another replied with a smirk. "Even a family banquet is a battlefield."

From the main table, the Duke laughed heartily as another toast was raised. But his wife could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes flicked subtly toward the Chen patriarch's every move.

Lian An noticed too. Her expression softened; she reached over and laid her hand gently on her father's arm.

"Father," she said quietly, "do not let bitterness spoil your celebration. You have done your duty. Nothing more needs to be said."

The Duke met her gaze — and the storm in him eased a little.

"My daughter," he said softly, "you have your mother's wisdom."

The Praise of Beauty

As the banquet drew toward its peak, the nobles once again turned to admiration.

"Your Grace," said one minister's wife, "Heaven favored your family greatly — a Duke strong in virtue, a Duchess of grace, an Empress as radiant as the sun, and a nephew that every maiden dreams of marrying."

The hall chuckled in agreement.

Even the Chen daughter's face flushed faintly; though her father scowled, his wife forced a smile.

The Duke raised his cup modestly. "Heaven was generous, and I try not to waste its kindness."

The Duchess smiled, her eyes glistening with quiet pride. "Our family has endured much, but tonight feels like a blessing."

The nobles echoed her sentiment with cheers, lifting their cups high. The musicians struck a new tune, lively and full of joy.

The Hidden Tension

Lord Chen said little for the rest of the evening.

He laughed when politeness demanded, raised his cup when others did, but his eyes never softened. Every glance toward the Duke carried the echo of an old wound.

Only once did he lean toward his younger daughter and mutter,

"Remember this, Yue'er. Never trust the Lian family."

The girl's fingers tightened around her cup. "Father... please. Not here."

He didn't reply. His gaze drifted toward the Empress — serene, kind, and so painfully reminiscent of everything his family had lost.

Hatred and regret mingled quietly behind his composed smile.

A Banquet's End

The night waned. Guests departed with full hearts and flushed faces, praising the Duke's generosity and the Empress's beauty.

"The Duke's house glows brighter than the palace tonight," one guest said as they left.

"The Empress's smile could calm any storm," another added.

By the time the last song ended, the hall had softened into quiet warmth.

The Duke leaned back, exhaustion and contentment mixing in his eyes. "A good night," he murmured.

The Duchess nodded, her gaze lingering on her daughters. "The best in a long while."

Lian An smiled faintly, though she felt the undercurrent of unease.

Even joy had its shadows — and tonight, the Chen family's presence had cast one too long to ignore.

But for now, she chose peace.

Tomorrow would bring duty. Tonight, she was simply a daughter, surrounded by warmth, pretending the world was still whole.