

Ghost 74

Chapter 74: the silver gold

The night of the banquet glimmered with soft laughter and bright lights.

Lanterns still burned above the Duke's courtyard, their golden reflections floating on the pond's surface. Inside, the hall pulsed with music, perfume, and the clinking of wine cups.

As the celebration continued, one man seemed almost too composed for the chaos around him — Lian Ruo, the Duke's nephew.

Eyes in the Hall

He stood near a column, his posture effortless yet commanding. The torchlight caught the line of his jaw, the slight curve of his mouth — and it was enough to send half the young women in the hall into fits of flustered whispers.

"He looks like he stepped out of a painting."

"If he glances this way, I'll faint."

"Maybe he'll ask me for a dance—"

Their words buzzed like bees, soft but relentless.

Everywhere he went, eyes followed — coy glances, playful fans, smiles that lingered a moment too long. But Lian Ruo simply bowed politely, murmured excuses about fetching wine or speaking to servants, and slipped away.

It wasn't vanity that made him withdraw — it was restlessness.

Because every time he felt a gaze, he was searching for one in particular.

And he found it.

Across the crowded room, Chen Yue sat beside her mother, dressed in a pale lavender gown that shimmered like the moonlight. Her eyes met his for only a heartbeat — startled, searching, remembering. Then she looked down quickly, pretending to fix the clasp of her fan.

That brief glance was enough.

Lian Ruo's calm cracked. He took a slow breath, glanced toward the Duke and Duchess — both occupied by conversation — and then moved quietly along the edge of the hall.

The Corridor of Silence

Chen Yue's mother leaned toward her daughter, whispering something about court etiquette and posture.

But the girl's thoughts were elsewhere — tangled, trembling. Her pulse raced the moment she realized he was walking toward the corridor.

A moment later, she pressed a hand to her stomach and whispered, "Mother... I'm feeling unwell. I'll go to the washroom."

Lady Chen looked up, concern knitting her brow. "Do you need someone to come with you?"

"No, Mother," she said quickly. "I just need some air."

She bowed politely and slipped from her seat.

The music softened behind her as she entered the long corridor. The torches flickered against carved walls, the faint sounds of the banquet fading until all she could hear was her heartbeat.

And then — a shadow moved behind her.

Before she could turn, a hand caught her wrist — firm, familiar, but gentle.

Her breath caught.

"Lian Ruo," she whispered.

He didn't speak for a moment. He only looked at her — really looked — as though memorizing every line of her face.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, voice low enough that only she could hear.

"For what?" she asked, trying to sound angry, but her voice trembled.

"For making you uncomfortable. For not being able to stop people from staring."

His tone was calm, but his eyes burned with sincerity. "I can't control how they look at me, Yue'er — but you should know, I only see you."

Her heart fluttered painfully. "You shouldn't say things like that here," she murmured, glancing nervously down the corridor.

"I know," he said softly. "That's why I needed a moment before you left."

The Tokens

He reached into his sleeve and brought out a small velvet pouch.

"What is this?" she asked, still suspicious but unable to hide her curiosity.

He opened the pouch carefully and revealed two things — a silver anklet, delicate as moonlight, and a fine gold chain, its pendant shaped like a heart with tiny, hand-carved letters entwined within: L and Y.

Her eyes widened, all anger dissolving in surprise. "You... you had these made?"

He smiled faintly. "I promised to bring you something from the south when I returned. I thought this might remind you... that I still keep my promises."

Her lips trembled between laughter and tears. "You shouldn't give me things like this," she whispered, though her fingers itched to touch them.

"Then let me pretend you didn't say that," he replied softly.

He kneeled slightly — not a grand gesture, just a quiet one — and held out the anklet. "May I?"

She froze, unsure whether to nod or flee. But the sincerity in his eyes disarmed her completely.

She lifted the edge of her gown slightly, just enough for him to see her ankle.

The anklet slipped on smoothly, cool against her skin. His fingers brushed the silver clasp into place, careful and reverent, as if it were something sacred.

For a moment neither of them breathed.

When he stood again, the space between them felt charged, fragile, alive.

Then he lifted the chain. "One more."

She turned around slowly, her hair cascading down her back in soft waves. He hesitated — then, with quiet care, reached forward and gently swept her hair to one side. His fingertips grazed her shoulder, feather-light.

Her pulse thundered, but she didn't move.

He fastened the chain around her neck, the golden heart resting just above her collarbone.

"There," he said softly, his voice steady but his throat tight. "Now even when I'm far away, you'll have something that carries my name with yours."

Her breath caught. "You shouldn't say such things. People will misunderstand—"

"Let them," he said simply. "We've already been separated by misunderstanding once. I won't let it happen again."

She turned back to face him — and for the first time, she wasn't afraid. The lantern light caught the pendant, glinting like a small sun between them.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He smiled — a quiet, unguarded smile that made her heart ache. "No need to thank me. Just... don't forget me."

"I couldn't even if I tried."

The Moment Before Parting

The sound of footsteps echoed faintly at the far end of the corridor. Someone was approaching.

Her eyes widened. "I have to go," she whispered.

He nodded once, stepping back to give her space, his expression unreadable but full of something deep and unspoken.

She turned quickly, clutching the pendant close to her chest, and hurried away — every step light, quick, and trembling with emotion.

Before disappearing around the corner, she paused, glanced back once.

Lian Ruo stood there in the soft torchlight, watching her go — calm, steady, but his eyes lingered as though each second mattered.

And when she vanished from sight, he exhaled slowly, the ghost of a smile crossing his face.

"Fate has a cruel sense of humor," he murmured to himself. "To make enemies of families... and fools of hearts."

Then he tucked the empty velvet pouch into his sleeve and returned to the hall as if nothing had happened — composed, quiet, every trace of longing hidden beneath the poise of a nobleman.

Secrets in the Lantern Light

Chen Yue slipped back into her seat beside her mother. Her cheeks were still pink, her heartbeat loud in her ears.

"Are you feeling better?" Lady Chen asked gently.

"Yes," she said quickly, adjusting her gown to hide the faint glimmer of gold at her throat. "Much better."

Her mother nodded approvingly, unaware. "Good. Your father is in conversation with the Duke. Behave with grace."

"I will."

But her fingers brushed the pendant again and again, unable to stop smiling behind her fan.

Across the room, Lian Ruo lifted his cup and pretended to listen to an old minister's speech — though his eyes flicked once toward her, quick as a heartbeat, then away again.

Neither of them knew how fragile such stolen moments could be — or how quickly they would fade in the shadow of politics and fate.

But for that night, under the Duke's golden lanterns, their small secret shimmered quietly — a silver promise born between two hearts caught on opposite sides of loyalty and love.