

Ghost 215

Chapter 215: the distance between two

Morning entered the palace softly, like a cautious guest.

Golden light slid across the marble corridors and rested gently on carved pillars, warming cold stone that had witnessed generations of emperors and empresses.

The Emperor had barely slept.

Not because of work.

Not because of ministers.

But because of a thought.

Today... I will eat breakfast with her.

It sounded simple.

But for him, it was not.

He adjusted his robe and walked toward the Empress's courtyard without announcing himself.

The Sound of Her Laughter

Before he reached the doors, he heard something rare.

Laughter.

Bright.

Unrestrained.

Free.

He slowed.

Through the half-open doors, he saw her.

Lian An stood beside a small stone stove, sleeves slightly folded, hair loosely tied. A thin ribbon slipped from her shoulder as she leaned forward to flip something in a pan.

Steam rose around her like morning mist.

She was smiling.

Not the polite smile she wore in court.

Not the careful smile she gave him.

But a real one.

He stood there quietly.

Watching.

She was talking animatedly — though he saw no one near her. From the outside, it looked like she was speaking to air.

If only he knew her three ghosts were hovering nearby, teasing her endlessly.

"Turn it carefully!"

"You'll burn it again!"

"You call this cooking? This looks like battlefield debris!"

She swatted at the air.

"Shut up."

The Emperor raised an eyebrow.

Is she... arguing with herself?

But instead of confusion, something warm stirred in him.

She looks alive.

Not burdened.

Not defensive.

Alive.

He stepped forward.

Breakfast Together

The sound of his footsteps made her turn.

For a second, surprise crossed her face.

Then she smiled.

"Your Majesty."

Her tone was natural today.

Not stiff.

"Come. Breakfast is ready. Let's eat."

He nodded.

They sat across from each other at the small courtyard table.

The food was simple.

Vegetable pancakes.

Egg omelette.

Fresh fruit.

Warm tea.

He picked up his chopsticks.

"You seem happy this morning," he said casually.

She blinked, then smiled faintly.

"Just woke up in a good mood."

That was all.

No elaboration.

No explanation.

He waited.

She did not continue.

He tried again.

"The festival preparations are progressing smoothly."

"Yes."

"Your crochet... improving?"

She nodded.

"Better than before."

Her replies were polite.

Short.

Measured.

Like speaking to a respected acquaintance.

Not a husband.

He told himself not to overthink.

She is like this with everyone.

But deep down, he knew—

She was not like this with her friend.

Not like this with her family.

He had seen her warmth elsewhere.

Here—

She kept a careful distance.

The Silence Between Them

The wind brushed through the courtyard.

He noticed her hair moved softly in the breeze.

He wanted to say something personal.

Something light.

Something that might cross that invisible space between them.

But the words felt heavy in his throat.

So he asked something safe.

"Will you attend court today?"

"No."

"I have embroidery to finish."

Again — polite.

Not cold.

But not intimate.

Breakfast ended.

She stood first.

"Instruct the maid if you need anything."

She said it like a hostess.

Not like a wife.

He rose slowly.

"Very well."

And just like that—

The moment ended.

What He Didn't Know

As he walked away from her courtyard, he felt unsettled.

Not because of anything she did.

But because of what she didn't do.

She didn't share.

Didn't complain.

Didn't confide.

He felt like someone invited to dine—

But not invited into her heart.

The News That Came Later

When he reached the outer hall, Duke Lian was already waiting.

The Duke bowed.

Formal greetings were exchanged.

Then came the discussion.

And that was when he heard it.

"Your Majesty," Duke Lian said carefully, "I wished to inform you that my nephew Lian Rou's marriage arrangement has been accepted."

The Emperor paused.

Marriage?

He felt something flicker.

"When was this decided?"

"Recently."

Recently.

He stood still for half a second too long.

He had just eaten breakfast with his wife.

She had not mentioned it.

Not even casually.

Not even in passing.

The Duke continued speaking about arrangements, alliances, courtesy visits.

The Emperor nodded mechanically.

But his thoughts were elsewhere.

She knew.

And she didn't tell me.

A Strange Ache

When Duke Lian left, the Emperor remained seated alone.

He replayed the morning.

Her smile.

Her lightness.

Her simple replies.

She spoke as if nothing important had happened.

As if her cousin's marriage was not worth mentioning.

As if he did not need to know.

Am I... still outside her world?

The thought hurt more than he expected.

He had taken her side before the Dowager.

He wore her scarf proudly.

He spent time in her courtyard.

He tried.

Yet—

She did not treat him as someone to share joy with.

Walking Alone

He left the hall and walked through the palace gardens.

The trees cast long shadows.

Servants moved around busily.

Life went on.

But inside him—

There was quiet confusion.

Their marriage started wrongly.

Suspicion.

Distance.

Politics.

He knew that.

He accepted that.

But now—

He was trying.

Wasn't he?

Or perhaps he was only trying in ways convenient for him.

He bought her scarf.

Protected her publicly.

Visited her more.

But did he ever sit and ask what she truly felt?

Did he ever earn her trust?

Or did he assume proximity was enough?

The Realization

He stopped near the lake.

The same lake where he once caught her before she fell.

That memory still chilled him.

If I hadn't arrived that moment—

He closed his eyes briefly.

No.

He would not think that way.

But perhaps—

She survived alone too many times.

Perhaps she learned not to rely on anyone.

Especially not him.

She didn't share because—

Why would she?

Had he ever made himself someone she could rely on emotionally?

He sighed.

I cannot expect her to cross the bridge if I stand still.

The Bridge Between Them

Marriage was not a throne.

Not a decree.

It was a bridge.

And theirs was broken at the start.

He had stepped forward recently.

But perhaps she still stood on the other side—

Unsure if he would truly meet her halfway.

He touched the scarf at his neck unconsciously.

Crooked.

Uneven.

Imperfect.

But precious.

Because she made it.

He wore it not out of pity.

But pride.

Yet she did not know.

He had not told her.

He simply assumed she would understand.

Perhaps she thought someone else bought it.

Perhaps she believed he pitied her.

Perhaps she believed nothing had changed.

A Quiet Decision

He straightened slowly.

Very well.

If she does not treat me as family—

Then I will become someone she chooses to include.

Not someone she tolerates.

Not someone she avoids.

Someone she trusts.

Someone she speaks to first.

It would take time.

But he would cross that bridge.

Even if he had to build it himself.

Back in Her Courtyard

Meanwhile—

Lian An was unaware of the storm in his thoughts.

She was still smiling faintly from the morning.

The ghosts were teasing her again.

"Why are you smiling like that?"

"Did the Emperor grow wings?"

"You're blushing."

She threw a cloth at them.

"Shut up."

But even as she scolded them—

Her lips curved again.

She didn't hate him anymore.

That much she knew.

But trusting him completely?

That bridge was not yet crossed.

And neither of them fully realized—

They were both standing at opposite ends of the same river.

Waiting.

Ending Scene

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the Emperor stood once more near the lake.

Wind moved through the trees.

He looked toward the direction of her courtyard.

One day—

She will speak to me first.

One day—

She will share joy without hesitation.

And when that day comes—

The distance between our chairs at breakfast will disappear.

Until then—

I will walk forward.

No matter how long the bridge is.