

## **Ghost 250**

Chapter 250: the emperor at the duke residency

Night had gently settled over the Duke residence, wrapping the grand estate in a calm golden glow.

Lanterns hung along the corridors, their light swaying softly in the evening breeze.

Inside, preparations for dinner were underway.

Servants moved quickly but quietly.

The aroma of warm food filled the air.

For the first time since the ambush—

There was an attempt to return to normalcy.

—

In the main hall, Lian Hua sat beside her grandmother, whispering dramatically,

"And then—he just flew back like this—"

"That's not what happened," Lian Rou interrupted.

"You exaggerate everything."

"I make stories interesting," Lian Hua replied proudly.

—

Nearby, Chen Ruyi sat with the Duchess, speaking softly.

And at the center—

Lian An (the Empress) sat quietly.

Calm.

Composed.

But her thoughts—

Still lingering on the attack.

—

Then—

A sudden commotion echoed from outside.

Footsteps.

Voices.

Urgent.

—

"His Majesty has arrived!"

—

Silence.

—

Every single person in the hall froze.

—

"...What?" Lian Hua blinked.

"At this time?" the Duchess whispered.

—

The Duke stood immediately.

"Everyone—come."

—

Within moments—

The entire household gathered at the entrance.

—

The gates opened.

And there—

Under the lantern light—

Stood the Emperor.

—

He wasn't dressed in full royal regalia.

But even in simpler attire—

His presence filled the space.

Cold.

Commanding.

Unignorable.

—

The moment everyone saw him—

They bowed.

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

—

But the Emperor didn't respond immediately.

His gaze moved.

Searching.

—

Until—

It landed on her.

—

Lian An.

Standing among her family.

Alive.

Unharmed.

—

For a brief moment—

Something in his expression shifted.

Relief.

Raw.

Unhidden.

—

Then—

It disappeared.

Replaced by composure.

—

"Rise."

—

Everyone stood.

But no one spoke.

—

The Emperor stepped forward.

He didn't greet.

Didn't exchange pleasantries.

Didn't follow protocol.

—

Instead—

He asked directly.

"...How is the Empress?"

—

The question was simple.

But the tone—

Held something deeper.

—

Lian An blinked slightly.

Then replied calmly,

"I am fine, Your Majesty."

—

But before the Emperor could respond—

A soft chuckle came from behind.

—

The Grandmother.

—

She stepped forward slowly, her eyes sharp despite her age.

"Of course she is fine."

"She's strong."

—

Then she looked at the Emperor carefully.

A knowing smile forming.

"...But it seems someone was very worried."

—

A faint silence followed.

—

Lian Hua immediately looked between them.

Then whispered loudly,

"Grandmother—"

"Quiet," the Duchess muttered.

—

The Emperor didn't react outwardly.

But his gaze flickered briefly.

—

"I received news of the ambush," he said.

His tone returning to authority.

—

The Duke stepped forward.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"It was a targeted attack."

—

The Emperor nodded slightly.

"...I know."

—

His eyes turned toward Lian Rou.

"Explain."

—

Lian Rou repeated the events.

Clear.

Precise.

No exaggeration.

—

The Emperor listened without interruption.

But with each detail—

His expression grew colder.

—

"Seven attackers."

"Trained."

"Focused on the carriage."

—

"...And they asked for the girl."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor's gaze shifted slowly—

Back to Lian An.

—

"...You."

—

She met his eyes.

Unflinching.

"Yes."

—

A pause.

Then the Emperor asked quietly—

"...Were you afraid?"

—

The question surprised everyone.

—

Lian An blinked slightly.

Then—

"...No."

—

The Emperor's eyes narrowed slightly.

"...Why?"

—

Lian An answered simply,

"Because I wasn't alone."

—

A subtle silence followed.

—

The Duke cleared his throat.

"Your Majesty, we believe—"

"This was not just an attack."

—

The Emperor nodded.

"I agree."

—

He stepped forward slightly.

"...This was meant to mislead."

—

The Duke's eyes flickered.

"...You came to the same conclusion."

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"They want us to think the threat is outside."

—

The room grew tense again.

—

Lian Hua whispered,

"But it is outside..."

—

The Emperor looked at her.

"...No."

—

His voice dropped slightly.

"...The real danger is where no one is looking."

—

A chill passed through the room.

—

The Grandmother watched everything quietly.

Then—

She smiled.

Soft.

Knowing.

—

She turned slightly toward the Duchess.

"...He came personally."

—

The Duchess understood.

And for the first time—

Her worry eased.

—

Because she saw it too.

—

The Emperor had not come as a ruler tonight.

—

He had come—

As a man.

—

Concerned.

—

The Grandmother stepped forward again.

"Well then."

"If His Majesty has come all this way..."

"You should at least stay for dinner."

—

The Duke stiffened slightly.

"Mother—"

—

But the Emperor spoke first.

"...If it is not an inconvenience."

—

Everyone paused.

—

Then the Grandmother laughed softly.

"Inconvenience?"

"It's an honor."

—

Lian Hua grinned.

"This is going to be interesting."

—

Lian An looked at the Emperor quietly.

Something felt different.

—

Not command.

Not distance.

—

But presence.

—

As they moved inside—

The atmosphere shifted.

From tension—

To something more complex.

—

Dinner was served.

But tonight—

It wasn't just a meal.

—

It was a gathering of truths.

Unspoken emotions.

And silent realizations.

—

As the Emperor sat among her family—

Listening.

Watching.

Occasionally speaking—

—

The Grandmother leaned back slightly.

Her eyes resting on him.

—

And she thought—

—

"...So."

—

"He has finally fallen."

A Seat at the Family Table

The grand dining hall of the Duke residence was filled with a warm glow.

Lanterns cast soft golden light across the polished wooden table, where dishes had been carefully arranged—steaming bowls of soup, delicately prepared meats, fresh vegetables, and fragrant rice.

Unlike the palace—

There was no stiffness here.

No silent pressure.

No hidden calculations in every glance.

Only—

Family.

—

The Emperor sat among them.

Not at the head.

Not elevated.

Just... seated.

And for the first time in a long while—

He felt it.

A strange ease.

—

Lian Hua was the first to break the silence.

"Try this!"

Before anyone could stop her, she placed food directly into the Emperor's bowl.

The entire table froze.

—

The Duchess gasped softly.

"Lian Hua—!"

—

But the Emperor simply looked at the bowl.

Then at her.

"...Thank you."

—

Lian Hua grinned.

"No problem."

—

Lian Rou covered his face.

"This is embarrassing."

—

Chen Ruyi laughed quietly.

And even the Duke allowed a faint smile.

—

The tension—

Melted.

—

Lian An sat across from the Emperor, watching.

There was something unfamiliar in this scene.

Something... gentle.

—

The Emperor picked up his chopsticks and tasted the food.

His expression didn't change much—

But he nodded slightly.

"...It's good."

—

The Grandmother chuckled.

"Of course it is."

"This house doesn't serve anything less."

—

The conversation slowly began.

Light.

Natural.

The kind that didn't require careful thought before speaking.

—

Then—

The Duke's younger brother cleared his throat.

"Your Majesty."

—

The table quieted slightly.

—

"There is something we would like to inform you about."

—

The Emperor looked at him.

"...Go ahead."

—

He continued,

"In four days, we will be hosting a banquet."

"To officially announce the marriage of Lian Rou and Chen Ruyi."

—

Chen Ruyi lowered her gaze slightly.

Lian Rou remained calm, but his posture straightened.

—

The Emperor listened quietly.

Then nodded.

"I see."

—

The Duke added,

"It will be a formal gathering."

"Nobles, officials..."

"And of course—"

He paused slightly.

"...Your Majesty's presence would honor us."

—

A brief silence followed.

—

Everyone waited.

—

The Emperor looked at Lian Rou.

Then at Chen Ruyi.

Then—

At Lian An.

—

She didn't say anything.

But her calm expression—

Held quiet support.

—

The Emperor leaned back slightly.

"...I will attend."

—

Relief spread across the table.

—

The Duke nodded respectfully.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

—

Lian Hua clapped softly.

"This is going to be amazing!"

—

The Grandmother smiled.

"Yes."

"It will be lively."

—

The Emperor picked up his cup.

For a moment—

He didn't drink.

—

Instead—

He looked around the table again.

—

The Duke.

The Duchess.

The siblings.

The laughter.

The warmth.

—

And then—

Her.

—

Lian An.

—

A strange feeling settled in his chest.

Something unfamiliar.

Something he hadn't allowed himself to feel before.

—

"...So this is what it's like."

He murmured quietly.

—

"Your Majesty?" the Duke asked.

—

The Emperor shook his head slightly.

"...Nothing."

—

He took a sip of tea.

—

And for the first time—

The palace felt far away.

—

And this table—

Felt closer to home than anything else.