

Ghost 251

Chapter 251: a game of mahjong

The night at the Duke residence had grown deeper, but instead of quieting down—

It had become livelier.

Dinner had ended.

Servants cleared the dishes.

Lanterns were adjusted.

And in the central hall—

A square table was set.

—

Mahjong tiles were carefully arranged.

The soft clicking sound of tiles touching each other echoed lightly.

—

"Your Majesty," the Duke's younger brother said with a smile,

"Would you care for a game?"

—

The Emperor glanced at the table.

Then at Lian Rou.

A faint spark appeared in his eyes.

"...It has been a while."

—

Lian Hua immediately jumped up.

"Yes! Yes! Play!"

—

The Grandmother chuckled.

"Let the young ones enjoy."

—

Soon—

Seats were taken.

At the table sat:

The Emperor.

Lian Rou.

The Duke's younger brother.

And one elder from the family.

—

Around them—

Everyone gathered.

Watching.

Waiting.

Excited.

—

Lian Hua whispered loudly to Lian An,

"Who do you think will win?"

—

Lian An smiled faintly.

"...Let's see."

—

Chen Ruyi stood quietly beside Lian Rou, her eyes filled with curiosity.

—

The tiles were shuffled.

The sound—

Sharp.

Rhythmic.

Almost musical.

—

The game began.

—

The Emperor's movements were calm.

Measured.

Each tile he picked—

Each tile he discarded—

Carried intention.

—

Lian Rou, on the other hand—

Was focused.

Sharp.

Observing every move.

—

The first few rounds passed quietly.

Only the sound of tiles filled the room.

—

Then—

Lian Hua couldn't hold back.

"Why did you throw that one?!"

—

Everyone paused.

—

The Emperor raised an eyebrow slightly.

"...You understand the game?"

—

Lian Hua straightened proudly.

"Of course."

—

Lian Rou muttered,

"She doesn't."

—

"I do!"

—

The Grandmother laughed softly.

"Let her speak. It makes the game more fun."

—

The Emperor glanced briefly at Lian An.

For a moment—

Their eyes met.

—

She was smiling.

Relaxed.

At ease.

—

Something in his chest softened again.

—

Back to the game—

—

Lian Rou played a strategic move.

A quiet one.

But effective.

—

The Duke's brother nodded.

"Good."

"You're improving."

—

The Emperor watched silently.

Then—

Placed his tile.

—

"Hu."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

Lian Hua gasped.

"He won already?!"

—

Lian Rou leaned back slightly, exhaling.

"...Fast."

—

The Emperor allowed a faint smile.

"Luck."

—

"No," the Duke's brother said.

"Experience."

—

The game reset.

—

Second round.

—

This time—

Lian Rou played more aggressively.

Watching closely.

Calculating.

—

The Emperor noticed.

And adjusted.

—

A silent battle.

Not loud.

Not obvious.

But intense.

—

Tiles moved faster now.

—

Lian Hua leaned forward.

"This is getting interesting."

—

Chen Ruyi watched Lian Rou carefully.

Every move he made.

Every decision.

—

And she smiled slightly.

—

Because she could see—

He wasn't just playing.

He was trying.

—

Trying to match the Emperor.

—

Trying to prove something.

—

Then—

A moment came.

—

Lian Rou placed a tile.

Confident.

—

The Emperor paused.

Looked at the table.

—

Then—

Placed his own.

—

"Hu."

—

Again.

—

This time—

Lian Hua stood up.

"No! That's not fair!"

—

The Emperor looked at her calmly.

"Why not?"

—

"You're too good!"

—

Lian Rou sighed.

"...He's just better."

—

The Grandmother chuckled.

"Pride wounded?"

—

Lian Rou smirked slightly.

"...Not yet."

—

Third round.

—

Now—

The atmosphere shifted.

—

Less formal.

More competitive.

—

Even the Emperor leaned slightly forward.

Engaged.

—

Lian Rou focused harder.

Watching.

Learning.

—

And this time—

He waited.

Didn't rush.

Didn't react quickly.

—

Then—

He placed his tile.

—

"...Hu."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

Lian Hua screamed,

"HE WON!"

—

The room burst into laughter.

—

Lian Rou leaned back slightly, satisfied.

—

The Emperor looked at him.

Then nodded once.

"...Well played."

—

Respect.

Simple.

Clear.

—

Chen Ruyi's eyes shone slightly.

—

The game continued.

Round after round.

Wins.

Losses.

Laughter.

Comments.

—

Time passed without anyone noticing.

—

At one point—

The Grandmother leaned toward the Duchess.

"...Look at them."

—

The Duchess smiled softly.

—

Because she saw it too.

—

The Emperor—

Was no longer distant.

No longer untouchable.

—

He was sitting there.

Playing.

Laughing.

Living.

—

Like family.

—

Lian Hua whispered again,

"I like this version of him."

—

Lian An didn't reply immediately.

—

She just watched.

—

The Emperor picking a tile.

Smiling slightly.

Arguing lightly with Lian Rou.

—

And for the first time—

She didn't see a ruler.

—

She saw—

A man.

—

The night grew deeper.

But no one wanted to leave.

—

Because moments like this—

Were rare.

—

And everyone knew—

They wouldn't last forever.

—

But for now—

They stayed.

—

Under warm lantern light.

Around a simple table.

—

Bound not by power—

But by presence.

—

And laughter.

Victory, Laughter, and Teasing

The mahjong table had grown lively as the rounds continued.

Tiles clinked.

Voices overlapped.

Laughter rose and fell like waves.

—

But now—

The final round had begun.

—

Everyone leaned in slightly.

Even the servants at the back had slowed their movements, watching quietly.

—

At the table—

The Emperor remained calm.

As always.

His fingers moved smoothly across the tiles.

No hesitation.

No wasted motion.

—

Across from him—

Lian Rou was focused.

More serious now.

His earlier confidence had turned into determination.

—

"I'm not losing this round," he muttered.

—

Lian Hua immediately responded,

"You said that last time too."

—

"...Quiet."

—

Chen Ruyi covered her smile.

—

The Duke's younger brother chuckled.

"Let him try."

—

The tiles moved faster now.

Each player calculating carefully.

Watching.

Waiting.

—

The tension built.

—

Lian Rou discarded a tile.

Confident.

—

The Emperor's gaze flickered slightly.

—

He picked up a tile.

Paused.

Then—

Placed it down.

—

"...Hu."

—

Silence.

—

Absolute silence.

—

Then—

Lian Hua exploded.

"AGAIN?!"

—

The room burst into laughter.

—

Lian Rou froze for a second.

Then slowly leaned back.

"...I lost."

—

The Emperor allowed a faint smile.

"Looks like it."

—

The Duke's brother clapped lightly.

"Well played, Your Majesty."

—

The Grandmother nodded with satisfaction.

"Experience wins."

—

Chen Ruyi looked at Lian Rou.

"...You did well."

—

He sighed.

"Not enough."

—

Lian Hua walked around the table dramatically.

"Defeated!"

"Crushed!"

"Destroyed!"

—

"Sit down," Lian Rou snapped.

—

"No," she grinned.

"This is my moment."

—

She turned to the Emperor.

"Your Majesty, how does it feel to defeat him so badly?"

—

The Emperor raised an eyebrow slightly.

"...He put up a good fight."

—

Lian Rou scoffed.

"That's just politeness."

—

The Grandmother laughed.

"Even defeat has grace tonight."

—

The Duke smiled faintly.

"This was enjoyable."

—

The atmosphere had completely changed now.

The earlier tension—

Gone.

Replaced with warmth.

Ease.

—

Lian Hua leaned closer to Lian Rou.

"You almost won."

—

"I didn't."

—

"But almost."

—

"That doesn't count."

—

Chen Ruyi spoke softly,

"It does."

—

Lian Rou looked at her.

—

She smiled.

"Next time, you will win."

—

For a moment—

His expression softened.

"...Maybe."

—

Then Lian Hua interrupted again.

"No, he won't."

—

"Why not?"

—

"Because His Majesty will still be there."

—

Everyone laughed again.

—

The Emperor shook his head slightly.

"You have a lot of confidence in me."

—

"Yes," Lian Hua replied immediately.

"Because you win everything."

—

The words were simple.

But they carried weight.

—

The Emperor didn't respond.

But his gaze shifted briefly—

Toward Lian An.

—

She had been quiet this whole time.

Watching.

Observing.

—

Now—

She smiled.

Just slightly.

—

The Grandmother noticed.

And her own smile deepened.

—

She leaned toward the Duchess and whispered,

"...Do you see?"

—

The Duchess nodded.

"...Yes."

—

Because something had changed.

Subtle.

But real.

—

At the table—

The tiles were being gathered.

The game was over.

—

But no one moved to leave.

—

Instead—

They lingered.

Talking.

Laughing.

Teasing.

—

Lian Hua still wasn't done.

"Next time, I'll play."

—

Lian Rou looked horrified.

"Absolutely not."

—

"Why?"

—

"You'll lose in one move."

—

"I'll win."

—

"You don't even know the rules."

—

"I'll learn."

—

The Emperor spoke quietly,

"...I can teach you."

—

Everyone paused.

—

Lian Hua's eyes lit up.

"Really?!"

—

"...If you're serious."

—

"I am!"

—

Lian Rou sighed deeply.

"This is a disaster."

—

Chen Ruyi laughed softly again.

—

Lian An watched the scene.

Her gaze resting briefly on the Emperor.

—

And for a moment—

Something felt...

Light.

—

No burden.

No distance.

—

Just—

People.

Sharing a night.

—

The Duke finally stood.

"It's late."

"We should rest."

—

Reluctantly—

Everyone began to disperse.

—

But as they moved—

The laughter lingered.

—

The warmth stayed.

—

And the memory of this night—

Quietly settled in their hearts.

—

A night where victory was celebrated—

And defeat was teased—

—

But more than that—

A night where walls had lowered.

—

And something new had begun.