

Ghost 252

Chapter 252: a gentle farewell

The laughter from the mahjong game slowly faded into soft murmurs.

The night had grown deep.

Lantern flames burned lower, their golden glow dimmer than before.

Even the lively Duke residence had begun to settle.

—

Servants moved more quietly now.

Footsteps softened.

Voices lowered.

—

Around the hall, everyone looked... tired.

But it was a good kind of tired.

The kind that comes after joy.

After warmth.

After moments shared without restraint.

—

Lian Hua stretched dramatically, leaning back against her chair.

"I can't move anymore..."

"You didn't do anything," Lian Rou replied.

"I supported emotionally."

"That's not a thing."

"It is."

—

Chen Ruyi laughed softly, her eyes slightly tired but warm.

"You both never stop, do you?"

—

"Never," Lian Hua said proudly.

—

At that moment—

The Aunt (Lian Rou's mother) stepped forward.

Her gaze moved gently toward Chen Ruyi.

"It's late."

Her tone was soft but firm.

"Your parents will be worried."

—

Chen Ruyi straightened slightly.

"Yes... I should return."

—

Lian Hua immediately frowned.

"So soon?"

—

The Aunt smiled.

"She can come again tomorrow."

—

Lian Hua thought for a moment.

"...That's acceptable."

—

Everyone chuckled lightly.

—

The Aunt turned to her son.

"Lian Rou."

"Send her home."

—

He nodded without hesitation.

"Yes, Mother."

—

Chen Ruyi lowered her gaze slightly.

"...Thank you."

—

The atmosphere shifted again.

Quieter.

Gentler.

—

Everyone began to move toward the entrance.

Not rushed.

But naturally.

As if unwilling to let the night end too quickly.

—

At the courtyard—

The carriage was already prepared.

Lanterns lit the path.

The soft sound of night insects filled the silence.

—

Chen Ruyi stood near the carriage, turning slightly toward the family.

Her eyes lingered—

On each of them.

—

The Duchess stepped forward first.

"Take care on the way."

—

Chen Ruyi nodded.

"I will."

—

The Duke added calmly,

"Send word when you arrive."

—

"Yes."

—

The Grandmother walked closer, her expression kind.

"Next time, stay longer."

—

Chen Ruyi smiled softly.

"I would like that."

—

Then—

Lian Hua rushed forward and hugged her.

"Come again tomorrow!"

—

Chen Ruyi laughed, slightly surprised but warm.

"I will."

—

"Promise?"

—

"I promise."

—

Lian Hua finally let go.

Satisfied.

—

Then—

Her gaze turned to Lian An.

—

For a moment—

They simply looked at each other.

—

Chen Ruyi stepped closer.

"...Thank you."

—

"For today."

"For everything."

—

Lian An smiled gently.

"You're family now."

"No need to thank me."

—

Chen Ruyi's eyes softened.

"...Still."

—

She bowed her head slightly.

—

Then—

Her gaze shifted.

Toward the Emperor.

—

The atmosphere stilled slightly.

—

Chen Ruyi bowed properly.

"Your Majesty."

—

The Emperor nodded.

"...Be safe."

—

Simple.

But sincere.

—

She straightened.

Then turned—

Toward Lian Rou.

—

The two stood facing each other.

Closer now.

Without the noise.

Without the others interrupting.

—

"...It was a good night," she said softly.

—

He nodded.

"Yes."

—

A brief pause.

Then—

"I'll see you tomorrow."

—

"...Yes."

—

Their words were simple.

But the meaning—

Clear.

—

Lian Hua whispered loudly from behind,

"Say something more romantic!"

—

"Quiet," Lian Rou snapped immediately.

—

Chen Ruyi laughed softly again.

—

Then—

She stepped into the carriage.

—

The door closed gently.

—

The driver took his position.

The horses shifted.

—

Before the carriage moved—

She lifted the curtain slightly.

Looking out once more.

—

At the family.

At Lian Hua waving energetically.

At Lian An standing calm and warm.

At the Duke and Duchess.

—

And—

At him.

—

Lian Rou stood still.

Watching.

—

Their eyes met for a brief moment.

—

Then—

The carriage began to move.

—

Slowly.

Steadily.

—

The sound of wheels against the ground echoed softly in the quiet night.

—

Everyone remained where they were.

Watching.

Until—

The carriage disappeared beyond the gates.

—

Silence returned.

—

Lian Hua sighed.

"She left..."

—

The Grandmother smiled.

"She'll return."

—

Lian Rou turned slightly.

"...Let's go inside."

—

The group slowly began to move back.

—

But the night felt different now.

—

Quieter.

Softer.

—

Because something had shifted.

—

A bond had deepened.

—

A relationship had taken another step forward.

—

And under the calm night sky—

The future quietly unfolded.

—

One moment at a time.

A Night That Changed Everything

The Duke residence had slowly quieted after Chen Ruyi's departure.

The lively laughter had softened into calm conversations.

Lanterns flickered gently in the courtyard.

And one by one—

Everyone began preparing to rest.

—

But before dispersing—

All eyes turned toward one person.

—

The Emperor.

—

The Duke cleared his throat politely.

"Your Majesty... it is late."

"Will you be returning to the palace tonight?"

—

A simple question.

But the entire courtyard stilled.

—

Even Lian Hua stopped mid-step.

Even the servants slowed.

—

Because the answer—

Would mean something.

—

The Emperor stood calmly.

His expression unreadable.

—

Then—

His gaze shifted.

Toward—

The Empress.

—

For a brief moment—

Their eyes met.

—

Then he spoke.

"...I will stay."

—

Silence.

—

Complete silence.

—

Then—

Lian Hua gasped loudly.

"WHAT?!"

—

The Duchess blinked.

The Duke froze.

The Grandmother's brows lifted slightly.

—

And the Empress—

Stood completely still.

—

"...Stay?" she repeated softly, as if unsure she heard correctly.

—

The Emperor didn't look away.

"Yes."

—

The meaning was clear.

He wasn't staying as a guest.

—

He was staying—

With her.

—

The Duchess recovered first.

A soft smile appeared on her lips.

"Well... of course."

—

She turned immediately.

"Prepare the Empress's chamber."

—

Then she looked at both of them.

"As husband and wife, it is natural."

—

The Empress opened her mouth.

"I—"

—

"No need to say anything," the Duchess interrupted gently.

"You both must be tired."

—

The Grandmother nodded approvingly.

"Yes, yes. Enough talking."

"Rest is more important."

—

Lian Hua grinned mischievously.

"I won't disturb."

—

"Go away," Lian Rou muttered.

—

Within moments—

Everyone began leaving.

Too quickly.

Too smoothly.

—

As if this had been planned.

—

"Wait—" the Empress tried again.

—

But no one listened.

—

The courtyard emptied.

—

And suddenly—

Only the two of them remained.

—

Silence fell.

—

Awkward.

Heavy.

Unfamiliar.

—

The Empress turned slowly.

Looking at him.

"...You didn't have to stay."

—

"I wanted to."

—

Simple.

Direct.

—

Her heart skipped slightly.

—

She looked away.

"...Let's go inside."

—

They walked toward her chamber.

—

Inside—

The room was warm.

Softly lit.

Prepared.

—

The maids had already arranged everything.

Fresh clothes.

Warm water.

Incense.

—

Then—

The maids quietly left.

—

The door closed.

—

And once again—

They were alone.

—

The Empress stood near the bed.

Unsure.

Uncomfortable.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly around her sleeves.

—

"I'll... freshen up first," she said quickly.

—

The Emperor nodded.

"...Go ahead."

—

She didn't wait.

She moved quickly toward the bathing area.

—

Inside—

Warm steam filled the space.

—

She placed her hand on her chest.

Her heartbeat—

Faster than usual.

—

"...Why is he like this now..."

—

Her cheeks warmed slightly.

—

After some time—

She finished.

Changed into her night clothes.

—

She took a deep breath.

Then stepped out.

—

And froze.

—

The Emperor—

Was already there.

—

He had finished bathing.

—

His hair slightly damp.

Loose.

Less formal.

—

He looked... different.

—

Less like a ruler.

More like—

A man.

—

Her gaze dropped immediately.

—

"...You can sleep first," she said quickly.

—

But he didn't move.

—

Instead—

He walked toward her.

—

Step by step.

Slow.

Steady.

—

Her breath caught.

—

Her heart began racing.

—

"...What is he doing..."

—

She instinctively stepped back.

—

But stopped when she reached the bed.

—

Now—

He stood in front of her.

Close.

Too close.

—

Her hands tightened again.

—

"...Your Majesty—"

—

Before she could finish—

He raised his hand.

—

Her body stiffened.

—

But—

He didn't grab her.

Didn't pull her.

—

Instead—

His hand rested gently—

On her head.

—

Soft.

Careful.

—

She froze.

—

Then—

He leaned slightly forward.

—

And placed a soft kiss—

On her forehead.

—

Time stopped.

—

Her eyes widened.

—

Her breath stilled.

—

Her heart—

Skipped.

—

Then raced uncontrollably.

—

He pulled back slowly.

—

His voice was calm.

Gentle.

"...Sleep."

—

She couldn't speak.

—

"...I'll wait."

—

Her eyes lifted slightly.

Confused.

—

"For what...?" she whispered.

—

He looked at her.

Not intense.

Not forceful.

—

Just... steady.

—

"...For the day you trust me."

—

Silence.

—

The words lingered in the air.

—

"I won't force anything."

—

"...Until then."

—

Her cheeks turned red instantly.

—

Her gaze dropped again.

—

Her mind—

Empty.

Full.

Confused.

Warm.

—

She turned quickly.

"...I—I'll sleep."

—

Without waiting—

She climbed onto the bed.

Pulled the blanket.

Turned away.

—

Her heart still racing.

—

"...What is happening to him..."

"...What is happening to me..."

—

Behind her—

The Emperor remained where he was for a moment.

—

Then slowly moved.

—

He lay down on the other side.

Maintaining distance.

—

Respecting space.

—

The room fell silent.

—

Only the soft sound of breathing remained.

—

The Empress closed her eyes.

—

But sleep didn't come immediately.

—

Because her mind—

Was filled with that moment.

—

That touch.

That kiss.

Those words.

—

"...I'll wait..."

—

Her lips pressed slightly together.

—

A strange warmth spread in her chest.

—

Something she didn't understand yet.

—

Beside her—

The Emperor lay awake.

—

Looking at the ceiling.

—

But his thoughts—

Were only of her.

—

And for the first time—

There was no rush.

No force.

No expectation.

—

Only—

Patience.

—

Outside—

The night deepened.

—

And inside—

Something quietly began to change.

—

Between two hearts—

Learning—

Slowly—

To come closer.