

## **Ghost 253**

Chapter 253: — Before Dawn, A Quiet Departure

The night at the Duke residence had finally fallen into deep silence.

Lanterns burned low.

The corridors were still.

Even the guards moved with softer steps, careful not to disturb the peaceful rest that had settled over the estate.

—

Inside the Empress's chamber—

The world felt different.

Warmer.

Quieter.

—

Lian An lay asleep.

Her breathing soft and even.

Her expression calm—

A rare calm.

—

Beside her—

The Emperor was awake.

—

He had not slept much.

Not because he couldn't.

But because—

He didn't want to.

—

His gaze rested on her.

Careful.

Silent.

As if even the act of looking—

Had to be gentle.

—

The faint early light of dawn began to slip through the window.

A soft grey glow.

—

Morning was coming.

—

And with it—

Responsibility.

Duty.

The world that did not pause for moments like this.

—

He exhaled quietly.

Then slowly sat up.

—

Careful.

Deliberate.

—

He made sure the blanket still covered her properly.

Adjusted it slightly—

So she wouldn't feel the morning chill.

—

For a brief moment—

His hand hovered above her head again.

—

But this time—

He didn't touch.

—

"...Rest well."

The words were barely a whisper.

—

Then—

He stood.

—

The room felt colder the moment he stepped away.

—

He walked toward the table.

—

There—

He paused.

—

Then picked up a brush.

—

For a moment—

He simply looked at the blank paper.

—

Then—

He began to write.

—

Slow.

Steady strokes.

—

A short note.

—

> I have left before dawn.

Do not worry.

Rest well and stay here until you are ready to return.

— I will come again.

—

He stared at the words for a moment.

—

Then added one more line.

—

> Take care of yourself.

—

His hand stilled.

—

Then—

He placed the brush down.

—

Folded the note neatly.

—

And left it on the table where she would easily see it.

—

—

He stepped outside.

—

The air was cool.

Fresh.

Still touched with the quiet of early dawn.

—

A servant waiting outside immediately bowed.

"Your Majesty."

—

The Emperor nodded.

"I'm leaving."

—

The servant blinked slightly.

"So early?"

—

"Yes."

—

His tone was calm.

But firm.

—

"Prepare the carriage."

—

"It is already ready, Your Majesty."

—

Of course it was.

The palace never left anything to chance.

—

The Emperor walked forward.

—

Then paused slightly.

—

"...Inform the Duke."

—

The servant bowed.

"Yes."

—

"And the Empress?"

—

The servant hesitated.

—

The Emperor shook his head slightly.

"...Let her sleep."

—

There was no need to wake her.

—

Not for departure.

—

He stepped into the carriage.

—

The wheels began to move.

—

Slowly.

Quietly.

—

The Duke residence gates opened.

Then closed behind him.

—

And just like that—

He was gone.

—

—

As the carriage moved through the early morning roads—

The Emperor leaned back slightly.

—

The sky was still pale.

The city barely awake.

—

But his mind—

Already turning.

—

Today—

He had duties.

—

The Dowager Empress (Dawgress) had summoned him for breakfast.

—

And after that—

They would visit Lady Chen's maiden residence.

—

A formal visit.

A necessary one.

—

To congratulate.

To maintain alliances.

To show presence.

—

To play the role—

Of the Emperor.

—

His expression shifted slightly.

—

From softness—

To composure.

—

From man—

To ruler.

—

"...Lady Chen."

—

He hadn't visited her residence in a long time.

—

And now—

He would go with his mother.

—

Expected.

Observed.

Judged.

—

Everything he said—

Everything he did—

Would be watched.

—

The carriage moved steadily.

—

And yet—

A part of him remained behind.

—

In that quiet room.

—

With her.

—

—

Back at the Duke residence—

The sun had begun to rise.

—

Golden light slowly filled the courtyard.

—

Servants moved again.

The house began to wake.

—

Inside the Empress's chamber—

Lian An stirred slightly.

—

Her fingers shifted.

—

Then slowly—

Her eyes opened.

—

For a moment—

She didn't move.

—

Still caught between sleep—

And waking.

—

Then—

She turned slightly.

—

And froze.

—

The space beside her—

Was empty.

—

"...He left..."

—

Her chest tightened slightly.

—

She sat up.

Looking around.

—

The room was quiet.

Still.

—

For a moment—

Something unfamiliar touched her heart.

—

Then—

Her gaze landed on the table.

—

The folded note.

—

She blinked.

—

Then slowly stood.

—

Walked toward it.

—

Picked it up.

—

Her fingers hesitated—

Before opening it.

—

She read.

—

Silence.

—

Then again.

—

And again.

—

Her expression softened slightly.

—

"...He left early..."

—

"...without waking me..."

—

Her fingers tightened slightly around the paper.

—

Then—

Her gaze lingered on the last line.

—

Take care of yourself.

—

Her cheeks warmed faintly.

—

"...What is wrong with him..."

—

But her voice—

Was softer than before.

—

She folded the note carefully.

—

Didn't throw it.

Didn't leave it.

—

Instead—

She placed it inside her sleeve.

—

Close.

—

—

Outside—

The morning fully arrived.

—

And somewhere between duty and emotion—

Two people—

Walked separate paths.

—

But neither—

Was as distant—

As Preparations and Quiet Calculations

The palace, which had recently been weighed down by strange unease and whispered fears, had suddenly become lively again.

Servants moved briskly through the corridors.

Boxes were carried.

Silks were folded.

Jewelry cases were opened and inspected.

The air was filled with purpose.

—

In the Dowager's courtyard, the atmosphere was especially busy.

Rows of lacquered chests stood open.

Inside them—fine fabrics, rare herbs, jade ornaments, gold accessories—each item carefully selected.

This was no ordinary preparation.

—

The Dowager Empress was returning to her maiden home after a long time.

—

"Not this one," she said, her voice sharp but controlled.

"This silk is too common."

—

A maid quickly bowed and replaced it with another.

—

"And the jade hairpins?"

—

"Prepared, Your Majesty."

—

"Show me."

—

The lid was lifted.

Inside, delicate jade pins shimmered under the light.

—

The Dowager nodded faintly.

"These will do."

—

Though her expression remained composed—

There was a subtle shift in her demeanor today.

Less harsh.

Less rigid.

—

Because returning to her maiden home—

Was not just a visit.

—

It was a reminder of who she had been—

Before the palace.

—

Before power.

—

Before expectations.

—

Nearby—

Another set of preparations was being made.

—

For accompanying members.

—

Because this visit—

Was not hers alone.

—

The Emperor would also be going.

—

And with him—

Members of the imperial household.

—

—

At that moment—

Lady Chen stepped into the courtyard.

—

She paused.

Observing everything.

—

The busy maids.

The prepared chests.

The organized chaos.

—

Her expression remained calm.

—

Not surprised.

—

Because she already knew.

—

Today—

They would be leaving for the Chen residence.

—

Her home.

—

A faint smile touched her lips.

—

It had been a long time.

—

And more importantly—

She felt... relieved.

—

Because this visit confirmed something.

—

Chen Ruyi would not be entering the palace.

—

Instead—

She would marry into the Duke's family.

—

Away from here.

—

Away from the Emperor.

—

Away from becoming a threat.

—

Lady Chen slowly walked forward.

"Greetings, Dowager."

—

The Dowager glanced at her briefly.

"...You've come."

—

"Yes."

"I heard preparations have begun."

—

The Dowager nodded.

"Everything must be proper."

"We cannot appear lacking."

—

Lady Chen smiled softly.

"Of course."

—

Her gaze shifted briefly toward the chests.

Then back.

—

"...It has been a while since you visited your maiden home."

—

The Dowager's eyes flickered slightly.

"Yes."

—

A pause.

—

Then—

"Things have changed."

—

Lady Chen understood.

—

Everything had changed.

—

The palace.

The relationships.

The balance of power.

—

She lowered her gaze slightly.

"...This visit will be good."

—

The Dowager didn't respond.

But her silence—

Was agreement.

—

—

As Lady Chen stood there—

Her thoughts moved elsewhere.

—

To her father.

—

To the sudden decision.

—

To the unexpected alliance.

—

"...Why did he change..."

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

—

The man who once prioritized power above everything—

Had suddenly chosen...

Safety?

—

Or something else?

—

She didn't know.

—

And that—

Made her uneasy.

—

Because her father was not someone who changed without reason.

—

"...There must be something."

—

Her gaze darkened slightly.

—

But then—

Another thought surfaced.

—

The Empress.

—

The attack.

—

The survival.

—

Her expression stiffened.

—

"...She should have died."

—

For a moment—

Her calm mask cracked.

—

Then—

She composed herself again.

—

No.

—

This wasn't over.

—

Not yet.

—

—

A maid approached.

"Lady Chen, your travel preparations are ready."

—

She nodded.

"I will check them."

—

As she turned—

She glanced once more at the courtyard.

—

At the movement.

At the preparation.

At the order.

—

And beneath it all—

She felt it.

—

A shift.

—

Not visible.

—

But real.

—

—

Somewhere—

Things were moving.

—

Changing.

—

And she didn't yet know—

If she was ahead of it.

—

Or already behind.

—

—

Inside the Dowager's chamber—

The older woman stood alone for a moment.

—

Looking at the prepared gifts.

—

Her reflection faint in the polished surface of a lacquered box.

—

"...Maiden home..."

—

A distant memory flickered.

—

A younger version of herself.

—

Unburdened.

—

She exhaled slowly.

—

"...Let's see."

—

Because this visit—

Was not just about returning.

—

It was about understanding—

What had changed.

—

And what hadn't.

—

—

Outside—

The palace buzzed with movement.

—

Carriages were prepared.

Guards assigned.

Routes planned.

—

The journey would begin soon.

—

And with it—

New encounters.

—

New revelations.

—

And perhaps—

New dangers.

—

Because while the palace looked lively—

—

The shadows within it—

Had not disappeared.