

Ghost 255

Chapter 255: — A Heart That No Longer Runs Away

The Duke residence was alive again.

But this time—

Not with laughter alone.

With preparation.

With urgency.

With celebration.

—

Servants moved swiftly through corridors, carrying fabrics, trays, scrolls, and decorations.

The sound of footsteps echoed endlessly.

Lanterns were being polished.

Silks were being hung.

Courtyards were being cleaned again and again.

—

The upcoming banquet was not just any gathering.

It was the official announcement of Lian Rou and Chen Ruyi's marriage.

—

And because of that—

Everything had to be perfect.

—

In the outer courtyard—

The Duke supervised arrangements personally.

"No mistakes."

"Check the seating again."

"Make sure the guest list is accurate."

—

His voice was calm.

But firm.

—

The Duchess, on the other hand, managed the inner preparations.

"Flowers should be fresh."

"Change these drapes."

"Bring the embroidered cloth from storage."

—

Servants hurried to obey.

—

Lian Hua ran from one place to another—

Pretending to help.

Actually creating more chaos.

—

"This looks better here!"

"No, no, move that!"

—

"You are making it worse," Lian Rou said, grabbing her collar and dragging her away.

—

"I'm contributing!"

"You are not."

—

Nearby—

The Grandmother simply watched.

Smiling.

—

Everything felt...

Warm.

Alive.

—

But in the inner chambers—

There was a completely different kind of atmosphere.

—

Inside her room—

The Empress sat near the window.

—

Sunlight fell softly over her.

—

And in front of her—

Three ghosts floated around like restless children.

—

"You're smiling again."

—

"I am not," she replied immediately.

—

"You are."

"You have been smiling since morning."

—

The female ghost narrowed her eyes.

"That smile is suspicious."

—

The general crossed his arms.

"Definitely related to the Emperor."

—

The scholar nodded.

"Confirmed."

—

The Empress froze.

—

"...No."

—

"Yes."

—

"No."

—

"YES."

—

She turned away quickly.

Trying to hide her expression.

—

But it was too late.

—

Her cheeks—

Were slightly pink.

—

The ghosts gasped dramatically.

—

"Look!"

"She's blushing!"

—

"I AM NOT!"

—

"You are!"

—

The female ghost floated closer.

"Say it."

—

"Say what?"

—

"You liked it."

—

"...Liked what?"

—

"The forehead kiss."

—

Silence.

—

Complete silence.

—

The Empress's face turned red instantly.

—

"I DID NOT—"

—

"You did."

—

"You absolutely did."

—

The scholar added calmly,

"Based on observation, your heart rate increased, your breathing pattern changed, and your reaction was consistent with emotional stimulation."

—

"...Shut up."

—

The general laughed loudly.

"Our Empress has fallen."

—

"I HAVE NOT FALLEN!"

—

"Then why are you smiling like this?"

—

"...Because I am happy for the wedding."

—

"Liar."

—

"BIG liar."

—

She grabbed a cushion and threw it at them.

—

It passed through them.

—

Useless.

—

They laughed louder.

—

"You can't even hit us."

—

"Life is unfair."

—

The Empress covered her face.

"...Why are you like this..."

—

But even behind her hands—

Her lips curved slightly.

—

Because they weren't wrong.

—

Her mind drifted.

—

To last night.

—

To that moment.

—

To that gentle touch.

—

To those words—

"I'll wait."

—

Her chest tightened slightly.

—

A strange feeling.

Soft.

Warm.

Unfamiliar.

—

She had never experienced this before.

—

Not in this life.

—

Not even in her past life.

—

In her past life—

She worked.

She struggled.

She survived.

—

There was no time for love.

No time for relationships.

—

Dating?

Never.

—

Her life had been simple.

Work.

Family.

Dreams.

—

And then—

Death.

—

She had come here thinking—

This life would be different.

—

She would not depend on anyone.

—

She would survive.

Build her restaurant.

Become independent.

—

And eventually—

Divorce the Emperor.

—

That had been her plan.

Clear.

Simple.

—

But now—

She sat there.

Blushing over a kiss.

—

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

—

The female ghost leaned in suddenly.

"You're thinking about him again."

—

"...No."

—

"Yes."

—

"Your face says everything."

—

The general added,

"You even woke up smiling."

—

"I did not."

—

"You did."

—

The scholar nodded.

"Confirmed."

—

She stood up suddenly.

"I'm going outside."

—

"To avoid the topic?"

—

"Yes."

—

"Coward."

—

"...I hate you all."

—

But she didn't leave.

—

Instead—

She sat back down slowly.

—

Because—

Deep down—

She didn't want to run anymore.

—

That scared her more than anything.

—

Just then—

A maid entered.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

The Empress turned.

"Yes?"

—

"A letter has arrived."

—

Her heart paused.

—

"A letter?"

—

"Yes."

—

"From His Majesty."

—

Silence.

—

The ghosts immediately leaned in.

—

"OPEN IT."

—

"NOW."

—

"QUICK."

—

Her fingers hesitated slightly as she took the letter.

—

"...Calm down," she muttered.

—

"To whom?"

—

"To myself."

—

She opened it.

—

Her eyes moved slowly across the words.

—

Then—

Her expression changed.

—

Softened.

—

The ghosts watched closely.

—

"What does it say?"

—

"Tell us."

—

"Read it out loud."

—

She closed the letter quickly.

"...No."

—

"That means it's romantic."

—

"Definitely romantic."

—

"Scandalous."

—

"It is not scandalous!"

—

"Then read it."

—

"...No."

—

The female ghost crossed her arms.

"Then we will assume the worst."

—

"...He just asked if preparations are going well."

—

"And?"

—

"...And... told me not to overwork."

—

"And?"

—

"...And nothing."

—

"Liar."

—

"...That's all."

—

But her fingers tightened slightly around the letter.

—

Because at the bottom—

There was one more line.

—

"I will come today."

—

Her heart started beating faster.

—

"...He's coming..."

—

The thought alone—

Made her nervous.

—

Excited.

—

Confused.

—

The ghosts noticed immediately.

—

"He's coming, isn't he?"

—

"...Yes."

—

"OH."

—

"NOW WE UNDERSTAND."

—

"That explains everything."

—

The general smirked.

"Prepare yourself."

—

"For what?"

—

"For more forehead kisses."

—

"...STOP IT!"

—

They laughed again.

—

The Empress stood up quickly.

"I need to get ready."

—

"Already?"

—

"He's not even here yet."

—

"I know."

—

"But still."

—

Her voice softened slightly.

"...I don't want to look careless."

—

The ghosts froze.

—

Then—

Slowly—

They smiled.

—

"Oh."

—

"This is serious."

—

"She's gone."

—

"Our Empress is gone."

—

"...I am still here."

—

"Physically, yes."

—

"Emotionally? Gone."

—

She ignored them.

—

Moving toward the mirror.

—

Her reflection stared back.

—

Her cheeks still slightly pink.

Her eyes brighter than before.

—

"...When did I start looking like this..."

—

She touched her face lightly.

—

Then lowered her hand.

—

Her expression slowly turned thoughtful.

—

In her past life—

She had always moved forward.

—

Without hesitation.

—

Without looking back.

—

But now—

She was standing still.

—

Not because she was forced.

—

But because she wanted to understand.

—

This feeling.

—

This change.

—

This man.

—

"...I don't know what the future holds..."

—

Her voice was barely a whisper.

—

"I don't know if this will end well..."

—

The ghosts went quiet.

—

For once—

They didn't interrupt.

—

Because they could feel it.

—

This wasn't teasing anymore.

—

This was real.

—

She looked out the window.

—

The courtyard was busy.

Bright.

Alive.

—

But inside her—

Everything felt calm.

—

Different.

—

"...But..."

—

Her lips curved slightly.

—

"I don't want to run away anymore."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

The female ghost smiled softly.

"...Finally."

—

The general nodded.

"About time."

—

The scholar adjusted his expression.

"Emotional acceptance achieved."

—

"...You all are annoying."

—

"But we're right."

—

"...Maybe."

—

She turned away.

—

But this time—

She didn't deny it.

—

Because deep down—

She knew.

—

Her life had changed.

—

Her plans had changed.

—

And her heart—

Was no longer her own.

—

Outside—

The preparations continued.

—

Inside—

A new story quietly began.

—

Not of survival.

—

But of something far more dangerous.

—

Something she had never planned for.

—

Love.

Old Wounds, New Ties

Morning sunlight filtered through the carved wooden windows of the Cheng Residence, casting long golden lines across the dining hall.

The atmosphere was... unusual.

Not tense.

But not entirely peaceful either.

—

A large table had been set.

Steaming dishes.

Fresh tea.

Warm porridge.

—

The Cheng family sat together.

For once—

Everyone was present.

—

At the head sat Cheng Guowei.

His expression calm, but his eyes thoughtful.

Beside him, his wife quietly served tea.

—

Across from them—

Elders.

Uncles.

Cousins.

—

And at the far end—

The Grandmother.

Silent.

Observing everything.

—

The topic of discussion was obvious.

—

The upcoming marriage.

—

Cheng Ruyi...

And Lian Rou.

—

One of the uncles spoke first, trying to sound composed.

"So... it is confirmed?"

—

Cheng Guowei nodded.

"Yes."

—

"The engagement will be announced at the Duke's banquet."

—

A few nodded.

Some exchanged glances.

—

"It is a strong alliance," another elder added.

"The Duke family is powerful."

—

"And the Empress is from there," someone else added.

—

A murmur of agreement spread.

—

But not everyone agreed.

—

A man sitting slightly to the side—

Placed his cup down harder than necessary.

—

His voice cut through the calm.

"...Have you all forgotten something?"

—

The table stilled.

—

Eyes turned toward him.

—

It was Cheng Guowei's younger brother.

—

His expression was tight.

Unhappy.

—

"What do you mean?" someone asked.

—

He leaned forward slightly.

His tone sharp.

—

"Cheng Ruyi's future mother-in-law..."

—

"Is a Cheng traitor."

—

Silence.

—

The air shifted instantly.

—

He continued.

—

"She was supposed to enter the palace."

"To bring honor to this family."

—

"But what did she do?"

—

"She ran away."

"Eloped."

—

"With the Duke."

—

His voice carried bitterness.

Old resentment.

—

"And now—"

—

"We are supposed to forget all that?"

—

"And happily become relatives?"

—

His hand struck the table lightly.

—

"That's wrong."

—

A heavy silence fell.

—

Some lowered their eyes.

Some avoided looking at him.

—

Because what he said—

Was not entirely false.

—

But—

Times had changed.

—

At the head—

Cheng Guowei's expression darkened slightly.

—

But before he could speak—

Another voice came.

—

Calm.

Steady.

—

"...Enough."

—

Everyone turned.

—

The Grandmother.

—

She hadn't raised her voice.

But the authority in it—

Was enough.

—

Her gaze slowly shifted toward her son.

—

The same man who had spoken.

—

Her eyes were sharp.

Cold.

Disappointed.

—

"I never thought..."

She said slowly.

"...that my most capable son..."

—

"...would become so foolish."

—

The man froze.

—

The entire table held its breath.

—

She continued.

—

"You are still clinging to the past."

—

"To pride."

"To resentment."

—

Her gaze hardened.

—

"While the world moves forward."

—

He clenched his jaw.

"Mother, I'm only saying what is right—"

—

"What is right?" she cut him off.

—

Her voice was still calm.

But sharper now.

—

"Is it right to reject strength?"

"Is it right to refuse alliance with power?"

—

She leaned slightly forward.

—

"The Duke family is not what it was before."

—

"They are stronger."

"More influential."

—

"And now—"

—

"The Empress stands with them."

—

Silence.

—

Her words settled heavily.

—

"You think this marriage weakens us?"

—

A faint scoff left her lips.

—

"It strengthens us."

—

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

—

"And if even the royal family has accepted this—"

—

"Who are you to oppose it?"

—

The man's expression stiffened.

—

He had no answer.

—

Because she was right.

—

The Emperor himself—

Had not objected.

—

Which meant—

This alliance was no longer just personal.

—

It was political.

—

And powerful.

—

The Grandmother leaned back slightly.

—

Her tone softened.

But only slightly.

—

"Old grudges..."

"...have no place in the future."

—

She looked around the table.

—

"We are not here to dwell on what happened years ago."

—

"We are here to ensure this family thrives."

—

Her gaze lingered on each person.

—

"And this marriage..."

—

"...is the right step."

—

Silence.

—

But this time—

It was different.

—

Not tense.

—

Resolute.

—

Cheng Guowei finally spoke.

—

"My decision stands."

—

His voice was calm.

Firm.

—

"Ruyi will marry Lian Rou."

—

"And we will move forward."

—

No one spoke against it.

—

Even the man who had objected—

Remained silent.

—

Because deep down—

He understood.

—

The world had changed.

—

And they—

Had to change with it.

—

The Grandmother lifted her cup.

Took a slow sip of tea.

—

Her eyes thoughtful.

—

"...The past is over."

—

Her voice was soft now.

—

"But the future..."

—

"...is just beginning."

—

Outside—

The morning sun rose higher.

—

And inside the Cheng Residence—

Old wounds were quietly sealed.

—

Not forgotten.

—

But no longer strong enough—

To stand in the way of what was coming next.