

Ghost 256

Chapter 256: Threads of Joy and Hidden Worries

Morning arrived gently at the Duke residence, wrapped in soft golden sunlight and the distant sound of preparations.

Today was not an ordinary day.

It was the beginning of something new—

A union.

A celebration.

A moment that would bind two families together.

—

Servants moved quickly across the courtyards.

Silk fabrics were carried from one hall to another.

Jewelry boxes were opened and inspected.

Flowers were arranged carefully along the corridors.

—

Everywhere—

There was life.

—

But beneath that liveliness—

There were also quiet emotions.

Unspoken thoughts.

Hidden worries.

—

In the inner courtyard—

The Aunt sat silently near the window.

Her hands rested in her lap.

Her gaze distant.

—

She should have been happy.

Her son was getting married.

The family was filled with joy.

—

And yet—

Her heart felt heavy.

—

Her husband, seated beside her, watched quietly.

He had noticed it long ago.

—

"You haven't smiled since morning," he said gently.

—

She didn't respond immediately.

—

Instead—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

"...I'm thinking about the Chen family."

—

Silence followed.

—

Her husband nodded slowly.

"I expected that."

—

She turned toward him.

"...You know how things were before."

"The tension..."

"The distance..."

—

Her voice softened.

"And now I have to face them as family."

—

Her husband reached out.

Placing his hand over hers.

—

"That is not something to fear."

—

She shook her head slightly.

"You don't understand."

—

"They are my maiden relatives."

"I know their nature."

"I know how they think."

—

A pause.

Then—

"...And Lady Chen..."

—

Her voice lowered further.

"...She is still in the palace."

—

That one sentence—

Carried many meanings.

—

Her husband's expression turned serious.

—

"...You're worried she will interfere?"

—

She didn't deny it.

—

"I don't trust peace that comes too easily."

—

Her husband sighed softly.

Then spoke with calm certainty.

—

"This marriage is not weak."

"It is built on understanding."

"On mutual choice."

—

"And more importantly..."

—

He looked at her.

Firm.

—

"Our family is not alone anymore."

—

Her gaze softened slightly.

—

"...You mean the Empress."

—

He nodded.

—

"She stands with us."

"And the Emperor..."

"...has begun to stand with her."

—

A faint silence filled the room.

—

For the first time—

Her shoulders relaxed slightly.

—

"...Still..."

"I feel uneasy."

—

Her husband squeezed her hand gently.

—

"That is natural."

—

"But today—"

—

He smiled faintly.

—

"...Try to be a mother first."

"Not someone from the past."

—

Her eyes lowered.

—

And after a moment—

She nodded.

"...I will try."

—

—

Meanwhile—

In another part of the residence—

A completely different atmosphere existed.

—

Bright.

Noisy.

Chaotic.

—

Inside the Empress's chamber—

Laughter echoed.

—

"Turn around!"

"No, not like that!"

"You look like a walking curtain!"

—

The Empress stood in the center—

Surrounded by chaos.

—

Not from people.

—

But from—

Ghosts.

—

Fen Yu floated in front of her, arms crossed.

"This color doesn't suit you."

—

The General scoffed.

"You don't even have taste."

—

The Scholar adjusted his imaginary glasses.

"The embroidery is slightly off-centered."

—

The Empress froze.

—

Then slowly turned.

—

"...All of you..."

—

Her eyes narrowed.

—

"...Do you want to disappear today?"

—

Silence.

—

Then—

Fen Yu pointed at the General.

"He started it."

—

The General pointed at the Scholar.

"He continued it."

—

The Scholar calmly said,

"I only stated facts."

—

The Empress closed her eyes.

Took a deep breath.

—

"...I should have left you all in the palace."

—

"No!" all three shouted at once.

—

She opened her eyes.

—

"...Then behave."

—

They nodded immediately.

—

Two seconds later—

They started whispering again.

—

"This ribbon is ugly."

"Your face is ugly."

"At least I have one."

—

"...ENOUGH."

—

The Empress grabbed a hairpin and threw it—

It passed through them.

—

They laughed.

—

"You can't hit us."

—

"...I regret saving you."

—

Despite her words—

A small smile appeared on her lips.

—

Because—

This chaos.

This noise.

—

Made her feel—

Alive.

—

—

Her maid stepped forward.

"My Lady, shall I fix the final layer?"

—

The Empress nodded.

—

The silk robe flowed elegantly.

Red with gold embroidery.

Graceful.

Refined.

—

Her hair was styled carefully.

Ornaments placed delicately.

—

Even the ghosts paused.

—

"...Okay," Fen Yu admitted.

"You look good."

—

The General nodded.

"Acceptable."

—

The Scholar added,

"Visually balanced."

—

The Empress rolled her eyes.

"...Thank you for your useless approval."

—

—

She stood up.

Looking at herself in the mirror.

—

For a moment—

She didn't see the Empress.

—

She saw—

A woman who had changed.

—

From someone struggling.

To someone—

Standing.

—

—

Outside—

The residence buzzed with final preparations.

—

Guests were arriving.

Carriages lined up outside.

Voices filled the air.

—

Inside—

The family gathered slowly.

—

The Aunt stepped out—

Now composed.

Now ready.

—

Her earlier hesitation—

Hidden behind calm dignity.

—

She saw the Empress approaching.

—

Their eyes met.

—

"...You look beautiful," the Aunt said softly.

—

The Empress smiled.

"Thank you."

—

Then—

She stepped closer.

Lowering her voice slightly.

—

"...Don't worry."

—

The Aunt blinked.

—

The Empress's gaze was steady.

Warm.

—

"Today will go well."

—

Something in her tone—

Felt reassuring.

—

The Aunt exhaled slowly.

—

"...I hope so."

—

—

In another corner—

The Emperor arrived quietly.

—

His presence—

Commanding.

Yet calm.

—

His gaze searched—

Until it found her.

—

The Empress.

—

For a brief moment—

Everything else faded.

—

She stood among her family.

Smiling.

Alive.

—

His expression softened.

—

And without realizing—

He took a step forward.

—

Because now—

This place.

—

This family.

—

And that woman—

—

Felt like something he didn't want to lose.

—

—

The preparations continued.

The emotions intertwined.

—

Joy.

Nervousness.

Hope.

Fear.

—

But above all—

There was something stronger.

—

A sense—

That this day—

Would not just mark a wedding.

Fragrance, Faces, and Hidden Tension

Morning sunlight poured softly into the Empress's chamber.

The calm after last night still lingered.

For the first time in a long while—

There was no distance.

No cold silence.

Only a quiet, unfamiliar warmth.

—

The Empress stood near the mirror.

Dressed for the day.

Her hair neatly arranged, adorned with delicate ornaments.

Her attire elegant yet soft—perfect for the upcoming banquet.

—

She adjusted her sleeves slightly.

Trying to steady her thoughts.

—

Behind her—

The Emperor stood.

Watching.

—

Not as a ruler.

Not as someone distant.

But as someone... captivated.

—

"...You look beautiful."

—

Her hands froze.

—

The words were simple.

But coming from him—

They carried weight.

—

Her reflection showed it clearly—

Her cheeks turning red.

—

"...I always look like this," she muttered, trying to sound casual.

—

The Emperor chuckled softly.

"...No."

—

His voice lowered slightly.

"...Today, you look... different."

—

She turned quickly.

Avoiding his gaze.

"...I have to go to Mother."

—

An excuse.

A weak one.

—

But she didn't wait.

She walked past him.

Too quickly.

—

As she passed—

A faint fragrance lingered.

—

The Emperor paused.

Then—

Without thinking—

He inhaled softly.

—

Her scent.

Light.

Warm.

Comforting.

—

"...Heaven," he murmured under his breath.

—

Then he shook his head slightly.

—

"...Control yourself."

—

But the small smile on his lips didn't fade.

—

Outside—

The Duke residence had transformed.

—

The banquet preparations were in full swing.

Lanterns decorated every corridor.

Silk drapes fluttered gently in the breeze.

Servants moved swiftly, carrying trays, arranging tables, adjusting decorations.

—

The air was filled with anticipation.

—

Today—

Was important.

—

The announcement of Lian Rou's marriage.

—

Guests had begun arriving.

Nobles.

Officials.

Families of status.

—

The courtyard buzzed with polite greetings and hidden judgments.

—

Inside the main hall—

The Duke stood with dignity.

Welcoming each guest.

—

The Duchess beside him, graceful as ever.

—

Lian Hua moved around excitedly, whispering gossip to anyone who would listen.

—

And then—

A sudden shift.

—

At the entrance—

A new group appeared.

—

The atmosphere changed instantly.

—

Whispers began.

—

"...That's..."

"...The Chen family..."

"...All of them?"

—

Yes.

—

The Chen family had arrived.

—

Not just one or two members.

—

Everyone.

—

At the front—

Chen Guowei walked in.

His posture straight.

His expression calm.

—

Behind him—

Lady Chen.

Elegant.

Composed.

—

And—

Chen Ruyi.

Graceful.

Quiet.

—

Along with the rest of the Chen household.

—

The hall fell into a subtle silence.

—

Because everyone knew.

—

The animosity.

—

The tension between the Lian family and the Chen family was no secret.

—

And yet—

Here they were.

—

Together.

—

"...What is going on..."

"...Is this real..."

"...Did they reconcile?"

—

Whispers spread like wildfire.

—

The Duke's gaze sharpened slightly.

—

But he stepped forward.

—

As host.

—

"Minister Chen."

—

Chen Guowei bowed slightly.

"Duke."

—

Polite.

Formal.

—

But beneath it—

A storm of history.

—

The Duchess stepped forward with a composed smile.

"Welcome."

—

Lady Chen returned the gesture.

"Thank you for receiving us."

—

Their eyes met.

—

Calm.

But not friendly.

—

Behind them—

Guests watched closely.

—

Every expression.

Every movement.

—

Because this moment—

Was unusual.

—

Very unusual.

—

Then—

Lian Rou stepped forward.

—

His gaze immediately found—

Chen Ruyi.

—

And for a brief second—

The tension disappeared.

—

Only warmth remained.

—

"...You came," he said quietly.

—

She nodded.

"I promised."

—

Lian Hua suddenly appeared between them.

"Of course she came! She belongs here now!"

—

The hall erupted in soft laughter.

—

The tension eased slightly.

—

But not completely.

—

Because—

Not everyone was comfortable.

—

Lady Chen stood to the side.

Watching.

—

Her eyes moved from the Empress—

To Chen Ruyi—

To the Duke—

—

And then—

To the Emperor.

—

Who had just arrived.

—

His presence immediately commanded attention.

—

Everyone bowed.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

He acknowledged them briefly.

—

But his gaze—

Found only one person.

—

The Empress.

—

Standing among her family.

Smiling.

Relaxed.

—

Different from the palace.

—

His expression softened.

—

Lady Chen noticed.

—

And her fingers tightened slightly.

—

"...So it's true," she thought.

—

"He really has changed."

—

At the same time—

Chen Guowei observed everything carefully.

—

The Emperor.

The Empress.

The Lian family.

—

The dynamics.

—

"...This is not the same as before," he realized.

—

And that—

Made things dangerous.

—

Very dangerous.

—

Because alliances were shifting.

—

Power was shifting.

—

And beneath the surface—

Something deeper was moving.

—

The banquet had not even begun.

—

Yet already—

The air was filled with tension.

—

Hidden smiles.

Careful words.

Silent calculations.

—

And in the middle of it all—

The Empress stood.

—

Unaware—

Or perhaps quietly aware—

—

That she—

Had become the center—

Of everything.

—

A storm—

That was just beginning to rise.

—

But—

The beginning—

Of something much bigger.

—

Something that would change—

Everything.