

Ghost 257

Chapter 257: Whispers, Games, and Hidden Currents

The Duke residence had transformed overnight.

Where once there had been calm elegance, now there was vibrant festivity.

Bright silk banners fluttered in the soft breeze.

Golden lanterns hung in rows, casting warm light over the grand courtyard.

Musicians played cheerful tunes in the background, their melodies weaving through laughter and chatter.

—

The banquet for Lian Rou and Chen Ruyi's engagement had begun.

And it was unlike any ordinary noble gathering.

—

The Duke had ensured this was not a stiff, formal event.

Instead—

It was alive.

Lively.

Filled with warmth.

—

Guests from noble families, merchants, scholars, and even distant acquaintances had arrived.

Everyone was dressed in their finest attire.

But what made this banquet different—

Was the atmosphere.

—

People weren't just sitting quietly.

They were moving.

Laughing.

Playing.

—

In one section of the courtyard—

Games had been arranged.

Traditional games, strategy games, even playful competitions.

—

A loud cheer erupted near one corner.

"Again! Again!"

—

A group of young nobles surrounded a table where dice were being thrown.

Another group gathered around a ring toss game.

Even elderly nobles smiled, watching the younger ones compete.

—

And for the first time in a long while—

Even men participated openly in the festivities.

—

Lian Hua dragged a nobleman toward one of the stalls.

"You have to try this!"

"I don't even know the rules!"

"Neither do I!"

—

They both laughed.

—

Nearby—

Servants carried trays filled with food and drinks.

Aromatic dishes filled the air with rich fragrance.

—

Everything felt... light.

—

But beneath the joy—

Whispers still moved.

—

Soft.

Careful.

—

Eyes occasionally drifted—

Toward one figure.

—

The Empress.

—

She stood near one of the stalls earlier, greeting guests politely.

But now—

She had quietly slipped away.

—

And as she did—

The whispers followed.

—

"That's her..."

"The one who almost died..."

"They say the Emperor stayed with her..."

"Did you see the way he looks at her now?"

—

Some voices held curiosity.

Some held admiration.

Some—

Jealousy.

—

Meanwhile—

In a quieter corner of the banquet—

The Emperor stood.

—

Beside him—

Lady Chen.

—

The two spoke calmly.

As if the noise around them didn't exist.

—

Lady Chen held her cup gracefully.

"...Mother did not attend."

—

The Emperor nodded.

"She is unwell."

—

Lady Chen's brows furrowed slightly.

"...Is it serious?"

—

"Just weakness."

—

A pause.

—

Lady Chen lowered her gaze.

"It is unfortunate."

"She would have enjoyed this gathering."

—

The Emperor glanced toward the lively crowd.

"...Yes."

—

But his gaze didn't linger.

—

Because his attention—

Shifted.

—

Instinctively.

—

Toward—

The kitchen area.

—

Lady Chen noticed.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly around her cup.

—

But her smile remained unchanged.

—

"...The Duke has organized this well."

—

"Yes."

—

Simple replies.

—

But his focus wasn't fully there.

—

And she knew it.

—

—

Inside the kitchen—

The atmosphere was completely different.

—

Less formal.

More chaotic.

More real.

—

Steam rose from pots.

Knives chopped rhythmically.

Voices overlapped.

—

And in the middle of it all—

The Empress stood.

—

Her sleeves slightly rolled.

Her hair tied back more loosely than usual.

—

Cooking.

—

"Add a little more salt—no, not that much!"

—

Her friend laughed.

"You're worse than the head chef!"

—

"I am the head chef here."

—

"Self-appointed."

—

"Still counts."

—

The twins stood nearby, tasting everything.

—

"This is good."

"No, this is better."

"You just ate both."

"I'm comparing."

—

The "new man" (Wei Jie) leaned against a table, arms crossed, amused.

"...You people treat a banquet like a street kitchen."

—

The Empress rolled her eyes.

"At least we enjoy it."

—

He smirked slightly.

"...Fair."

—

Nearby—

Lian Hua had also invaded the kitchen.

Because of course she had.

—

"I came to help!"

—

"You came to eat," Lian Rou said, entering behind her.

—

"I can do both."

—

She immediately grabbed a dumpling.

—

"Don't—"

Too late.

—

She bit into it.

—

Her eyes widened.

"...THIS IS AMAZING."

—

The Empress smirked slightly.

"Of course."

—

Her friend nudged her.

"Look at you... glowing."

—

"I'm sweating."

—

"That too."

—

Laughter filled the kitchen.

—

For a moment—

There was no palace.

No politics.

No danger.

—

Just—

People.

Together.

—

Then—

A maid entered.

"Your Majesty is being requested outside."

—

The Empress blinked.

"...Now?"

—

"Yes."

—

Her friends exchanged looks.

—

"Go," her friend said.

"We'll manage here."

—

The Empress hesitated slightly.

Then nodded.

—

She wiped her hands.

Adjusted her clothes.

—

And stepped out.

—

—

Back in the banquet hall—

The Emperor stood where he had been.

—

But the moment she appeared—

His gaze found her.

—

Naturally.

—

Effortlessly.

—

Lady Chen noticed again.

—

And this time—

Her smile tightened just slightly.

—

The Empress approached.

"...You called me?"

—

The Emperor nodded.

"...You've been busy."

—

"I prefer the kitchen."

—

"I can see that."

—

A small pause.

—

The music continued in the background.

Laughter echoed around them.

—

But between them—

There was something quieter.

—

Softer.

—

Lady Chen stepped slightly forward.

"Your cooking is being praised everywhere."

—

The Empress nodded politely.

"Thank you."

—

Their eyes met briefly.

—

A silent tension.

—

Hidden beneath courtesy.

—

Then—

A loud cheer broke the moment.

—

"THE FINAL ROUND!"

—

Everyone turned.

—

The game section had reached its peak.

—

A competition had begun.

Winner gets a prize.

—

"Come! Come!"

Lian Hua dragged the Empress again.

"You're playing!"

—

"I am not—"

—

Too late.

—

She was pulled into the center.

—

The Emperor watched.

—

A faint smile appeared.

—

Lady Chen saw it.

—

And for the first time that night—

A shadow passed through her eyes.

—

—

The Empress stood in the center of the game circle.

Confused.

—

"What is this game?"

—

"Simple," Lian Rou explained.

"Strategy and luck."

—

"...I'm bad at both."

—

"Perfect."

—

Everyone laughed.

—

The game began.

—

And for once—

The Empress didn't think about anything else.

—

Not the palace.

Not danger.

Not enemies.

—

She played.

She laughed.

She argued.

—

And lost.

Badly.

—

"HOW?!" she stared at the board.

—

"You're terrible," her friend said proudly.

—

"Thank you for the support."

—

Even the Emperor laughed quietly.

—

And in that moment—

Watching her like this—

Free.

Alive.

—

He felt something steady in his chest.

—

Something he no longer tried to deny.

—

—

The night deepened.

—

Games continued.

Music softened.

—

But beneath it all—

Three different currents moved.

—

Joy.

—

Jealousy.

—

And something darker—

Still watching.

—

Waiting.

—

For the right moment.

The Announcement That Stirred Hearts

The Duke residence, which had just settled into the quiet calm of night, suddenly came alive again.

Servants hurried through the corridors.

Lanterns were relit.

Tables were rearranged.

And in the central hall—

A grand gathering began once more.

—

The reason?

No one knew.

—

Guests, family members, and close allies were called back.

Even those who had already prepared to sleep returned, curious.

—

"What's happening now?" Lian Hua whispered, adjusting her sleeves.

"No idea," Lian An replied calmly, though even she was curious.

—

The Empress stood beside her, equally puzzled.

"...Wasn't the dinner already over?"

—

Before anyone could guess further—

Two figures stepped forward.

—

The Duke.

And beside him—

Chen Guowei.

—

Both holding wine cups.

—

The murmurs in the hall slowly faded.

—

The Duke raised his hand slightly.

The room fell silent.

—

His expression was calm, but his eyes held something deeper.

Pride.

Resolution.

—

"Tonight," he began,

"I have gathered everyone again... for an important announcement."

—

Everyone straightened.

—

Even the Emperor, seated beside the Empress, looked attentive.

—

Chen Guowei stepped forward.

His face was serious.

But not tense.

—

"This matter," he said,

"concerns both our families."

—

A ripple moved through the hall.

—

The Duke continued,

"After careful thought..."

"...we have decided to form an alliance."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

"...through marriage."

—

Gasps.

—

Actual gasps.

—

Lian Hua nearly choked.

"WHAT?!"

—

The Empress blinked in surprise.

Even though she knew—

Hearing it publicly felt different.

—

The Duke lifted his cup slightly.

"My nephew—"

"Lian Rou."

—

All eyes turned toward him.

—

Lian Rou stood calmly.

But his ears were slightly red.

—

"...will be engaged to—"

—

Chen Guowei spoke the next name.

"Chen Ruyi."

—

The hall erupted.

—

Whispers.

Gasps.

Excited murmurs.

—

"It's real?!"

"They're getting married?!"

"The Chen family and Duke family?!"

—

The alliance shocked everyone.

Because it wasn't just a marriage.

—

It was a shift in power.

—

Two rival forces—

Joining hands.

—

The Duke raised his cup higher.

"The banquet in four days—"

"—will officially announce their marriage to the world."

—

Chen Guowei followed.

"We invite all of you to witness and celebrate this union."

—

Both men lifted their cups together.

"To the future."

—

The crowd echoed.

"To the future!"

—

Wine was raised.

Smiles spread.

Voices grew louder.

—

The tension dissolved—

Into celebration.

—

But not everyone reacted the same.

—

On one side—

The young noble ladies whispered among themselves.

—

"...Lian Rou is getting married..."

"...So fast..."

—

One girl sighed dramatically.

"There goes the most eligible man..."

—

Another added,

"And Chen Ruyi... she's so lucky..."

—

A third frowned slightly.

"...Or maybe she just got there first."

—

They laughed softly, hiding disappointment.

—

On the other side—

Young men reacted differently.

—

Some nudged each other.

"Now you can stop dreaming."

—

"Like you had a chance."

—

"That hurts."

—

Laughter broke out.

—

Meanwhile—

Lian Hua leaned toward the Empress.

"See? I told you something big was coming."

—

"You didn't say marriage," the Empress replied.

—

"I felt it spiritually."

—

"You feel too many things spiritually."

—

"True."

—

They both smiled.

—

Near them—

The Emperor watched quietly.

—

His gaze moved toward Lian Rou.

Then briefly—

Toward Chen Ruyi.

—

Then—

Toward the Empress.

—

A faint smile appeared.

—

This alliance...

Was not just personal.

—

It would change the balance of the court.

—

But more than that—

He could see something else.

—

Genuine happiness.

—

Something rare.

—

At the center—

Lian Rou finally moved.

He walked forward.

—

Chen Ruyi, standing beside her parents, looked slightly nervous.

—

He stopped in front of her.

—

The hall quieted again.

—

Not fully.

But enough.

—

"...Congratulations," someone whispered.

—

He looked at her.

She looked back.

—

No dramatic words.

—

No grand gestures.

—

Just—

A quiet understanding.

—

"...We'll do well," he said softly.

—

She nodded.

"Yes."

—

Simple.

But certain.

—

Around them—

Applause broke out.

—

Warm.

Sincere.

—

The Duke smiled proudly.

The Duchess wiped a tear discreetly.

—

Chen Guowei stood straighter.

Satisfied.

—

And the hall—

Once again—

Filled with celebration.

—

Music began.

—

Wine flowed.

—

Laughter returned stronger than before.

—

Because tonight—

Was not just an announcement.

—

It was the beginning—

Of something new.

—

A union.

A shift.

A future—

No one expected.

—

And as the night deepened—

The palace, the families, and even the hearts within—

Quietly moved—

Toward change.