

Ghost 265

Chapter 265: The Day of Guo Da Li

The morning sun rose bright and auspicious over the capital.

Unlike ordinary days—

Today carried meaning.

Tradition.

Expectation.

—

It was the day of Guo Da Li.

The formal exchange of betrothal gifts.

—

Two families.

Two households.

Preparing to bind their futures together.

—

Duke Residence — A House Full of Joy

Before dawn had fully broken, the Duke residence was already awake.

Lanterns still glowed faintly from the previous night.

Servants hurried through the corridors.

Doors opened and closed.

Voices overlapped.

—

"Be careful with that tray!"

"Align the boxes properly!"

"Where is the silk bundle?!"

—

In the main courtyard—

Rows of gift boxes were arranged neatly.

Covered in red silk.

Tied with golden threads.

—

Jewelry sets.

Fine fabrics.

Tea leaves.

Wine jars.

Sweet boxes.

—

Each one—

Symbolic.

Each one—

Prepared with care.

—

The Elders

Inside the hall—

Duke Lian Zheng stood tall, dressed in formal robes.

Dark red and gold.

Dignified.

—

Beside him—

His younger brother adjusted his sleeves.

"Everything is ready."

—

The Duke nodded.

"Check once more."

—

Nearby—

The Grandmother sat calmly.

Her eyes bright despite her age.

—

"It has been years since we prepared like this..."

She smiled softly.

—

The Duchess stood beside her.

Elegant.

Composed.

—

But her eyes betrayed excitement.

—

"Our Rou'er is getting married..."

she murmured.

—

The Women's Chambers

Inside—

The women were preparing.

—

Lian Hua ran from one side to another.

"This hairpin or that one?!"

—

The Aunt sighed.

"You're not the bride."

—

"But I want to look good!"

—

"Stand still."

—

Chen Ruyi wasn't there yet—

But the excitement had already spread.

—

The Empress stood near the mirror.

Her dress—

Refined.

Elegant.

But not overly grand.

—

She adjusted her sleeve quietly.

—

Lian Hua suddenly appeared behind her.

"You look beautiful."

—

The Empress smiled faintly.

"So do you."

—

"Of course I do."

—

Both laughed.

—

The Final Checks

Back in the courtyard—

Servants began loading the gifts.

—

Large trays carried carefully.

Placed into carriages.

—

"Slowly!"

"Don't tilt it!"

—

The Duke watched everything.

—

Nothing—

Could go wrong today.

—

Because this—

Was not just ceremony.

—

It was reputation.

Honor.

Respect.

—

And love.

—

Cheng Residence — A House of Grace and Calculation

Across the city—

The Cheng residence was equally busy.

—

But the atmosphere—

Was different.

—

Less chaotic.

More controlled.

—

The Elders

Inside the main hall—

Chen Guowei stood in formal attire.

His expression—

Calm.

Measured.

—

Beside him—

The Cheng grandmother observed quietly.

—

"Everything must be perfect," she said.

—

Chen Guowei nodded.

"It will be."

—

Nearby—

Servants arranged receiving trays.

Preparing to accept gifts.

—

The Women's Chambers

Inside—

Chen Ruyi sat before the mirror.

—

Her dress—

Soft red.

Elegant.

Graceful.

—

Her hair styled carefully.

Jewelry placed delicately.

—

Her hands rested on her lap.

—

Still.

—

But her heart—

Was not.

—

Lady Chen Enters

The door opened.

—

Lady Chen stepped inside.

—

Her expression—

Calm.

Smiling.

—

But her eyes—

Sharp.

—

"Ruyi."

—

Chen Ruyi turned.

"Sister."

—

Lady Chen walked closer.

—

"Let me help you."

—

She adjusted her hairpin.

Smoothed her sleeve.

—

"You look beautiful."

—

Chen Ruyi smiled slightly.

"Thank you."

—

Lady Chen's fingers paused briefly.

—

"...You should."

—

Her voice softened.

"But remember..."

—

"This marriage is not just about love."

—

Chen Ruyi looked at her quietly.

—

"I know."

—

Lady Chen smiled again.

Satisfied.

—

Servants Preparing

Outside—

Servants loaded return gifts.

—

Tea.

Silk.

Jewelry.

—

Carriages lined up.

Ready.

—

Everything—

Prepared with precision.

—

The Departure

Back at the Duke residence—

The moment had arrived.

—

"Time."

—

The Duke stepped forward.

—

Everyone gathered.

—

Carriages ready.

Gifts loaded.

—

The Empress stood beside her family.

—

The Emperor—

Watching quietly from the side.

—

Lian Hua whispered,

"This is so exciting!"

—

The Grandmother nodded.

"Yes."

—

"Let's go."

—

The procession began.

—

Arrival at Cheng Residence

The Duke family arrived in grandeur.

—

Servants announced loudly.

"The Duke has arrived!"

—

The gates opened.

—

The Cheng family stood waiting.

—

Formal.

Respectful.

—

Greetings were exchanged.

Bows.

Acknowledgments.

—

Then—

The gifts were presented.

—

One by one—

Trays carried forward.

—

Jewelry.

Silk.

Tea.

Sweets.

—

Each item placed carefully.

—

Each symbol—

Acknowledged.

—

The Ceremony

The atmosphere grew solemn.

—

Words were spoken.

Formalities completed.

—

Respect exchanged.

—

A bond—

Formed.

—

The Younger Generation

In between—

Glances were exchanged.

—

Lian Rou.

Chen Ruyi.

—

A small smile.

—

A quiet promise.

—

Lady Chen Watching

At the side—

Lady Chen watched.

—

Her smile remained.

—

But her eyes—

Cold.

—

Calculating.

—

The Empress Watching

Nearby—

The Empress stood quietly.

—

Observing everything.

—

Feeling—

Something deeper.

—

This ceremony—

This union—

This family.

—

She understood now—

What she almost lost.

—

And what she must protect.

—

Closing

As the ceremony concluded—

The atmosphere softened again.

—

The formal tension lifted.

—

Families spoke.

Laughter returned.

—

The day had gone perfectly.

—

But beneath the surface—

Threads of fate continued to weave.

—

Because while one union was celebrated—

—

Shadows still lingered.

—

Watching.

Waiting.

—

For their moment.

—

And this time—

Everyone knew—

They could not afford to be careless.

The formal rituals of Guo Da Li had come to a perfect end.

The exchange of gifts was complete.

Respect had been shown.

Promises had been sealed.

—

And now—

It was time for celebration.

—

The grand banquet hall of the Cheng residence was filled with nobles from across the capital.

Rows of tables stretched elegantly under glowing lanterns.

Red silk draped along pillars.

Golden decorations shimmered softly.

—

But what truly drew attention—

Was the food.

—

Servants moved in perfect rhythm.

Carrying trays of steaming dishes.

Arranging them with precision.

—

Dumplings, delicately folded.

Fragrant fried rice.

Golden roasted meats.

Fresh vegetables glazed in rich sauces.

—

The aroma alone—

Filled the entire hall.

—

The first bites were taken.

—

And silence fell.

—

Not because of tension—

But because everyone was tasting.

Experiencing.

—

Then—

Voices began to rise.

—

"This is excellent!"

—

"The flavors—this is unlike anything I've had before."

—

"Who prepared this banquet?"

—

"Even the imperial kitchen cannot compare!"

—

Praise spread from table to table.

—

The nobles, who were usually reserved—

Now openly expressed admiration.

—

"This chef must be extraordinary."

—

"Such balance of taste and presentation..."

—

"Every dish is perfect."

—

At the main table—

The Duke sat with calm pride.

Beside him, his younger brother smiled openly.

—

One noble leaned forward.

"Duke, you must tell us—"

"Who prepared this feast?"

—

The Duke placed his cup down slowly.

His voice steady.

—

"...This banquet..."

—

"...was prepared by the Empress's restaurant."

—

A pause.

—

"...Whisper Bowl."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

A wave of surprise spread.

—

"The Empress?"

—

"That restaurant?"

—

"I've heard of it!"

—

"Yes—branches have opened in other towns!"

—

"They train their staff so well—"

—

"And now this..."

—

The admiration only grew stronger.

—

The Duke's brother chuckled.

"We were fortunate to secure them."

—

"They are efficient."

"Disciplined."

"And their food..."

—

He gestured lightly.

—

"...speaks for itself."

—

More laughter.

More praise.

—

At another table—

Some nobles whispered among themselves.

—

"The Empress is truly remarkable..."

—

"Not only graceful..."

"But capable."

—

"Such talent..."

—

Back at the main table—

The Emperor sat quietly.

—

Listening.

Watching.

—

As the praises for her continued—

A faint smile appeared on his lips.

—

Not proud.

Not possessive.

—

Just—

Warm.

—

Across the hall—

The Empress sat with the women.

—

She heard it too.

—

Every word.

Every compliment.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly around her cup.

—

Not out of nervousness.

—

But emotion.

—

Because this—

Was hers.

—

Something she built.

Something she protected.

—

And now—

It stood proudly before everyone.

—

Lian Hua leaned toward her.

"They love it."

—

The Empress smiled softly.

"...Yes."

—

Chen Ruyi added quietly,

"It's perfect."

—

The Empress looked at her.

—

And nodded.

—

At that moment—

The banquet was no longer just a celebration.

—

It became—

A recognition.

—

Of effort.

Of growth.

Of strength.

—

And as laughter and praise filled the hall—

The Duke raised his cup.

—

"To this union."

—

"To this family."

—

"And to a future..."

—

"...as prosperous as this feast."

—

Cups lifted.

Voices echoed.

—

And under the warm glow of lanterns—

The night became unforgettable

Smiles Hiding Blades

The banquet hall was filled with warmth.

Laughter echoed.

Nobles praised the food without restraint.

—

But not every heart in the hall was at peace.

—

At the far end of the table—

Lady Chen sat gracefully.

Her posture perfect.

Her smile flawless.

—

But her eyes—

Were cold.

—

She lifted her cup slowly.

Took a sip.

—

Her gaze drifted toward the center—

Where the Duke proudly spoke about the feast.

—

"...prepared by the Empress's restaurant—Whisper Bowl."

—

That sentence echoed again in her mind.

—

The Empress... owns a restaurant?

—

Her fingers tightened slightly around the cup.

—

No one noticed.

—

She lowered her gaze.

—

Since when...?

—

In all these years—

She had never heard of it.

—

Never imagined—

That woman—

Would build something of her own.

—

And not just anything—

Something powerful enough—

To earn praise from nobles.

—

Her lips curved again.

—

A perfect smile.

—

But inside—

Something twisted.

—

Her eyes moved again—

This time toward Chen Ruyi.

—

Her younger sister sat beside Lian Rou.

Calm.

Happy.

—

And closer—

Closer to the Duke family.

—

Lady Chen's smile stiffened.

—

So now... even my sister...

—

...is becoming part of her world.

—

Her nails pressed into her palm beneath the table.

—

First the Emperor...

—

Now my family too?

—

She inhaled slowly.

—

Then—

She laughed softly.

—

No one found it strange.

—

Because she looked—

Relaxed.

—

Satisfied.

—

But inside—

Her thoughts were already moving.

—

Let it be.

—

Let them celebrate.

—

Let them praise her.

—

Her eyes darkened slightly.

—

After the wedding...

—

We'll see.

—

A slow thought formed.

—

Careful.

Precise.

—

Because she knew one thing clearly—

—

The Dowager Empress.

—

She did not know.

—

She did not know that the Empress—

Was building influence.

Power.

Connections.

—

And if she found out—

—

Punishment.

—

Severe.

Immediate.

—

Lady Chen's smile deepened.

—

She will never accept this.

—

The Empress running businesses...

—

Being praised by nobles...

—

Standing above others...

—

Her eyes flickered toward the Empress.

—

Sitting quietly.

Receiving admiration.

—

You're rising too fast...

—

Then—

Her gaze shifted toward the Emperor.

—

He was watching.

Listening.

—

And there was something in his eyes—

—

Warmth.

—

That—

Was dangerous.

—

Lady Chen's heart tightened.

—

No...

—

I cannot let this continue.

—

But she was not foolish.

—

She would not act rashly.

—

Not anymore.

—

Shin Gu already made one mistake.

—

This time...

—

Her fingers relaxed.

—

I will not fail.

—

Because she understood—

—

If the Emperor discovered her involvement—

—

Everything would end.

—

Her position.

Her future.

Her power.

—

So this time—

—

She would be careful.

—

Invisible.

—

Untouchable.

—

Her lips curved gently again.

—

As if nothing was wrong.

—

As if she was simply enjoying the banquet.

—

But inside—

—

A plan had already begun.

—

I will not let you take everything from me.

—

I will show him...

—

Her eyes lifted toward the Emperor once more.

—

...who truly deserves to stand beside him.

—

And as the banquet continued—

With laughter, celebration, and joy—

—

No one noticed—

—

That beneath one woman's gentle smile—

—

War—

—

Had quietly begun.