

Ghost 267

Chapter 267: — A House Filled With New Bonds

The wedding rituals had concluded in grandeur.

Drums had echoed.

Red silk had flowed like waves.

Laughter, blessings, and tears of joy had filled the air.

—

And now—

The bride had been welcomed into the Duke family.

—

The grand gates of the Duke residence opened once again—

But this time—

For celebration.

For union.

For a new beginning.

—

Arrival of the Bride

The carriage carrying Chen Ruyi stopped at the entrance.

Her veil slightly lifted by the breeze.

Her hands trembling—

Not with fear.

But with the weight of a new life.

—

Beside her—

Lian Rou stood tall.

Steady.

Protective.

—

"Careful," he said softly as he helped her down.

—

She looked at him.

And nodded.

—

Step by step—

She entered the Duke residence.

—

And behind them—

Family.

Relatives.

Guests.

—

And—

The Emperor.

—

The Banquet Invitation

Inside the hall—

The Duke stood proudly.

His voice clear.

—

"Tomorrow, we will host the final marriage banquet."

"All noble families and relatives are invited."

—

A pause.

Then—

"Send invitation to the Cheng family as well."

—

A brief silence followed.

Everyone understood what it meant.

—

The Duke continued calmly.

"And... Lady Chen will also be invited."

—

The atmosphere shifted slightly.

But no one objected.

—

Because this—

Was not politics.

—

This was family honor.

—

Tea Ceremony

Later—

Inside the inner hall—

The most intimate ritual began.

—

The elders sat in a row.

The Grandmother, the Duke, the Duchess, and the elder members of the family.

—

Chen Ruyi and Lian Rou entered together.

—

She wore red.

Bright.

Radiant.

—

He stood beside her.

Firm.

Respectful.

—

They knelt together.

—

A servant handed them tea.

—

One by one—

They offered it to the elders.

—

"To Grandmother."

—

She accepted.

Her eyes soft.

Filled with approval.

—

"Good child."

—

She handed over a red envelope.

Symbol of blessing.

—

"To Father."

—

The Duke accepted.

Nodded once.

—

"To Mother."

—

The Duchess's eyes glistened slightly.

She took the tea.

"...Welcome."

—

Another red envelope.

—

One by one—

Each elder blessed them.

—

The room was silent.

Sacred.

—

A moment of acceptance.

—

A moment of belonging.

—

A Decision for the Future

After the ceremony—

The elders remained seated.

The atmosphere softened.

—

Then—

The Duke's elder brother spoke.

—

"From today onward..."

He looked at Lian Rou and Chen Ruyi.

"...You both will stay here."

—

Everyone looked at him.

—

"With the Duke and Duchess."

—

The Duchess looked surprised.

"...Elder Brother—"

—

He raised his hand.

"The South estate is quiet."

"I will take Mother there."

—

The Grandmother chuckled.

"I don't mind."

—

He continued,

"This house needs youth."

"Needs life."

—

Then he looked at Chen Ruyi.

"You are now the lady of this house."

—

Her eyes widened slightly.

—

He turned to Lian Rou.

"Take responsibility."

—

Lian Rou bowed his head.

"Yes."

—

The Duchess's eyes softened.

"...Thank you, Sister-in-law."

—

Her voice held gratitude.

Relief.

Joy.

—

The family—

Was growing closer.

—

The Emperor Arrives

At that moment—

A servant announced,

"His Majesty has arrived."

—

The Emperor entered the hall.

Calm.

Composed.

—

But his presence—

Still commanded attention.

—

Everyone greeted him.

—

But before formalities could begin—

The Grandmother waved her hand.

"Come here."

—

The Emperor paused.

Then—

Walked toward her.

—

"Sit beside me."

—

A rare command.

—

He obeyed.

—

The Grandmother smiled.

"You came at the right time."

—

She gestured toward the younger ones.

"Listen."

—

Stories of the Past

Soon—

The atmosphere changed again.

—

Lian Hua began.

"Do you know, when Jiejie was small—"

—

"No—" Lian An tried to stop her.

—

But it was too late.

—

"She used to sneak into the kitchen!"

—

Laughter.

—

"And once she burned the whole pot!"

—

"That's not true!" the Empress protested.

—

The Duchess laughed.

"It is."

—

The Emperor listened.

Quietly.

—

His gaze—

Resting on her.

—

Then—

Another story.

—

"She once climbed a tree and refused to come down."

—

"And cried when she couldn't get down herself."

—

"I was five!" the Empress defended.

—

The hall filled with laughter.

—

Even the Emperor's lips curved slightly.

—

He had never seen this side of her.

—

Not the Empress.

—

But—

Her.

—

A girl.

Alive.

Bright.

Free.

—

The Emperor's Realization

As the stories continued—

The Emperor grew quieter.

—

His gaze softened.

His thoughts deepened.

—

"...If I had known her like this..."

—

"...If I had met her before..."

—

"...Would things be different?"

—

He imagined—

A different beginning.

—

Not forced marriage.

Not distance.

—

But laughter.

Understanding.

Time.

—

His fingers tightened slightly.

—

"...I would have treated her better."

—

"...I would have given her importance."

—

"...I would not have let things become like this."

—

A rare regret—

Settled in his heart.

—

A New Beginning

The night continued.

—

Laughter.

Stories.

Warmth.

—

Chen Ruyi sat beside Lian Rou.

Their hands brushing slightly.

—

The Duchess watched them with happiness.

—

The Grandmother leaned back.

Satisfied.

—

And the Emperor—

Sat quietly.

Listening.

Watching.

—

And slowly—

Understanding.

—

This family.

This warmth.

This life—

—

Was something he had missed.

—

But now—

—

Perhaps—

—

It was not too late.

—

Because for the first time—

—

He wasn't just an Emperor.

—

He was—

—

Part of something real.

A Night of Union and Quiet Distance

The Duke residence was once again filled with warmth as night deepened.

After all the rituals, laughter, and blessings—

Everyone gathered for dinner.

—

The long table was filled with rich dishes.

Steam rose from freshly prepared food.

The atmosphere was no longer formal—

But soft.

Intimate.

Like a true family gathering.

—

Chen Ruyi sat beside Lian Rou, her face slightly flushed beneath the soft glow of lantern light.

She was quiet.

Gentle.

Still adjusting to her new place.

—

Lian Hua leaned closer and whispered loudly,

"Bride looks shy~"

—

Chen Ruyi lowered her head immediately.

—

"Stop teasing," Lian Rou said, though his tone lacked real anger.

—

The Duchess smiled.

"Let her be."

—

Across the table—

The Emperor sat calmly.

His gaze occasionally drifting—

Toward the Empress.

—

She was laughing softly with her younger sister.

Relaxed.

Unaware.

—

For a moment—

He simply watched.

—

And then—

Looked away.

—

Escorting the Bride

After dinner—

The time came.

—

The bride was to be escorted to the bridal chamber.

—

Lian Hua immediately jumped up.

"We will take her!"

—

The Empress smiled.

"Come."

—

Together—

The Empress and her younger sister walked beside Chen Ruyi.

Holding her hands gently.

—

The corridor was lit with red lanterns.

Soft.

Romantic.

—

"Are you nervous?" Lian Hua asked.

—

Chen Ruyi nodded slightly.

"...A little."

—

The Empress squeezed her hand.

"He is a good person."

—

Her voice was calm.

Reassuring.

—

Chen Ruyi looked at her—

And smiled faintly.

"I know."

—

They reached the door of the bridal chamber.

—

But just as they were about to enter—

A group of young cousins blocked the way.

—

"No entry!"

—

Lian Hua blinked.

"What?"

—

"It's tradition!"

—

"No one enters without a gift!"

—

Lian Hua crossed her arms.

"You're extorting the bride now?"

—

"Custom."

—

The Empress sighed softly.

"...How much?"

—

The cousins grinned.

—

After a brief exchange—

And a bit of playful bargaining—

They were bribed successfully.

—

"Alright, alright—go in!"

—

Everyone laughed.

—

Chen Ruyi was finally guided inside.

—

The Empress and Lian Hua helped her sit on the bed.

—

Then—

They stepped back.

—

"Rest well," the Empress said softly.

—

Lian Hua added,

"We'll come tomorrow and tease you more."

—

Chen Ruyi covered her face slightly, laughing.

—

Then—

They left.

Closing the door gently behind them.

—

Inside the Bridal Chamber

Moments later—

Lian Rou entered.

—

The room was quiet.

Lit by soft candlelight.

—

He walked slowly toward her.

—

For a moment—

Neither spoke.

—

Then—

He poured two cups of wine.

—

"Here."

—

She accepted.

—

Their hands brushed slightly.

—

They drank together.

—

A traditional gesture.

—

A promise.

—

He looked at her.

His voice calm.

Steady.

—

"...I will treat you well."

—

Simple words.

—

But sincere.

—

Chen Ruyi looked at him.

Her eyes soft.

—

"I know."

—

And in that quiet room—

A new bond was sealed.

—

A Quiet Departure

Outside—

The night grew deeper.

—

In the courtyard—

The Duchess stood beside the Emperor.

—

"You should stay tonight," she said gently.

"It is late."

—

The Emperor remained silent for a moment.

—

Then—

He shook his head.

"...I will return."

—

The Duchess looked at him carefully.

But didn't insist.

—

"Then at least rest before leaving."

—

"...No."

—

His voice was calm.

But distant.

—

Because his gaze—

Had already shifted.

—

Toward the Empress.

—

She stood a little away.

Under the lantern light.

—

He walked toward her.

—

She looked up.

"...You're leaving?"

—

"Yes."

—

A brief silence.

—

"...Take care," she said softly.

—

He nodded.

—

For a moment—

He wanted to say something more.

—

But didn't.

—

Instead—

"...Rest well."

—

Then—

He turned.

—

And walked away.

—

No hesitation.

No looking back.

—

The Empress stood there.

Watching.

—

Until his figure disappeared into the night.

—

And for reasons she didn't understand—

—

Her heart felt...

—

A little empty.