

Ghost 268

Chapter 268: The Morning After & The Final Celebration

The morning sun rose softly over the Duke Residence, its golden light slipping through the carved windows and resting gently upon red silk drapes that still decorated every corner.

The air carried the lingering scent of incense, flowers, and celebration.

—

Today—

Was the final day.

The marriage banquet.

—

But before the grand evening—

There was a quieter, more intimate moment to be shared.

—

The Newlyweds Arrive

In the main hall—

The family had already gathered.

The elders sat in their places.

The younger ones stood nearby, whispering and waiting.

—

Then—

The doors opened.

—

Lian Rou entered first.

Dressed neatly.

Composed.

But his ears—

Slightly red.

—

Behind him—

Chen Ruyi followed.

Dressed in softer morning attire.

Her head lowered slightly.

Graceful.

Shy.

—

The moment they stepped inside—

All eyes turned toward them.

—

And silence fell.

—

For exactly one second.

—

Then—

Lian Hua burst out laughing.

—

"Ohhh~ look at them!"

—

"Stop it," Lian Rou muttered immediately.

—

"You're blushing!"

—

"I'm not."

—

"You are."

—

Chen Ruyi's face turned even redder.

—

The Empress smiled faintly.

Watching.

—

There was something beautiful about this moment.

Simple.

Warm.

Real.

—

Tea Ceremony

The Aunt spoke gently,

"Come."

"It's time."

—

A servant brought forward a tray.

—

Tea.

Prepared carefully.

—

The couple knelt.

—

Chen Ruyi held the cup with both hands.

Careful.

Respectful.

—

She first turned to the elders.

—

"Father... Mother..."

—

Her voice was soft.

But steady.

—

She offered the tea.

—

The Duke accepted it.

His expression calm.

But his eyes—

Warm.

—

He took a sip.

Then nodded.

"...Good."

—

The Duchess followed.

Her smile gentle.

—

"From today..."

"You are part of this family."

—

Chen Ruyi's eyes softened.

"...Yes, Mother."

—

Next—

They moved to the Grandmother.

—

Chen Ruyi bowed slightly.

"Grandmother."

—

The old lady chuckled.

"Come closer."

—

She accepted the tea.

Drank.

—

Then—

Placed a red envelope in Chen Ruyi's hand.

—

"A blessing."

—

"For happiness."

—

"For harmony."

—

Chen Ruyi accepted it with both hands.

"...Thank you."

—

Lian Rou also received his.

—

The hall filled with warmth.

—

Teasing Continues

The moment the ceremony ended—

Lian Hua stepped forward again.

—

"So~ how was your first night?"

—

"LIAN HUA."

—

The entire hall erupted into laughter.

—

Chen Ruyi covered her face slightly.

—

The Empress stepped in calmly.

"That's enough."

—

But even she—

Was smiling.

—

The younger sister joined in,

"Yes, tell us!"

—

Lian Rou stood up immediately.

"We are leaving."

—

"You just arrived!"

—

"Still leaving."

—

The Grandmother laughed heartily.

"Let them breathe."

—

A Moment of Peace

As the laughter settled—

The family gathered again.

Relaxed.

Comfortable.

—

The Grandmother looked at the Empress.

Then at Lian Hua.

—

"Today is the final day."

—

"The banquet."

—

Her voice became slightly more serious.

—

"Everything must be perfect."

—

She turned to them.

"You two—"

"Help Ruyi get ready in the evening."

—

The Empress nodded.

"Yes."

—

Lian Hua saluted playfully.

"Understood."

—

Chen Ruyi smiled softly.

"...Thank you."

—

Preparing the Bride

As the day passed—

The atmosphere shifted again.

—

From playful—

To focused.

—

In Chen Ruyi's chamber—

Silk dresses were laid out.

Jewelry arranged.

Hair ornaments prepared.

—

The Empress stood beside her.

Calm.

Attentive.

—

Lian Hua sat nearby—

Trying to help.

But mostly talking.

—

"This one!"

"No, this one!"

"No, actually—this one!"

—

"You're not helping," the Empress said.

—

"I am."

—

"You're confusing her."

—

Chen Ruyi laughed softly.

"It's okay."

—

The Empress gently picked up a hairpin.

—

"This one suits you."

—

Simple.

Elegant.

Refined.

—

Chen Ruyi looked at it.

Then nodded.

"...Yes."

—

The Empress began arranging her hair.

Carefully.

Gently.

—

Her movements were precise.

Yet soft.

—

Like someone who had done this before.

—

Lian Hua watched.

"...You're really good at this."

—

The Empress didn't respond.

—

But her expression—

Softened slightly.

—

Dressing the Bride

The red wedding robe was brought forward.

—

Rich.

Heavy.

Beautiful.

—

Chen Ruyi stood still as they helped her into it.

—

Layer by layer—

The transformation happened.

—

From a shy girl—

To a bride.

—

A lady of the house.

—

Lian Hua stepped back.

"...Wow."

—

The Empress looked at her.

And smiled.

—

"You look beautiful."

—

Chen Ruyi's eyes filled slightly.

"...Thank you."

—

The Evening Approaches

Outside—

The Duke residence transformed once again.

—

Lanterns lit.

Music prepared.

Guests began arriving.

—

Voices filled the air.

Laughter.

Greetings.

—

The grand banquet—

Was about to begin.

—

Inside the chamber—

Chen Ruyi took a deep breath.

—

"Are you nervous?" Lian Hua asked.

—

"...A little."

—

The Empress stepped closer.

—

"...You'll be fine."

—

Chen Ruyi looked at her.

—

And nodded.

—

Because somehow—

Her words felt reassuring.

—

A New Beginning

As the doors opened—

And the bride stepped out—

—

The world awaited.

—

The family watched proudly.

—

The groom stood ready.

—

And under the glow of lanterns—

A new Chapter began.

—

Not just for Chen Ruyi.

—

But for all of them.

—

Because today—

Was not just an ending.

—

It was—

A beginning.

The evening sky shimmered with soft gold and crimson as lanterns lit up the grand Duke residence.

Rows of glowing lights stretched across the courtyard.

Music played gently.

Servants moved gracefully, guiding guests inside.

—

One by one—

The guests arrived.

—

Noble families.

Respected merchants.

Officials.

—

The Chen family arrived with formal dignity.

Soon after—

The Emperor entered, accompanied by Lady Chen and the Dowager.

—

All bowed deeply.

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

—

The Emperor acknowledged them calmly.

His gaze instinctively searched—

And found—

The Empress.

—

Standing beside the bride.

Radiant.

Calm.

Alive.

—

For a brief moment—

His expression softened.

—

Nearby—

Prince Liang, Princess Zhi, and Shin Gu also took their places.

—

When Shin Gu's eyes met Princess Zhi—

Something dark flickered.

Brief.

Sharp.

—

But it vanished just as quickly.

—

The celebration began.

—

Guests gathered.

Voices filled the air.

—

"Congratulations!"

"Blessings to the couple!"

—

Lian Rou and Chen Ruyi stood together, receiving wishes.

—

The Empress stepped forward.

Smiling gently.

"Be happy."

—

Chen Ruyi's eyes softened.

"...I will."

—

Princess Zhi also came forward.

Her voice warm.

"You deserve this happiness."

—

The bride nodded gratefully.

—

Everything felt—

Perfect.

—

Until—

—

A scream shattered the air.

—

Sharp.

Broken.

Desperate.

—

Everyone turned toward the entrance.

—

A girl—

From a noble family—

Came running inside.

—

Her hair disheveled.

Her face pale.

—

And—

She was only wearing her inner garments.

—

Gasps filled the courtyard.

—

"What—?!"

"Cover her!"

—

Servants rushed forward.

But the girl collapsed to her knees.

Crying.

Shaking.

—

Her lips moved—

Muttering incoherently.

—

"Ghost... ghost..."

—

Her family rushed forward.

"Daughter!"

"What happened?!"

—

The girl grabbed her father's sleeve.

Her eyes wide with fear.

—

"He... he came back..."

—

"Who?!"

—

"The merchant... the one I loved..."

—

Her voice broke.

—

"He died... but he came back..."

—

Silence fell.

—

Then—

Whispers spread.

—

"...What is she saying?"

"...A ghost?"

"...That's impossible..."

—

Some laughed nervously.

—

"There's no such thing."

—

"It must be madness."

—

The noble father's face darkened.

"Enough nonsense!"

—

But the girl shook her head violently.

—

"No... no..."

"I saw him..."

"He was standing there..."

"Calling me..."

—

Her body trembled uncontrollably.

—

The atmosphere shifted.

—

From celebration—

To unease.

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

—

The Empress stood still.

Watching.

Thinking.

—

Because deep inside—

She knew.

—

This—

Was not random.

—

And somewhere—

At the edge of the crowd—

—

Shin Gu smiled faintly.

—

Unnoticed.

—

As chaos quietly began—

In the middle of celebration.

A Shadow Over Celebration

The festive air of the Duke residence, once filled with laughter and music, now carried a strange tension.

All eyes were fixed on the trembling girl kneeling at the entrance.

Her body shook uncontrollably.

Tears streamed down her face.

—

The Dowager stepped forward first.

Her presence alone silenced the whispers.

—

"Lift her up."

—

Her voice was firm.

Controlled.

—

The servants quickly draped a shawl around the girl and helped her stand.

—

The Empress also stepped closer.

Her gaze sharp yet calm.

—

"What happened?" she asked gently.

—

The girl looked at her.

Her lips trembling.

—

"I... I was with my friends..."

—

Her voice broke.

—

"We were talking... laughing..."

—

She swallowed hard.

—

"And then..."

—

Her fingers tightened around the shawl.

—

"I felt... something..."

—

"Like someone was pulling at my clothes..."

—

Gasps echoed again.

—

"But there was no one!"

—

Her breathing grew uneven.

—

"And then..."

—

Her eyes widened in fear.

—

"I saw him."

—

Silence.

—

The Dowager narrowed her eyes.

"...Who?"

—

"The merchant..."

—

"The one I loved..."

—

"He went to the North..."

"...They said he died..."

—

Her voice cracked completely.

—

"But he was standing there..."

—

"Looking at me..."

—

"Calling me..."

—

The courtyard fell deathly still.

—

The Empress's expression didn't change.

But her fingers tightened slightly.

—

The Dowager turned sharply.

"Where are her friends?"

—

Servants quickly brought them forward.

Three young girls.

All pale.

All trembling.

—

"Speak," the Dowager ordered.

—

One of them nodded quickly.

"...We saw him too..."

—

Another whispered,

"He was there... just for a moment..."

—

"And then... he disappeared..."

—

Fear spread like wildfire.

—

Whispers grew louder.

—

"...Impossible..."

"...Ghosts don't exist..."

"...Or do they...?"

—

The Emperor stepped forward.

His presence cut through the chaos.

—

"Enough."

—

Instant silence.

—

His gaze moved across the crowd.

Then settled on the girl's family.

—

"Take her inside."

—

The family rushed forward.

Holding her.

Trying to calm her.

—

But before they could leave—

An elder from the Gaeng family stepped forward.

—

His face dark.

His voice filled with anger and humiliation.

—

"Your Majesty..."

—

"Who will take responsibility for this?"

—

The courtyard tensed again.

—

"Our daughter's reputation—"

—

"Who will marry her now?"

—

The words were heavy.

Sharp.

—

The Emperor remained calm.

—

"This matter will be investigated."

—

"It will be discussed in court."

—

His tone was firm.

Leaving no room for argument.

—

But then—

He added,

—

"...It may also be a misunderstanding."

—

Murmurs rose again.

—

"The man may not be dead."

—

"He could have faked his death."

—

The explanation spread quickly.

—

Relief.

Doubt.

Confusion.

—

Some nodded.

—

"Yes... that makes sense..."

—

"Better than believing in ghosts..."

—

The Gaeng elder hesitated.

—

Then finally bowed.

"...We trust Your Majesty."

—

The girl was taken away.

—

But the tension—

Remained.

—

Like an invisible shadow.

—

Watching.

Waiting.

—

The Emperor glanced briefly at the Empress.

—

Their eyes met.

—

Both understood.

—

This was not over.

—

Not even close.

—

Yet—

The music slowly resumed.

—

Guests forced smiles.

—

Laughter returned.

—

The banquet continued.

—

But beneath the celebration—

Something dark had already taken root.

—

And somewhere in the crowd—

—

Shin Gu watched quietly.

—

A faint smile on her lips.

—

As fear began to spread—

Exactly as planned.