

Ghost 269

Chapter 269: Beneath the Lanterns, the Game Deepens

The night had fully settled over the Duke residence, yet the banquet hall glowed brighter than the day itself.

Rows of red lanterns illuminated the courtyard.

Music drifted softly through the air.

Noble guests moved in elegant clusters—laughing, conversing, exchanging polite smiles.

—

From the outside—

It was a celebration.

A perfect gathering.

—

But beneath the surface—

Currents shifted.

—

The Cheng Family's Departure

At one corner of the hall, the Cheng family quietly prepared to leave.

Servants brought their cloaks.

Carriages were arranged.

—

Chen Ruyi stood beside her parents, her expression calm but thoughtful.

—

"Take care," the Duchess said warmly.

—

Chen Ruyi bowed slightly.

"I will."

—

Lian Hua hugged her quickly.

"Come tomorrow!"

—

"I will," she smiled.

—

Lian Rou stood a step behind.

Their eyes met briefly.

No words.

But enough was said.

—

Then—

The Cheng family turned and left.

Their carriage slowly disappearing beyond the gates.

—

The banquet continued.

—

But their departure—

Marked a shift.

—

The Grandmother Steps Forward

Back inside—

Conversations resumed.

Music rose again.

—

Then—

A voice cut through the hum.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

It wasn't loud.

But it carried weight.

—

The hall slowly quieted.

—

Standing before the Emperor—

Was Chen Ruyi's grandmother.

—

Her posture straight.

Her gaze steady.

—

The Dowager turned her head.

A faint smile forming.

—

The Empress, standing at a distance, noticed immediately.

—

"...Something is coming."

—

The Proposal

The grandmother bowed slightly.

—

"My youngest grandson..."

She began.

"...should be married."

—

A pause.

—

Then—

"...to the daughter of the Gaeng family."

—

The words dropped into the hall like a stone into still water.

—

Ripples spread instantly.

—

Murmurs.

Whispers.

—

"The Gaeng family?"

"That girl?"

"Isn't she...?"

—

The Cheng family, who had not yet fully exited the hall, froze.

—

Shock spread across their faces.

—

Even Chen Ruyi turned slightly.

Surprised.

—

The Emperor's Gaze

The Emperor didn't react immediately.

—

Instead—

His gaze moved slowly.

—

Toward Cheng Meli.

—

"...Do you agree?"

—

The question was direct.

—

All eyes turned.

—

Cheng Meli stood still.

—

His expression unreadable.

—

He looked at his grandmother.

—

Then—

At his younger sister.

—

Then—

At the gathered nobles.

—

The weight of expectation hung heavily.

—

The Dowager watched closely.

—

Lady Chen's lips curved faintly.

—

The Empress's eyes narrowed slightly.

—

"...This is not spontaneous."

—

Cheng Meli finally spoke.

—

"...Yes."

—

The answer echoed.

—

A decision made.

—

Perhaps not freely.

—

But publicly.

—

The Emperor Declares

The Emperor nodded once.

—

"It will be announced in court."

—

Formal.

Final.

—

The alliance was sealed.

—

Not with celebration—

But with authority.

—

Words That Shape Perception

Lady Chen stepped forward gracefully.

—

Her voice gentle.

Soft.

—

"That girl..."

"...is pitiful."

—

The hall quieted again.

—

"It is good that the Cheng family is helping her."

—

The words sounded kind.

Compassionate.

—

But they spread quickly.

—

A narrative formed.

—

The Dowager nodded approvingly.

—

"Yes."

—

"The Cheng family truly has a big heart."

—

A compliment.

—

But also—

A positioning.

—

The meaning was clear.

—

This was not a prestigious match.

—

It was—

Charity.

—

The Duke Family Watches

From across the hall—

The Duke family observed everything.

—

Silent.

—

The Duke's expression darkened slightly.

—

The Duchess remained calm.

—

The Grandmother's eyes gleamed.

—

And the Empress—

—

Watched.

—

Carefully.

—

"...They turned the situation."

—

"...Made it look like kindness."

—

"...Instead of pressure."

—

Her gaze shifted toward the Emperor.

—

"...And he allowed it."

—

Maintaining Appearances

Despite everything—

The Duke family continued hosting.

—

Greeting guests.

Smiling.

Conversing.

—

Nothing in their expressions revealed their thoughts.

—

Because in a place like this—

Control was everything.

—

Princess Zhi's Departure

Amid the shifting atmosphere—

A familiar presence approached.

—

"Sister-in-law."

—

The Empress turned.

—

Princess Zhi stood there.

—

Beside her—

Prince Liang.

—

The Princess's smile was gentle.

But tired.

—

"We are leaving."

—

The Empress frowned slightly.

"So early?"

—

Prince Liang spoke,

"Shin Gu is not feeling well."

—

"We came together."

"So we must return together."

—

At the mention of that name—

The Empress's eyes flickered.

—

But her expression remained calm.

—

"I see."

—

She nodded.

—

"Travel safely."

—

Princess Zhi stepped closer.

"...You too."

—

Their eyes met.

—

A silent understanding passed between them.

—

Then—

They turned and left.

—

The Empress watched their backs.

—

Her thoughts deepening.

—

A Mind That Sees Beyond

The music resumed.

The laughter returned.

—

But for the Empress—

Everything had changed.

—

She stood still for a moment.

—

Then slowly exhaled.

—

"...Today..."

—

Her gaze moved across the hall.

—

"...they created a distraction."

—

The Gaeng girl.

The sudden proposal.

The narrative of pity.

—

All of it—

Perfectly timed.

—

"...Too perfect."

—

Her eyes darkened.

—

"...While everyone is focused here..."

—

"...something else is moving."

—

A Silent Realization

The lanterns glowed brightly.

Guests laughed louder.

—

But the Empress—

Saw through it.

—

Because beneath the celebration—

The truth remained.

—

The enemy had not stopped.

—

They had only—

Changed their move.

—

And tonight—

They succeeded.

—

Because everyone—

Was distracted.

—

Ending Scene

The Empress stood quietly beneath the lantern light.

—

Her expression calm.

—

But her mind—

Sharp.

—

Because now—

She understood something clearly.

—

This was not just a palace conflict.

—

Not just political games.

—

This was something deeper.

Darker.

—

And far more dangerous.

—

Her lips pressed together slightly.

—

"...Let them think they succeeded."

—

"...Let them believe we are distracted."

—

A faint resolve settled in her eyes.

—

"...Then I will see..."

—

"...who is really behind this."

—

The music rose.

The night deepened.

—

And beneath the glowing lights—

—

The real battle—

—

Had already begun.

A Choice Between Heart and Power

The gates of the Cheng residence opened slowly as the carriage entered.

The night air was still.

Heavy.

As if it already knew—

Something important had been decided.

—

Inside the main hall—

Every member of the Cheng family had gathered.

Elders.

Sons.

Daughters.

All seated in their respective places.

—

Waiting.

—

Because the moment the Grandmother stepped in—

Everyone rose.

—

"Mother."

"Grandmother."

—

She acknowledged them with a slight nod and walked forward with steady, composed steps.

Then took her seat at the head.

—

Only then—

Did the murmurs begin.

—

"Is it true?"

"You proposed a marriage alliance?"

—

The head of the Cheng family spoke clearly,

"...With the Chaeng family?"

—

Silence fell again.

—

The Grandmother lifted her gaze.

Sharp.

Unwavering.

—

"Yes."

—

The answer was simple.

But it shook the room.

—

"Why the Chaeng family?" one elder questioned.

"We have no close ties with them."

—

The Grandmother's voice was calm—

But firm.

—

"Because they are powerful."

—

She let the words settle.

—

"The Chaeng family holds high-ranking ministerial positions."

"They control influence within the court."

—

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

—

"And after today..."

"...their position will only grow stronger."

—

The others frowned.

—

"What do you mean?"

—

She replied,

—

"The Emperor visited the Duke residence."

"He showed clear favor."

—

"And the Chaeng family..."

"...has long-standing ties within the court."

—

"If the Emperor begins strengthening alliances—"

"They will benefit."

—

The realization slowly dawned.

—

"This means..."

—

"They will rise further," the head of the family completed.

—

The Grandmother nodded.

—

"And us?"

—

Her voice lowered.

—

"We are weakening."

—

The room stiffened.

—

"One of our own was stripped of rank."

"Executed for treasury corruption."

—

No one spoke.

—

Because it was truth.

—

"Our hold in court is slipping."

"Our influence is no longer absolute."

—

She leaned forward slightly.

—

"If we do nothing..."

"...we will fall behind."

—

A long silence followed.

—

Then—

One by one—

The elders nodded.

—

"...You are right."

—

"We need a strong alliance."

—

"The Chaeng family is the best choice."

—

Agreement spread across the hall.

—

The decision—

Accepted.

—

Until—

—

A voice broke through.

—

"Grandmother."

—

All eyes turned.

—

Cheng Meli stepped forward.

—

His expression calm—

But his eyes carried conflict.

—

"I have something to say."

—

The Grandmother looked at him.

"...Speak."

—

He hesitated briefly.

Then—

—

"I like someone."

—

The words fell—

Like a stone in still water.

—

Shock rippled through the room.

—

"What?"

"You what?"

—

The elders exchanged glances.

—

But Cheng Meli stood firm.

—

"I want to marry her."

—

Silence.

—

The Grandmother watched him carefully.

Then—

A faint smile appeared.

—

"...I know."

—

Gasps.

—

"You know?" his father asked in disbelief.

—

She nodded.

—

"The servant girl."

—

Cheng Meli's expression changed.

—

"...You already knew..."

—

Her voice was calm.

—

"There is nothing in this house that escapes me."

—

The tension grew heavier.

—

"...Then you understand," he said quietly.

—

"I don't want this arranged marriage."

—

For the first time—

His voice carried emotion.

—

But the Grandmother remained unmoved.

—

"If you like her..."

"That is your personal matter."

—

Hope flickered—

—

But shattered instantly.

—

"She cannot be your official wife."

—

The words were final.

—

"Why?" he asked.

—

Her gaze sharpened.

—

"Because you are not just a man."

—

"You are a son of the Cheng family."

—

"Your marriage..."

"...is a political decision."

—

She continued—

—

"The Chaeng family's daughter will become your official wife."

—

"This alliance will secure our position."

—

"Strengthen our influence."

—

"Ensure our survival."

—

Silence filled the hall.

—

Cheng Meli clenched his fists.

—

"...And her?"

—

The Grandmother replied without hesitation—

—

"She may stay."

—

"As your concubine."

—

The words were cold.

Practical.

—

"You can keep her by your side."

—

"But your official wife—"

—

"...will be the Chaeng family's daughter."

—

No one opposed.

—

Because to them—

This was logical.

Necessary.

—

Cheng Meli stood still.

—

His heart pulling one way.

His duty pulling another.

—

"...And if I refuse?"

—

The Grandmother looked at him calmly.

—

"You won't."

—

Because she knew—

—

He couldn't.

—

Not against the family.

Not against everything he was raised to protect.

—

A long silence followed.

—

Then—

Slowly—

His shoulders lowered.

—

"...I understand."

—

But his eyes—

Were no longer calm.

—

Something inside him—

Had cracked.

—

The Grandmother leaned back.

Satisfied.

—

"The matter is settled."

—

The elders nodded.

—

"The Chaeng alliance will proceed."

—

And just like that—

His future was decided.

—

Not by love.

—

But by power.

—

Outside—

The night wind moved quietly.

—

Unaware—

That within those walls—

A heart had just been sacrificed—

For the sake of a family's survival.