

Ghost 185

Chapter 185: letters shake houses

Morning light filtered softly through the lattice windows of the Chen residence, illuminating shelves lined with ancient books and neatly rolled scrolls. The air smelled faintly of ink and sandalwood.

Chen Guowei sat alone in his study.

The parcel lay open on his desk.

No seal.

No name.

No sender.

Only a single letter.

His fingers, usually steady even in court debates, trembled slightly as his eyes moved across the page.

With every line he read, the color drained from his face.

By the time he reached the final sentence, his hand clenched so tightly around the paper that it crumpled.

Impossible...

The words written there were not threats shouted loudly.

They were worse.

They were quiet truths.

Things buried for years.

Deals made in shadows.

Favors exchanged that should never have existed.

Things no one should know.

Yet someone did.

And that someone knew enough to destroy him completely.

> Do not send your younger daughter, Chen Ruyi, to the palace.

Marry her to the Duke's nephew instead.

This is your only warning.

Chen Guowei exhaled sharply, his chest tight.

"How..." he whispered to himself.

His first thought was disbelief.

His second—fear.

His third—calculation.

Ruyi...

His innocent, gentle daughter.

Filial. Soft-spoken. Too kind for court schemes.

She would never betray him.

She would never even imagine such darkness.

And yet, whoever sent this letter knew not only about him, but about her as well.

They knew her feelings.

They knew her secret attachment.

They knew exactly which string to pull.

His jaw tightened.

And then another thought surfaced—bitter and sharp.

His elder daughter.

Lady Chen.

She had entered the palace.

She had endured.

She had schemed.

And yet—

She had failed.

No child.

No heir.

No secure position.

All these years, all those sacrifices... and still nothing.

And now this letter.

As if the heavens themselves were mocking him.

Chen Guowei slammed his palm against the desk.

"Guards!"

The door opened instantly.

"Yes, Master."

"Find out who sent this parcel," Chen Guowei said coldly. "Every servant. Every courier. Every footprint. Leave no stone unturned."

The guard bowed deeply. "This subordinate has already checked, Master. The parcel appeared at dawn. No one saw who delivered it."

Chen Guowei's eyes darkened.

So they were careful.

Too careful.

He dismissed the guard and leaned back slowly, staring at the ceiling.

Someone was watching him.

Someone powerful.

Someone patient.

And until he understood who...

He would have to be careful.

Very careful.

Elsewhere — Under the Duke's Sky

In sharp contrast, sunlight danced freely through the open garden of the Duke's residence.

Lian Rou sat beneath a flowering tree, a cup of tea in his hand, laughter still lingering in his eyes.

For the first time in a long while, his heart felt... light.

He had received news that morning.

Not official.

Not announced.

But enough.

Enough for certainty.

Chen Guowei would never send Chen Ruyi to the palace.

Never.

Lian Rou leaned back slightly, gazing up at the clear sky.

"She'll be safe," he murmured.

Safe from court intrigue.

Safe from power struggles.

Safe from becoming a pawn.

He knew Chen Guowei well enough.

A man who had done too many wrong things always feared exposure more than loss.

And Ruyi...

Ruyi was his weak point.

His softest spot.

Lian Rou smiled faintly.

"She'll be my wife," he said quietly, more promise than boast.

Not because of power.

Not because of deals.

But because she chose him.

And because someone, somewhere, had decided that some innocence deserved protection.

The wind stirred the leaves above him.

Lian Rou lifted his cup, taking a slow sip of tea.

Far away, shadows moved.

But for now—

The garden was peaceful.

And the future, at last, seemed clear.

Chen Ruyi sat by the window of her room, sunlight falling softly across the open pages of the book in her hands. The characters were neat, familiar, ones she had read many times before.

Yet today, not a single word entered her mind.

Her gaze drifted past the page, past the window, toward the distant sky.

Soon... the time will be over.

Her fingers tightened slightly around the book.

She knew what awaited her.

Once the proper season arrived, once the court finalized its selections, her father would send her to the palace. That path had always been laid before her—quietly, firmly, without discussion.

To become someone's concubine. To live behind layered walls. To smile when told. To bow when ordered.

Her chest felt tight.

Her thoughts, however, were not in the palace.

They were with Lian Rou.

The way he spoke to her without calculation. The way he laughed freely, unguarded. The way he never once looked at her as a bargaining chip.

Their feelings had never been spoken aloud, yet they were clear—steady, mutual, unshakable.

She could not imagine another man beside her.

She did not want to imagine it.

Just then—

A knock echoed softly at the door.

Her heart skipped.

"Come in," she said, standing up instinctively.

The door opened, and her father, Chen Guowei, stepped inside.

The moment she saw his face, her breath stilled.

He looked... tense.

Not angry.

Not cold.

But deeply troubled.

"Father?" she asked carefully, moving toward him. "What happened?"

He did not answer immediately.

Instead, he reached into his sleeve and took out a folded paper, placing it into her hands.

"Read this."

Confused, she unfolded the letter.

Her eyes moved across the lines—

And froze.

Her face drained of color.

Her fingers trembled.

This...

This letter...

Her lips parted slightly. "Father... who is the Duke's nephew?"

Chen Guowei watched her closely.

Too closely.

The question, the way her voice caught, the way her eyes lingered on that single line—it told him more than any confession could.

So she doesn't know...

And yet...

His suspicion sharpened.

Whoever sent this letter was not only his enemy.

They were also an enemy of the Duke.

And yet, they had chosen a path that protected his daughter.

That alone made them dangerous.

Chen Guowei took the letter back, folding it carefully.

"You don't need to know," he said calmly. "What you need to know is this—"

He met her eyes.

"I will not send you to the palace."

Her breath caught.

He continued, voice low, controlled.

"Someone sent this letter to threaten me. They know too much. Enough to make me reconsider many things."

He paused.

"You are still young. There is no need for you to marry the Emperor."

Her heart thundered.

"Then... Father?" she asked softly.

"I will think of another arrangement," he said. "A nobleman. Someone appropriate. Someone safer."

Chen Ruyi lowered her gaze obediently, but her voice was steady.

"Father, please think carefully. Whatever decision you make... I will follow."

Chen Guowei nodded, satisfied by her filial response.

He turned to leave.

At the door, he stopped briefly.

"Do not speak of this letter to anyone."

"I understand," she replied.

The door closed behind him.

Silence returned to the room.

Chen Ruyi stood still for a long moment.

Then—

She slowly sat back down, pressing the book to her chest.

Her lips curved into a small, relieved smile.

Lian Rou...

She knew it.

He had done something.

And more importantly—

Her father did not suspect him.

Nor her.

That was good.

Very good.

Outside, the sunlight warmed the window, and for the first time in days, Chen Ruyi allowed herself to believe—

Her future might truly belong to her.

Quiet Calculations

The fragrance of medicinal herbs lingered softly in the Dowager's courtyard.

Lady Chen sat beside the bed, carefully holding a porcelain bowl, her movements gentle and unhurried as she fed the Dowager spoon by spoon. Her expression was composed, serene—exactly what a filial daughter-in-law should look like.

"You've improved a great deal," Lady Chen said softly. "Your complexion looks much better today."

The Dowager hummed in agreement, clearly pleased. "You've been attentive these days. It is good to have someone thoughtful nearby."

Lady Chen smiled modestly and lowered her gaze.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed the familiar figure approaching.

The Emperor.

He had been visiting the Dowager frequently these days—sometimes to check her health, sometimes simply to talk. Each time, Lady Chen would remain present, offering tea, listening quietly, never interrupting unless spoken to.

And she could feel it.

Their relationship had changed.

Not dramatically.

Not openly.

But unmistakably.

The Emperor no longer spoke to her with distance. Their conversations flowed easily now—about court matters, about the festival preparations, even about trivial things. They ate together occasionally, shared light laughter, exchanged calm glances.

There was warmth.

A controlled warmth.

As for children...

Lady Chen had already decided.

Now was not the time.

Princess Zhi's loss still hung heavily over the palace like a shadow, and beyond that—something darker, more dangerous, was clearly stirring within these walls. The Emperor himself had acknowledged it.

Until the palace was safe...

She would not conceive.

Not yet.

She was patient.

She had always been patient.

Her gaze drifted briefly toward the courtyard outside.

As for the Empress...

Lady Chen's lips curved faintly.

For now, she was not a threat.

Lady Chen had observed her carefully these past days.

The Empress did not look at the Emperor with longing. There was no jealousy. No possessiveness. No softness in her eyes.

And the Emperor?

He did not desire her.

He protected her, yes. He defended her when needed. But that was duty.

Responsibility.

Perhaps even guilt.

Not love.

Lady Chen understood that difference better than anyone.

Still...

She would remain cautious.

People who appeared harmless often became dangerous when least expected.

And in a palace where shadows moved unseen, carelessness was fatal.

Lady Chen lowered her eyes again and stirred the medicine gently, her expression calm, gentle, and perfectly composed.

For now—

Everything was still within her control.