

Ghost 210

Chapter 210: the visit no one expected

The Duke's residence was rarely disturbed by sudden guests.

Especially not by Minister Chen Guowei.

The servant nearly dropped the teacups when the name was announced.

"W—What did you say?" the steward asked again.

"Minister Chen Guowei has arrived with gifts," the servant whispered nervously. "He requests an audience with the Duke and Duchess."

The Duke, who had been reviewing documents, paused mid-page.

The Duchess, who was arranging embroidery threads, lifted her head sharply.

Both shared the same expression—

Shock.

And disbelief.

"Chen Guowei?" the Duke repeated slowly. "The same Chen Guowei who competes with us at court and blocks half our proposals?"

The Duchess narrowed her eyes.

"That man has never stepped into this residence in all these years. Why now?"

The Duke's gaze darkened.

"This is not a friendly visit."

The Unwelcome Guest

Moments later, Chen Guowei was escorted into the main hall.

He wore formal robes, his posture respectful, his face calm.

Behind him, servants carried exquisite gift boxes—rare tea leaves, medicinal ginseng, silk, and a carved jade ornament.

The Duke rose, courtesy demanding it.

"Minister Chen," he said coolly. "To what do we owe this... surprise?"

Chen Guowei bowed deeply.

"I apologize for coming unannounced. I hope the Duke and Duchess will forgive my intrusion."

The Duchess gestured lightly.

"Sit."

Tea was served.

Silence lingered, thick and uncomfortable.

The Duke did not smile.

Chen Guowei lifted his teacup, took a sip, then placed it down with deliberate care.

"I came today," he said, voice measured,

"to discuss a marriage."

The Duchess's fingers tightened on her teacup.

The Duke raised an eyebrow.

"A marriage?"

Chen Guowei nodded.

"My younger daughter, Chen Ruyi, is of age. I wish to propose a union between her and your nephew, Lian Rou."

The room went completely still.

The Duchess's embroidery thread slipped from her fingers.

The Duke stared at Chen Guowei as if he had spoken madness.

"You want your daughter to marry my nephew?" the Duke asked slowly. "Minister Chen, have you forgotten how many times we have opposed each other in court?"

Chen Guowei smiled faintly.

"Precisely because of that, this marriage could mend old divisions."

The Duke let out a soft, humorless laugh.

"Mend divisions?"

"Or infiltrate my family?"

The Duchess spoke sharply.

"You expect us to believe your sudden goodwill?"

Chen Guowei bowed his head.

"I understand your doubts."

A Father's Desperation

The Duke studied him closely.

This man was not acting arrogant.

He was... restrained.

Almost careful.

"You have always avoided any alliance with my family," the Duke said.

"And now you come bearing gifts and your daughter's hand?"

Chen Guowei's gaze flickered for a fraction of a second.

"I have reasons."

The Duchess leaned forward.

"Speak clearly. What are you hiding?"

Chen Guowei paused.

He could not reveal the letter.

He could not reveal the threat.

So he chose half-truth.

"My daughter's future must be secured," he said quietly.

"And I believe Lian Rou is a good man. He has a clean reputation. He is not corrupted by court politics."

The Duke narrowed his eyes.

"My nephew is not a bargaining chip."

"I know," Chen Guowei said. "That is why I am asking properly."

Silence fell again.

The Duke's expression hardened.

"You will give me time."

Chen Guowei inclined his head.

"Of course. I will wait for your answer."

The Duchess interjected coldly.

"And if we refuse?"

Chen Guowei's fingers curled slowly inside his sleeves.

"Then... I will respect your decision."

His voice was steady.

But the Duke sensed something wrong.

This man was under pressure.

Heavy pressure.

Doubt and Suspicion

After Chen Guowei left, the Duke stood by the window, staring at the retreating carriage.

"This is wrong," he said slowly.

"Very wrong."

The Duchess agreed.

"He hates us. There is no reason for him to offer his daughter willingly."

The Duke clenched his jaw.

"Either he is being forced..."

"...or he is planning something."

The Duchess frowned.

"If he is plotting, then marrying Ruyi into our family puts us at risk."

The Duke nodded.

"I need to speak to Lian Rou."

Lian Rou's Reaction

Later that evening, the Duke summoned his nephew.

Lian Rou arrived cheerful, unaware of the storm brewing.

"Uncle, Aunt," he greeted with a smile. "You wanted to see me?"

The Duke did not waste time.

"Minister Chen Guowei proposed that his daughter, Chen Ruyi, marry you."

Lian Rou froze.

"What?"

The Duchess watched his face carefully.

His shock was genuine.

Then disbelief.

Then—

A flicker of something hopeful.

"You're serious?" he asked.

The Duke's gaze sharpened.

"You know her?"

Lian Rou swallowed.

"...Yes."

The Duchess's eyes widened.

"How?"

He hesitated, then spoke honestly.

"We met... by chance. We've spoken before."

The Duke sighed heavily.

"So it's not random."

Lian Rou clenched his fists.

"I care about her," he said firmly.

"And I know her father is not trustworthy. But she is not like him."

The Duke rubbed his temples.

"This is exactly why this is dangerous."

The Duchess softened.

"Rou'er, do you trust her?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

The Duke exhaled slowly.

"Then I will investigate Minister Chen first."

He looked at his nephew seriously.

"If this marriage proceeds, you will be stepping into political fire."

Lian Rou met his gaze.

"I'm not afraid of fire."

The Duke studied him.

And for the first time...

He wondered if this marriage might be both

a blessing

and

a trap.

Far Away — The Shadow Tightens

That night, Chen Guowei returned home.

The second letter lay hidden in his drawer.

The deadline burned in his mind.

Ten days.

He had made the first move.

But whether it would save his daughter...

Or doom them both...

He did not know.

News in the palace never walked.

It flew.

By the time the Dowager Empress finished her morning tea, the whispers had already reached her ears.

"Minister Chen Guowei visited the Duke's residence."

"He brought lavish gifts."

"He proposed marriage... for his younger daughter."

The porcelain cup in the Dowager's hand stopped mid-air.

"...What?"

The maid bowed low, trembling.

"Minister Chen proposed that his younger daughter, Chen Ruyi, marry Duke Lian's nephew, Lian Rou."

The Dowager's fingers tightened around the teacup.

A sharp crack echoed.

The cup shattered.

Hot tea spilled across the table.

The maids fell to their knees in terror.

"Marry into the Duke family?" the Dowager repeated coldly.

"Not into the palace?"

Her eyes darkened with fury.

"So he dares to take his daughter away from my sight."

She stood abruptly.

Her expression twisted with anger and humiliation.

"Chen Guowei promised me his younger daughter would be sent to the palace when the time came. Now he secretly offers her to the Duke?"

The Dowager laughed bitterly.

"He dares to play tricks under my nose."

The Dowager's Suspicion

The Dowager paced the room.

Her anger was not only about losing a potential pawn.

It was about losing control.

The Chen family was supposed to bind itself to the imperial house.

That was the plan.

Lady Chen was already in the palace.

Her younger sister was meant to follow.

Two daughters.

Two chains.

Now one chain was slipping away.

"Why the Duke?" she muttered.

"Why now?"

Her sharp gaze lifted to her trusted maid.

"Summon Lady Chen."

Lady Chen Is Questioned

Lady Chen arrived shortly after.

She bowed deeply.

"Mother Dowager summoned me?"

The Dowager's eyes were icy.

"Did you know your father went to the Duke residence today?"

Lady Chen's expression froze.

"...No."

Her heart skipped.

The Dowager studied her closely.

"Do not lie to me."

Lady Chen's hands clenched.

"I truly didn't know. My father has not mentioned anything to me."

The Dowager scoffed.

"He is bold. Bold enough to decide his younger daughter's marriage without consulting the palace."

Lady Chen felt a knot form in her chest.

"Is he planning to marry my sister outside the palace?" she asked carefully.

The Dowager's lips curled.

"Yes. To Empress Lian's cousin."

Lady Chen's eyes widened.

"To... Duke Lian's nephew?"

For a split second, panic flickered in her eyes.

The Dowager noticed.

"So you do care."

Lady Chen lowered her head.

"Ruyi is still young. She has always been obedient. I fear she will be used as a chess piece in court politics."

The Dowager's eyes sharpened.

"Your father is using her to escape the palace."

Lady Chen's throat tightened.

"If my sister marries into the Duke family... the Chen family will no longer be bound tightly to the imperial house."

"Exactly," the Dowager said coldly.

"And that is unacceptable."

The Dowager's Anger Turns Strategic

The Dowager sat back down slowly.

Her rage did not fade.

It hardened into calculation.

"Your father is either being threatened..."

"...or he thinks he can outsmart me."

Lady Chen whispered,

"Mother Dowager... what will you do?"

The Dowager smiled.

Not kindly.

"If Chen Guowei thinks he can remove his daughter from my grasp, he is mistaken."

She looked at Lady Chen.

"You will write to your father."

Lady Chen stiffened.

"What should I say?"

"Tell him," the Dowager said slowly,

"that sending his younger daughter into the palace was his promise to me.

And breaking promises has consequences."

Lady Chen swallowed.

"And if he refuses?"

The Dowager's eyes glinted.

"Then his career... will not last long."

Lady Chen felt a chill crawl up her spine.

She knew the Dowager never made empty threats.

A Dangerous Thought

After Lady Chen left, the Dowager stood by the window.

Her gaze fell on the palace grounds.

On the distant roofs of the Duke's residence beyond the walls.

"Empress Lian's family is gaining too much influence," she murmured.

Her eyes darkened.

"Her cousin marrying into the Chen family..."

"That is not allowed."

Her fingers tapped slowly against the table.

The palace was already unstable.

Dark things were happening.

The Empress was changing.

The Emperor was softening toward his wife.

And now—

The Chen family dared to escape her control.

Everything was shifting.

And the Dowager hated losing control.

Elsewhere — Lady Chen's Inner Conflict

Back in her chamber, Lady Chen sat in silence.

Her mind raced.

Father... what are you doing?

If her sister married Lian Rou...

The Dowager would see the Chen family as disloyal.

That would place her own position in danger.

But another thought slithered in her heart—

If Ruyi escaped the palace...

She alone would remain by the Emperor's side.

No competition from her own blood.

Her lips parted.

Part of her felt relieved.

Another part felt trapped.

Because the Dowager would not allow this marriage easily.

And when the Dowager moved...

Someone always bled.

End of Chapter — The Dowager's Fury

The palace was calm on the surface.

But beneath it—

Marriage, loyalty, power, and threat

were weaving into a dangerous knot.

And someone, somewhere,

was already tightening the string.