

Ghost 213

Chapter 213: the visit to cheng residence

The morning light fell gently over the capital, but inside the Cheng family residence, the air was heavy and suffocating.

Chen Guowei lay on his bed, his back still burning from the punishment he had received in the Dowager's courtyard the day before. The bruises beneath his robes throbbed with every breath. His servant knelt beside the bed, carefully applying herbal paste, but even the soothing medicine couldn't calm the storm in his heart.

His mind was in chaos.

Yesterday had been humiliation.

Today... uncertainty.

He had been forced to stand under the sun for an hour.

A teacup had nearly struck his head.

The Dowager Empress had publicly scolded him, calling him a traitor to his own clan.

And yet...

He did not regret his decision.

My younger daughter does not belong to this palace, he thought bitterly.

She is not meant to be a pawn in power struggles, nor a concubine in a pit of vipers.

The palace had devoured enough of his family already.

Just then—

"Master!" the steward rushed in, his face pale. "The Duke's carriage has arrived at the front gate."

Chen Guowei's eyes widened.

"The Duke... is here?"

The room fell silent.

His servants froze. His wife stopped crying. Even the sound of birds outside seemed to vanish.

Chen Guowei's first thought was sharp and sudden:

So the threat is over.

For days, an invisible hand had been pushing him—

Threatening letters, secret warnings, hints about his past misdeeds, dark shadows hovering over his family's future.

And now the Duke himself had come.

Who else could have forced his hand so precisely?

He closed his eyes slowly.

"I knew it," he murmured hoarsely. "It was the Duke's side all along."

The steward hesitated. "Master... should we receive him?"

Chen Guowei let out a bitter laugh.

"Of course. When a duke visits your door, you don't get to refuse."

He struggled to sit up. The pain made him suck in a sharp breath, but he waved the servants away.

"Help me dress properly. Even if my bones are broken, I will not receive him lying down."

The Duke Arrives

The Duke of Lian's carriage rolled to a halt before the Cheng family gates, the insignia gleaming under the sun. Guards lined both sides, their expressions solemn.

Lian Rou stood behind his uncle, his heart pounding.

He had insisted on coming.

Not as a duke's heir.

Not as a political piece.

But as a man who wanted to take responsibility for the woman he loved.

Chen Ruyi... he thought.

Today decides our future.

The Duke glanced back at him.

"Remember," he said quietly, "whatever happens today, you must remain calm. This is not a battlefield."

Lian Rou bowed. "I understand, Uncle."

Inside the residence, servants rushed about nervously. When the Duke and Lian Rou were led into the main hall, they found Chen Guowei already seated, pale but dignified, his back straight despite the obvious pain.

The two men exchanged a long, silent look.

Years of rivalry.

Years of political tension.

Years of standing on opposite sides of the court.

Yet today, both had come with the same intention.

The Duke spoke first.

"Cheng Guowei. I did not expect to see you ill."

Chen Guowei smiled thinly. "The palace shows mercy in strange ways. Please, sit."

Tea was poured. The steam curled upward like the tension between them.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Finally, Chen Guowei broke the silence.

"You came because of the marriage proposal."

The Duke nodded.

"I came to clear things. Yesterday, you proposed that your younger daughter marry my nephew, Lian Rou. This is no small matter. Our families have not exactly walked the same path."

Chen Guowei's fingers tightened around his teacup.

"That is precisely why I want to speak clearly today."

Chen Guowei's Confession

Chen Guowei inhaled deeply.

"I will not lie to you, Duke. At first, I was forced."

Lian Rou's eyes widened.

"Forced?"

Chen Guowei nodded.

"Someone threatened me. They know too much about my past... things that could destroy my clan overnight. They told me to marry my younger daughter to your nephew, or consequences would follow."

The Duke's expression darkened.

"And you believed this threat came from me?"

"Yes," Chen Guowei admitted. "Your timing was too perfect. Your nephew is close to the Empress. Your family's power is rising. I assumed this was your move to bind me."

Lian Rou took a step forward.

"Uncle had nothing to do with that. I swear on my life."

Chen Guowei looked at him, studying the young man's face.

Sincerity.

No political calculation.

Only raw determination.

Slowly, something inside Chen Guowei softened.

"I know now," he said quietly. "After meeting the Duke today, I realize I misjudged you."

The Duke sighed.

"If not us... then someone else is manipulating this from the shadows."

Chen Guowei nodded.

"Yes. But by the time I realized this, something else had become clear to me."

He turned his gaze toward the window, where sunlight filtered in.

"My younger daughter is innocent. Too innocent for palace schemes.

Sending her to the Emperor would destroy her.

Keeping her here would only make her a tool for others."

His voice trembled.

"I am her father before I am a court official."

The Duke's eyes softened slightly.

"And you believe my nephew will protect her?"

Chen Guowei looked at Lian Rou.

"I have observed him. He is reckless, yes. But his heart is sincere. He does not look at my daughter like a prize. He looks at her like... home."

Lian Rou bowed deeply.

"I will protect her with my life. I swear it."

Chen Guowei's eyes burned.

"That is all I want."

Agreement in Silence

The Duke set down his teacup.

"Then let us be honest with each other."

He straightened.

"I did not come to threaten you. I came to confirm whether this marriage was born from coercion or choice."

Chen Guowei met his gaze.

"It began with coercion," he admitted. "But I choose it now willingly."

The room felt lighter.

The Duke nodded slowly.

"Then we will proceed carefully. No grand announcements yet. The palace is watching every move. The Dowager will not be pleased."

Chen Guowei smiled bitterly.

"She has already shown her displeasure."

The two men shared a quiet, knowing look.

Enemies...

But for this moment, allies.

Lian Rou's Resolve

As the formal discussion ended, Chen Guowei called for tea to be refreshed.

Lian Rou stood up and bowed deeply to Chen Guowei.

"Uncle Cheng, I know our families have history. I know you don't trust easily. But I promise you this—your daughter will never become a pawn in my family."

Chen Guowei studied him for a long moment.

Then he nodded once.

"I will hold you to that promise."

Lian Rou felt his chest tighten with relief.

Chen Guowei's Inner Thoughts

As the Duke's carriage departed, Chen Guowei remained seated, staring at the empty hall.

The servants thought he looked relieved.

But inside, his heart was heavy.

My elder daughter is trapped in the palace web...

My younger daughter will escape it.

He closed his eyes.

The Empress is rising. The Duke's family is rising. The palace tides are changing.

And he knew, deep down—

Aligning with the Empress's side might be the only way for his clan to survive the storm that was coming.

Lady Chen sat in her courtyard, the soft silk of her sleeves pooling around her wrists as her maid knelt beside her, whispering hurriedly.

"Madam... the Duke's family has entered the palace today. They went straight to the Empress's courtyard."

Lady Chen's hand, which had been lazily twirling a jade ring, paused.

"The Empress?" she repeated softly.

Her lips curved into a slow smile, one that did not reach her eyes.

"So... she didn't tell His Majesty."

The maid lowered her head. "This servant heard that the Duke brought his nephew and younger daughter. They remained in the Empress's courtyard for quite some time."

Lady Chen let out a quiet laugh, light and pleasant on the surface, but cold beneath.

"How interesting. Family matters... marriage matters... and the Empress kept His Majesty completely in the dark."

Her maid hesitated. "Madam, perhaps the Empress intended to inform His Majesty later—"

Lady Chen lifted a hand.

"There is no 'later' in the palace," she said gently. "There is only what is known... and what is hidden."

She rose to her feet, her expression calm and graceful.

"If she won't speak, then I will help her speak."

The Walk to the Emperor's Courtyard

Lady Chen changed into a dignified lavender robe, her hair adorned with pearl pins. Each step she took toward the Emperor's courtyard was unhurried, elegant, as though she were merely paying a casual visit.

But inside her chest, something sharp and bitter churned.

So the Empress is planning marriage alliances now?

She dares to build her own power without telling His Majesty?

Her nails pressed into her palm.

How bold. How dangerous.

When she entered the Emperor's courtyard, all the servants bowed immediately.

"Greetings to Lady Chen."

She nodded lightly, not even sparing them a glance, and walked straight in.

The Emperor's Study

The Emperor was seated behind his desk, documents spread out before him. When he heard footsteps, he lifted his head.

"Chen'er?"

She smiled softly and curtsied.

"Your Majesty. Am I disturbing you?"

He relaxed slightly and gestured to the seat opposite him.

"You rarely come at this hour. What happened?"

Lady Chen sat down slowly, arranging her sleeves neatly. For a moment, she seemed hesitant, as though unsure whether to speak.

The Emperor frowned faintly.

"Is something troubling you?"

She looked up at him, her eyes filled with gentle concern.

"I wasn't sure whether to mention this... but I thought Your Majesty should know."

His expression sharpened. "Know what?"

Lady Chen lowered her voice, as if sharing something confidential.

"I heard that the Duke's family came to the palace today... to visit the Empress."

The Emperor paused.

"The Duke's family?"

"Yes." Lady Chen nodded. "They went to her courtyard with gifts. It seemed... formal."

His fingers tightened slightly around the brush in his hand.

"She didn't mention anything to me."

Lady Chen smiled faintly.

"That's why I hesitated to speak. Perhaps it was only a family visit. But... I also heard something else."

The Emperor looked up at her fully now.

"What else?"

Lady Chen's tone was gentle, almost reluctant.

"It seems that Lord Chen Guowei is preparing to arrange his younger daughter's marriage... with the Duke's nephew. The Empress's elder cousin."

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"Marriage?"

"Yes." Lady Chen sighed softly. "I was worried that such a major alliance... is being discussed privately between families, without Your Majesty's knowledge. The Duke's family and the Chen family have never been on good terms. If they suddenly form a bond, I fear it might affect the court's balance."

She lifted her gaze to him, concern etched on her delicate features.

"I only speak because I care about the stability of the palace... and about Your Majesty."

The Emperor leaned back slowly, his expression unreadable.

"So the Empress knew about this?"

Lady Chen hesitated, then nodded.

"She welcomed them personally. They stayed for quite a while. It didn't look like a casual visit."

Silence fell.

The Emperor's mind raced.

Marriage alliance between two powerful families... discussed without informing me... and in the Empress's courtyard?

He frowned slightly.

"Why wouldn't she tell me?"

Lady Chen lowered her eyes.

"Perhaps she didn't think it important... or perhaps she wished to handle family matters privately. I don't know."

Her words were soft, but each one slipped neatly into the Emperor's thoughts, stirring unease.

"I don't want to misunderstand Her Majesty," she added gently. "I just thought... you should be aware."

The Emperor remained silent for a long moment.

Finally, he said quietly, "You did the right thing by telling me."

Lady Chen's lips curved faintly.

"I only want Your Majesty to be safe from surprises."

She stood and bowed lightly.

"I won't disturb you further. Please don't think poorly of the Empress because of this. Perhaps... there is an explanation."

After she left, the Emperor sat still, staring at the documents before him.

But his eyes no longer saw the words.

All he could think of was—

What else is she handling without telling me?

Lady Chen's Smile Outside the Courtyard

As Lady Chen stepped out of the Emperor's courtyard, the soft smile on her face faded.

Her eyes darkened.

Empress... you should not build alliances in secret.

She turned her head slightly toward the direction of the Empress's courtyard.

If you wish to rise... then I will remind you what happens when someone rises too quickly in the palace.

Her lips curved again—slow, deliberate, dangerous.