

## **Ghost 214**

Chapter 214: the emperor uneasy alliance

The candle in the Emperor's study burned low.

Outside, the palace was quiet. Too quiet.

Only the soft rustle of night wind moving through the bamboo garden could be heard, and occasionally the distant footsteps of night guards changing shifts. The Emperor sat alone at his desk, the scrolls in front of him untouched.

He had not read a single word for the past half hour.

His mind was somewhere else.

Lady Chen's words echoed in his ears.

> "Your Majesty... my father is preparing my younger sister's marriage.

To Empress Lian An's elder cousin brother."

The brush in his fingers had paused mid-air.

At first, he had thought he heard wrongly.

But Lady Chen had repeated it calmly, as if stating something simple — like discussing the weather.

And that was what unsettled him the most.

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The Emperor's Confusion

The Emperor slowly set the brush down.

The Chen clan.

And the Lian clan.

Enemies for generations.

Political rivals. Court enemies. Openly polite, secretly hostile.

Their fathers had fought each other in court debates. Their uncles had destroyed each other's promotions. Their cousins had lost posts because of each other's schemes.

This was not a family feud born of emotion.

It was a rivalry built on power, blood, and history.

And yet...

Chen Guowei — Lady Chen's father — was willingly sending his younger daughter into the Lian family?

The Emperor leaned back against his chair, staring at the ceiling.

> "That old fox would never do this without a reason..."

Chen Guowei was not a sentimental man.

He was ruthless. Calculating. Extremely cautious.

If he allowed his youngest daughter to marry into the Lian family, it meant only one thing—

He believed the Lian family was becoming too powerful to oppose openly.

Or worse...

He believed the Chen family was beginning to lose.

The Emperor's fingers curled slightly.

This marriage was not love.

It was survival.

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Lady Chen's Loyalty

The Emperor closed his eyes briefly.

Lady Chen...

She had come to him directly. She had told him about her father's move without hiding anything. She had not tried to manipulate him. She had not exaggerated. She had not cried.

She simply informed him.

And that...

That made him uncomfortable.

Because for the first time, he realized something he had never consciously admitted before:

Lady Chen had always been loyal to him.

Not her father. Not her clan.

But him.

Whenever Chen Guowei made moves in court, Lady Chen warned him. Whenever her clan tried to push political marriage pressure, Lady Chen softened the path for him. Whenever her father demanded favors, Lady Chen never forced him.

She stood between him and her own blood.

And now—

She had come to tell him that her father was making peace with his enemy.

The Emperor let out a slow breath.

> "She stands with me... even against her own family."

And yet...

That realization did not bring him the warmth it once would have.

Instead, it brought him discomfort.

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The Unspoken Contrast

Without realizing it, his thoughts drifted—

To the Empress.

Lian An.

That woman never came to him with court matters.

She never warned him of her family's plans. She never used her clan to pressure him. She never begged for protection. She never tried to gain influence.

She was...

Detached from power.

And yet...

Her existence itself was becoming political weight.

Her family's rise. Her cousin's strengthening position. Her increasing popularity among commoners. Her restaurant branches spreading across cities. Her reputation improving.

The Emperor frowned slightly.

> "She doesn't scheme... but the world moves for her."

And that frightened people more than schemes.

Because uncontrollable influence was far more dangerous than plotted power.

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A Dangerous Pattern

The Emperor stood and walked toward the window.

The moon hung low above the palace roofs.

Everything looked peaceful.

But beneath this calm—

Power was shifting.

The Chen clan was retreating. The Lian clan was advancing. Court factions were reshuffling.

And he...

He was standing between two women.

One who had grown up beside him. One who had become his wife by fate.

Lady Chen, who stood with him openly.

And the Empress, who never asked for his support — yet was unknowingly changing the balance of the court.

He suddenly realized something deeply unsettling:

He had never once considered what would happen if the Empress truly chose to step into power.

Not deliberately.

But naturally.

If she wished—

She could crush factions without raising her hand.

Because people believed in her.

And belief was more dangerous than armies.

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The Emperor's Silent Worry

The Emperor's gaze darkened.

> "This marriage between Lian Rou and Chen Ruyi..."

If it succeeded—

The Lian and Chen clans would form an alliance.

And that alliance...

Could reshape the court.

Could challenge even imperial authority if not handled carefully.

The Emperor did not fear rebellion.

He feared balance shifting beyond his control.

He had learned long ago:

A ruler did not fear enemies.

A ruler feared allies becoming too strong.

And yet...

Strangely—

When he thought of Lian An gaining influence—

He did not feel threatened.

He felt...

Protective.

The realization startled him.

> "Since when did I start feeling this way?"

He pressed his fingers against his temple.

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The Quiet Shift in His Heart

The Emperor suddenly understood something he had been denying for a long time:

Lady Chen represented stability.

Habit. History. Comfort.

But Lian An represented change.

Growth. Movement. Uncertainty.

And his heart...

Had begun leaning toward uncertainty.

Not because of romance alone.

But because she made him feel something new.

Alive. Aware. Challenged.

With Lady Chen, everything was familiar.

With the Empress—

Everything felt... dangerous in a different way.

Not politically.

Emotionally.

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His Final Decision

The Emperor straightened his posture.

He picked up a brush and wrote a short note:

> "Summon Duke Lian tomorrow morning."

If alliances were forming—

He needed to know exactly how deep they ran.

He would not interfere.

But he would not be blind.

As for Lady Chen—

He owed her honesty.

And protection.

But...

Not false hope.

And as for the Empress—

He would watch her.

Not as a threat.

But as something precious the court did not yet understand.

The candle flickered.

The Emperor exhaled slowly.

> "This palace is changing..."

"And so am I."

Outside, the wind carried the scent of early autumn.

A season of transformation had begun.

The Empress's courtyard was unusually lively that afternoon.

Sunlight spilled gently over the stone floor, and the autumn breeze carried the faint scent of blooming osmanthus. Lian An sat on the wooden bench beside the small table, her hands resting on her lap, lips curved in a soft, genuine smile.

For once, her smile was not forced.

For once, it was light.

Her elder cousin brother, Lian Rou, was finally going to marry the woman he loved.

Not a political pawn.

Not a court arrangement.

But love.

Just thinking about it made warmth spread through her chest.

"He really did it..." she murmured softly to herself. "That stubborn fool finally won his future."

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## The Ghosts' Celebration

Three translucent figures floated lazily around her courtyard.

Fen Yu spun around in the air, her torn sleeves fluttering like ribbons.

"Heh! Finally! A happy marriage!" she laughed. "That means banquets, right? Big ones! With food! Lots of food!"

Wei Rong crossed his arms smugly.

"Focus. The important part is food."

Li Shen nodded solemnly.

"Statistically speaking, weddings produce the highest-quality dishes in noble residences."

Fen Yu clapped her hands excitedly.

"YES! We're eating well again!"

Lian An couldn't help but laugh at them.

"You three only care about food."

Fen Yu pouted.

"Food is important! Even ghosts deserve happiness!"

Wei Rong added seriously,

"And we've been eating palace rations. They lack soul."

Li Shen nodded.

"Indeed. The duke's residence chefs have superior seasoning techniques."

The three of them floated closer, their expressions filled with anticipation.

"We're going with you, right?" Fen Yu asked eagerly.

"We want to eat everything!"

Lian An smiled.

"Of course you're going. You think I'd leave you behind to starve and cause chaos here?"

Fen Yu cheered, spinning midair.

"Yes! New food! New chaos!"

Wei Rong rolled his eyes.

"Control yourself."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves.

"We must maintain dignity at a wedding."

Fen Yu laughed.

"Ghost dignity? Since when?"

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A Joyful Decision

Lian An leaned back slightly against the wooden pillar, gazing up at the blue sky.

"I'll go back to the duke residence for the wedding," she said softly.

"I'll see Father, Mother, Hua, and Rou again."

Her heart felt warm just thinking about it.

It had been too long since she last stood in her childhood home without fear, without pretending to be sick, without palace eyes watching her every step.

For once...

She just wanted to be a daughter.

A sister.

A cousin.

Not the Empress.

Fen Yu floated closer.

"You look happy. Like... actually happy."

Wei Rong nodded.

"This is good for you."

Li Shen's expression softened.

"You need places where you are not constantly on guard."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"Yes..."

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The Bitter Reality

Then—

The smile on her face slowly faded.

Her fingers tightened slightly.

"...But I have to get permission first."

The courtyard fell quiet.

Fen Yu blinked.

"Permission?"

Wei Rong frowned.

"From who?"

Lian An's gaze lowered.

"The Dowager."

The three ghosts stiffened.

Fen Yu's expression darkened instantly.

"That old witch again."

Wei Rong clenched his fists.

"She never makes things easy for you."

Li Shen spoke carefully,

"In this palace, nothing involving family visits is simple."

Lian An let out a slow breath.

"I know."

Her chest felt tight.

She knew exactly how it would go.

The Dowager would mock her.

Remind her of her 'place'.

Twist her words.

Find some reason to delay or obstruct.

Just thinking about facing that woman made her mood drop.

"She always creates problems," Lian An said quietly.

"Even when it's something harmless... she turns it into a battlefield."

Fen Yu floated angrily in circles.

"Why do you even need her permission? You're the Empress!"

Wei Rong snorted.

"In name only."

Li Shen nodded.

"In practice, the Dowager still controls most internal palace permissions."

Lian An closed her eyes briefly.

"I know she'll use this to humiliate me again."

Her voice was calm.

But there was hurt beneath it.

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Ghost Comfort (In Their Own Way)

Fen Yu floated close and gently patted Lian An's shoulder.

"Hey... at least you're not alone this time."

Wei Rong nodded.

"If she bullies you, we'll... glare at her."

Li Shen added,

"We can haunt her teacups."

Fen Yu grinned wickedly.

"I can knock over her flower pots at night!"

Lian An laughed softly despite herself.

"You three will get me exiled one day."

Wei Rong smirked.

"Worth it."

She shook her head.

But her heart felt lighter.

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Quiet Resolve

Lian An stood up slowly.

"I'll go ask for permission tomorrow."

Fen Yu groaned dramatically.

"Why tomorrow? Can't we sneak out tonight?"

Li Shen sighed.

"That would escalate political consequences."

Wei Rong nodded.

"Unfortunately."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"I'll endure it."

She straightened her back.

"For my family... I can endure one more round of humiliation."

The ghosts looked at her silently.

Fen Yu suddenly said,

"You know... you're actually really strong."

Lian An paused.

Wei Rong added,

"Stronger than most living people."

Li Shen nodded.

"And far more patient than necessary."

She smiled.

"Thank you."

The sun dipped slightly lower.

Her joy remained—

But beneath it now lay a familiar ache.

Happiness in the palace was never free.

It always came with a price.

Lian An gazed toward the direction of the Dowager's residence, her eyes calm but firm.

> "No matter what she says... I will go to my brother's wedding."

And this time—

She would not let anyone take that from her.