

Ghost 240

Chapter 240: The Dowager's Pressure

The imperial palace was quiet that morning, but tension hung heavily over the Dowager Empress's courtyard.

A line of servants stood at the courtyard entrance carrying lacquered red boxes decorated with gold ribbons. The boxes were filled with wedding sweets, silk cloth, and ceremonial gifts.

At the front stood Chen Guowei, father of Lady Chen and head of the powerful Chen family.

His posture was straight and calm, but anyone who knew the politics of the palace understood that this visit was not simple courtesy.

Chen Guowei had come to personally invite the Dowager Empress and Lady Chen to the wedding of his younger daughter, Chen Ruyi, who would soon marry Lian Rou, the nephew of the Duke and cousin of the Empress.

It was a marriage that had shaken many noble families.

Especially the palace.

The guards outside the Dowager's courtyard bowed respectfully but did not allow him to enter immediately.

A palace maid stepped forward and spoke politely.

"Minister Chen, Her Highness is currently resting."

Chen Guowei nodded.

"This official will wait."

The maid bowed and returned inside.

And so he waited.

The winter sun climbed slowly across the sky.

Half an hour passed.

Then another.

The servants carrying the gift boxes shifted slightly, their arms growing tired, but none dared complain.

Chen Guowei remained perfectly still.

He knew exactly what the Dowager Empress was doing.

She was making him wait deliberately.

It was her way of expressing displeasure.

Nearly an hour later, the doors finally opened.

The maid returned.

"Her Highness will see you now."

Chen Guowei stepped inside the courtyard.

The servants followed quietly.

Inside the chamber, the Dowager Empress sat on her carved wooden seat, calmly drinking tea.

Her expression was cold.

Beside her stood Lady Chen, dressed elegantly in pale blue silk.

The moment Chen Guowei entered, both women looked at the red wedding boxes behind him.

The Dowager Empress slowly set her tea cup down.

"So."

Her voice was calm but sharp.

"You came."

Chen Guowei bowed respectfully.

"This official greets Your Highness."

The Dowager Empress did not return the greeting.

Instead she looked directly at the gift boxes.

"What is all this?"

Chen Guowei gestured toward the servants.

"These are wedding sweets and gifts."

"My younger daughter will soon marry Lian Rou, nephew of the Duke."

The Dowager Empress gave a short laugh.

"I already know."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You forget that we spoke about this before."

Lady Chen glanced at her father quietly.

The Dowager Empress leaned back slightly.

"Before this wedding arrangement appeared..."

Her voice turned colder.

"...I personally spoke with you."

Chen Guowei remained silent.

The Dowager Empress continued.

"I advised you to send your younger daughter to the palace."

She gestured toward Lady Chen.

"She could serve the Emperor alongside her sister."

Lady Chen lowered her gaze.

The Dowager Empress's voice sharpened.

"That would have strengthened your family's position."

Chen Guowei finally spoke calmly.

"My daughter is not suited for palace life."

The Dowager Empress scoffed.

"That is what you said before."

Her eyes hardened.

"And yet now you send her into the Duke's household instead."

She leaned forward slightly.

"Do you realize what that means?"

Chen Guowei answered quietly.

"Yes."

"You choose the Empress's family over your own alliance with the palace."

The chamber fell silent.

Lady Chen watched her father carefully.

She expected hesitation.

But Chen Guowei remained calm.

"My daughter deserves a good husband."

The Dowager Empress laughed coldly.

"And you believe the Duke's nephew is that man?"

"Yes."

Chen Guowei replied firmly.

"Lian Rou is honorable."

"He is capable."

"And he will treat my daughter well."

The Dowager Empress's expression darkened.

"You speak as if you admire him greatly."

Chen Guowei nodded slightly.

"I do."

Lady Chen's fingers tightened slightly inside her sleeves.

The Dowager Empress watched Chen Guowei carefully.

"Have you forgotten the rivalry between your family and the Duke family?"

Chen Guowei answered calmly.

"Rivalry between elders should not decide the happiness of the next generation."

The Dowager Empress tapped her fingers against the armrest.

"You are being naïve."

Her voice lowered.

"You know very well that this marriage strengthens the Duke's influence."

Chen Guowei did not deny it.

But he also did not back down.

"My decision will not change."

The Dowager Empress stared at him for several long moments.

Then she spoke slowly.

"So no matter what I say..."

"...you will continue with this marriage?"

"Yes."

Chen Guowei answered respectfully.

The Dowager Empress leaned back again.

Her expression had become cold.

"You are stubborn."

Chen Guowei bowed slightly.

"I simply want the best life for my daughter."

Lady Chen finally spoke quietly.

"Father..."

"Are you certain?"

Chen Guowei met her gaze calmly.

"Yes."

He did not elaborate further.

Because in his mind, the answer had already been decided.

The Dowager Empress waved her hand dismissively.

"Leave the gifts."

Her voice carried clear displeasure.

"I will attend the wedding."

Chen Guowei bowed again.

"This official thanks Your Highness."

As he turned to leave the chamber, the Dowager Empress spoke one final sentence.

"You may believe the Duke's nephew is the best choice."

Her voice was quiet but heavy with meaning.

"But remember..."

"The palace does not forget decisions like this."

Chen Guowei did not respond.

He simply walked out of the courtyard with steady steps.

Because no matter how much pressure the palace applied—

He would not cancel the wedding.

In his mind, there was no doubt.

Lian Rou was the best husband his daughter could have.

The Empress's courtyard was peaceful that afternoon.

The winter sun rested softly over the tiled roofs, and the gentle warmth of its light spread across the courtyard garden. A faint breeze carried the scent of plum blossoms through the open windows of the chamber.

Inside, a low wooden table had been arranged with lunch.

Bowls of warm rice, steamed vegetables, delicate dumplings, and a light chicken broth filled the table with the comforting aroma of fresh food.

Lian An sat beside the table, wrapped in a soft cloak to keep the winter chill away. Though her health had greatly improved over the past few days, the healer still insisted she avoid cold air and heavy movement.

Across from her sat the Emperor.

He had come to her courtyard again for lunch.

Recently, this had quietly become a daily habit.

The palace servants had noticed it too, though none dared to speak about it openly.

The Emperor picked up his chopsticks and glanced toward Lian An.

"You should eat more."

Lian An raised an eyebrow.

"I already am."

He looked at the bowl in front of her.

"You barely touched the soup."

She sighed.

"The healer makes me drink bitter medicine every few hours. I'm not hungry."

The Emperor smirked slightly.

"That medicine saved your life."

Lian An made a face.

"It still tastes terrible."

The Emperor chuckled quietly and finally began eating.

For a few moments, the two of them ate in comfortable silence.

The courtyard was calm, the sound of wind brushing against the trees filling the quiet space.

After a moment, the Emperor spoke again.

"Are the wedding preparations finished?"

Lian An looked up from her bowl.

"For my cousin?"

"Yes."

The Emperor set his chopsticks down.

"I heard the Duke family has already begun preparing the ceremony."

Lian An nodded.

"Most of the preparations are complete."

Her voice carried a hint of excitement.

"My aunt is very strict about ceremonies."

"She has probably inspected every detail ten times already."

The Emperor raised an eyebrow.

"That sounds exhausting."

Lian An laughed softly.

"It is."

"But weddings are important."

She paused before continuing.

"And this one is especially important."

The Emperor looked at her carefully.

"Because the bride is from the Chen family?"

Lian An nodded.

"Yes."

She picked up a dumpling and spoke thoughtfully.

"My cousin and Chen Ruyi have liked each other for a long time."

The Emperor seemed slightly surprised.

"I didn't know that."

"It was kept quiet."

Lian An replied.

"Their families would not have agreed easily."

The Emperor nodded slowly.

"That makes sense."

He thought for a moment before asking,

"Your family must be very busy."

"They are."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"My sister is probably running around the Duke residence right now helping prepare decorations."

"And my cousin..."

She chuckled softly.

"He's probably being lectured about wedding etiquette."

The Emperor smirked.

"He deserves it."

Lian An raised an eyebrow.

"You sound very unsympathetic."

The Emperor shrugged.

"Marriage is a serious matter."

"Men should suffer a little before it."

Lian An laughed.

"That's a strange philosophy."

The Emperor looked at her thoughtfully.

"Perhaps."

He picked up his tea cup and took a sip.

Then he asked casually,

"Will you attend the ceremony?"

Lian An blinked.

"Of course."

"It's my cousin's wedding."

The Emperor nodded.

"I expected as much."

He paused slightly before continuing.

"I will attend as well."

Lian An looked surprised.

"You will?"

The Emperor set the tea cup down calmly.

"The marriage involves two noble families connected to the palace."

"It would be strange if I did not appear."

Lian An thought about it and nodded.

"That's true."

The Emperor looked at her again.

"You should not overexert yourself."

"The healer said you still need rest."

Lian An sighed.

"You sound exactly like my aunt."

The Emperor smirked slightly.

"That means I'm being sensible."

Lian An rolled her eyes.

"I am not fragile."

The Emperor's expression softened slightly.

"You almost died."

The words hung in the air.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Lian An lowered her gaze.

"...I know."

The Emperor watched her quietly.

Then he spoke in a calmer tone.

"That is why you should take care of yourself."

Lian An nodded slowly.

"I will."

The tension faded slightly as they returned to eating.

Outside the chamber, the courtyard remained peaceful.

Neither of them noticed that beyond the walls of the palace, unseen dangers were slowly beginning to move again.

But for this moment—

The quiet lunch in the Empress's courtyard felt almost normal.