

Ghost 245

Chapter 245: an alliance sealed

The morning sun rose bright over the Duke residence, its golden light reflecting off red lanterns and silk banners that had already begun to decorate the courtyard.

Today was not just another day of preparation.

Today—

The Chen family would arrive.

Inside the main hall, servants moved swiftly, arranging tea sets, placing cushions, and ensuring every detail reflected dignity and respect.

At the center of the hall sat Old Madam Lian Xiu, her posture upright, her expression calm but observant.

Beside her sat Duke Lian Zheng and his wife Lady Lian Meiyu.

On the other side were Lian Cheng and Madam Su Yan, the Empress's parents.

Standing slightly to the side was Lian Rou, dressed neatly, though his expression showed faint nervousness.

Lian An and her sister Lian Hua stood nearby, watching quietly.

Lian Hua leaned closer and whispered,

"Do you think they'll be polite?"

Lian An smiled faintly.

"They have to be."

Before Lian Hua could respond, a servant hurried in.

"Master, the Chen family has arrived."

The entire hall grew still.

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"Invite them in."

Moments later—

Chen Guowei entered the hall.

Beside him walked his wife, Madam Zhao Lifen, dressed in elegant dark green silk.

Behind them followed servants carrying boxes of gifts—fine silk, tea leaves, jewelry, and ceremonial items.

Chen Guowei stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Greetings, Duke."

Duke Lian Zheng stood up.

"Minister Chen."

The two men exchanged a formal nod.

Madam Zhao Lifan bowed gracefully.

"Greetings, Old Madam, Duchess."

Old Madam Lian Xiu nodded slightly.

"Sit."

Everyone took their seats.

For a moment, the atmosphere was formal and restrained.

Then tea was served.

The soft sound of cups being placed on the table filled the silence.

Chen Guowei spoke first.

"I came today to formally confirm the marriage between our families."

His voice was steady.

Behind him, the servants opened the gift boxes one by one.

Fine silk.

Gold ornaments.

Rare tea.

Jewelry.

Each item carefully selected.

Madam Zhao Lifan spoke gently,

"These are small tokens of sincerity."

Lady Lian Meiyu smiled politely.

"You are too kind."

Old Madam Lian Xiu observed everything carefully before speaking.

"This marriage was not easily agreed upon."

Her voice carried authority.

Chen Guowei nodded.

"I understand."

Lian Cheng watched quietly, his expression thoughtful.

Duke Lian Zheng spoke calmly.

"You chose to proceed despite pressure from the palace."

Chen Guowei did not deny it.

"Yes."

Old Madam Lian Xiu's gaze sharpened.

"You are aware of the consequences."

Chen Guowei met her gaze without hesitation.

"I am."

The room fell silent for a moment.

Then Madam Zhao Lifen spoke softly,

"My daughter... Chen Ruyi..."

"She respects this marriage deeply."

Lian Rou, who had been silent until now, spoke respectfully,

"I will take good care of her."

Madam Zhao Lifan looked at him and nodded, her eyes softening slightly.

"I believe you will."

Lian Hua leaned slightly toward Lian An and whispered,

"He looks so serious."

Lian An smiled faintly.

"He should be."

Meanwhile, the conversation continued.

Lady Lian Meiyu asked,

"When will the bride arrive?"

Chen Guowei replied,

"Tomorrow morning."

"She is already prepared."

Old Madam Lian Xiu nodded.

"Good."

She then looked directly at Chen Guowei.

"You admire my grandson."

Chen Guowei answered calmly,

"Yes."

Old Madam Lian Xiu continued,

"Many would not choose this alliance."

Chen Guowei replied without hesitation,

"I did not choose based on politics."

"I chose based on character."

The words settled heavily in the room.

Duke Lian Zheng nodded slowly.

"That is rare."

Madam Su Yan smiled gently.

"It is also wise."

The atmosphere softened slightly.

Tea was refilled.

The tension eased.

Lian Hua finally moved closer, unable to stay quiet any longer.

"Aunt Zhao..."

She spoke brightly.

"I've heard Chen Ruyi is very beautiful."

Madam Zhao Lifan smiled.

"She is gentle and kind."

Lian Hua nodded enthusiastically.

"I want to meet her soon!"

Lian Rou coughed lightly.

"You'll meet her tomorrow."

Lian Hua grinned.

"I'm excited!"

Lian An watched quietly.

Her eyes moved between both families.

The Duke family.

The Chen family.

Two sides that once stood opposed.

Now sitting together.

Talking calmly.

Sharing tea.

It felt unreal.

But also—

Right.

After some time, Duke Lian Zheng stood.

"This marriage is agreed."

He looked at Chen Guowei.

"From today onward..."

"Our families are connected."

Chen Guowei stood as well.

"Yes."

The two men faced each other.

Then—

They bowed slightly.

A formal acknowledgment.

An agreement sealed not just with words—

But with intent.

Behind them, the families watched quietly.

Old Madam Lian Xiu closed her eyes briefly.

"...It is done."

Lian Hua clapped softly, unable to hold back her excitement.

"It's official!"

Everyone laughed lightly.

Even Chen Guowei allowed a small smile to appear.

Madam Zhao Lifan looked relieved.

Lian Rou exhaled slowly.

And Lian An—

She watched everything with a quiet smile.

Because in that moment—

Despite the politics...

Despite the dangers...

Despite everything happening in the palace—

This was something good.

Something pure.

A marriage built not on power—

But on choice.

And for now—

That was enough.

The Banquet Decision

The discussion inside the Duke residence hall had slowly shifted from formal greetings to planning.

Tea had been refilled twice.

The atmosphere, once tense, had softened into something more cooperative.

At the center of the hall, Duke Lian Zheng sat upright, his fingers resting lightly on the table as he observed both families.

Then, after a moment of silence, he spoke.

"The wedding ceremony will proceed as planned."

Everyone nodded.

But then he added,

"However... before the wedding, I will host a banquet in four days."

The room grew attentive.

Lian Hua leaned forward immediately.

"A banquet?"

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"Yes."

"It will be a formal announcement of the marriage between our two families."

Old Madam Lian Xiu approved instantly.

"That is appropriate."

Chen Guowei also nodded slowly.

"Yes. It will make the alliance known properly."

Madam Zhao Lifan smiled faintly.

"That is a good arrangement."

But Duke Lian Zheng was not finished.

He leaned back slightly and continued,

"As for the banquet arrangements..."

His gaze shifted briefly toward Lian An.

"...I have already decided something."

Everyone followed his gaze.

Lian An blinked.

"Me?"

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"Yes."

He spoke clearly.

"For the banquet food..."

"I will hire the restaurant chain owned by the Empress."

Silence.

For a moment—

No one spoke.

Then—

Chen Guowei's expression changed.

"...The Whisper Bowl?"

Lian Hua grinned proudly.

"Yes!"

"That's Jiejie's restaurant!"

Madam Zhao Lifan looked slightly surprised.

"I have heard about it..."

She turned toward Lian An.

"It is very famous."

Chen Guowei spoke slowly,

"It spread across multiple towns in just a short time."

His eyes held clear acknowledgment.

"That is not easy."

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"That is why I chose it."

He continued,

"The food is unique."

"The preparation is clean."

"And the staff..."

He paused slightly.

"...are well-trained."

Lian Hua nodded excitedly.

"They're all so polite!"

"And they speak so nicely!"

Madam Su Yan smiled.

"They are also educated."

Lian Cheng added calmly,

"That is what makes it different from other establishments."

Chen Guowei leaned back slightly, still processing.

"I heard..."

He spoke slowly.

"...that even former slaves and workers there are trained to read and write."

Lian An nodded.

"Yes."

"They are taught discipline, behavior, and skills."

Madam Zhao Lifan looked impressed.

"That is rare."

Duke Lian Zheng continued,

"The staff are well-dressed."

"They behave with dignity."

"And they treat every guest with respect."

He looked directly at Chen Guowei.

"For a banquet that represents both our families..."

"...this is the best choice."

Chen Guowei did not argue.

Instead, he nodded slowly.

"...It is a wise decision."

But his gaze shifted toward Lian An again.

There was something new in his expression now.

Recognition.

Because he understood clearly—

This was not just a restaurant.

This was influence.

Lian Hua whispered to Lian An,

"See? Everyone knows about your restaurant!"

Lian An smiled faintly.

"It's not just mine."

"But yes... I'm proud of it."

Old Madam Lian Xiu spoke calmly,

"It also reflects well on our family."

Madam Su Yan added gently,

"And it shows her capability."

Duke Lian Zheng nodded.

"Yes."

Then he looked at Lian An directly.

"You will oversee the arrangements."

Lian An blinked.

"Me?"

"Yes."

He spoke firmly.

"This is your work."

"You understand it best."

Lian An thought for a moment.

Then nodded.

"...Alright."

"I'll handle it."

Lian Hua clapped happily.

"This banquet will be amazing!"

Lian Rou, who had been silent, finally spoke,

"At least I'll eat well before marriage."

Everyone laughed.

Even Chen Guowei allowed a small smile.

Madam Zhao Lifan nodded approvingly.

"I look forward to it."

The conversation continued, now filled with more ease than before.

Plans were discussed.

Guest lists.

Seating arrangements.

Decorations.

But one thing had become clear to everyone in that room—

The Empress was no longer just a political figure in the palace.

She had created something of her own.

Something powerful.

Something respected.

And now—

That influence would be displayed openly at the banquet.

As the meeting slowly came to an end, Lian An sat quietly, listening.

Her heart felt steady.

Because for the first time—

Her two worlds were beginning to connect.

The palace.

And her own creation.

And soon—

Everyone would see it.