

Ghost 254

Chapter 254: Hidden Bonds and Quiet Changes

The morning sun rose gently over the capital.

But the palace was already awake long before dawn.

—

Servants moved swiftly.

Carriages were prepared.

Guards lined the gates.

—

Because today—

The Dowager Empress, the Emperor, and Lady Chen were leaving the palace.

—

Destination—

The Chen Residence.

—

Inside the grand carriage—

The atmosphere was calm.

Too calm.

—

The Dowager Empress sat upright, composed as always.

Lady Chen sat beside her, elegant and attentive.

—

The Emperor sat across from them.

Silent.

—

His eyes half-lowered.

But his thoughts—

Far away.

—

Back in the Duke residence.

Back in that room.

—

Back to—

Her.

—

The soft warmth of her presence.

The faint scent of her hair.

The moment she froze when he kissed her forehead.

—

"...I'll wait..."

—

A faint smile almost appeared on his lips.

—

"Your Majesty?"

—

Lady Chen's voice pulled him back.

—

He blinked slightly.

"Yes?"

—

She studied him carefully.

"...Did you not sleep well?"

—

The Dowager Empress also looked at him now.

—

He straightened slightly.

"...Court matters."

—

"Nothing more."

—

His tone was steady.

Controlled.

—

But inside—

It wasn't true.

—

Lady Chen nodded slowly.

Though her eyes lingered.

—

Something felt...

Different.

—

The carriage continued forward.

—

Soon—

They arrived.

—

The Chen Residence stood tall and grand.

—

The main courtyard gates opened immediately.

Servants lined up on both sides.

—

"Welcome, Dowager Empress!"

"Welcome, Your Majesty!"

—

They bowed deeply.

—

The Dowager Empress stepped out first.

Followed by Lady Chen.

Then—

The Emperor.

—

Inside the main courtyard—

Several figures were already waiting.

—

Chen Guowei (Lady Chen's father)

His younger brother

And—

At the center—

An elderly woman.

—

Lady Chen's grandmother.

—

The moment she saw the Dowager Empress—

Her eyes widened.

—

Then—

Without hesitation—

She stepped forward quickly.

—

"Sister!"

—

The Dowager Empress's composed expression broke.

—

A rare smile appeared.

"...You still call me that."

—

The old lady laughed.

"And you still pretend to be cold."

—

Then—

They embraced.

—

Warmly.

Naturally.

—

Not like royalty.

—

But like family.

—

Everyone around—

Was stunned.

—

Servants.

Family members.

Even Chen Guowei himself.

—

They had never seen this before.

—

The Dowager Empress—

So close.

So affectionate.

—

Only the Emperor—

Remained calm.

—

Because he knew.

—

From childhood—

He had seen it.

—

His mother's true trust.

Her hidden alliances.

—

The Chen family—

Was not just political.

—

It was personal.

—

The embrace ended.

—

The grandmother held the Dowager Empress's hands.

"You've become thinner."

—

"And you've become more dramatic," the Dowager replied.

—

They both laughed.

—

Lady Chen smiled gently at the scene.

—

Everything felt warm.

Familiar.

—

But—

Her eyes shifted.

Toward the Emperor.

—

He stood quietly.

Watching.

—

But his gaze—

Was distant.

—

"...Still thinking about something..."

—

She stepped closer.

Standing beside him.

—

"...Your Majesty."

—

He turned slightly.

—

She lowered her voice.

"...Are you really alright?"

—

This time—

She was more certain.

—

Something had changed.

—

The Emperor paused.

—

For a moment—

Her question overlapped with something else.

—

"...For the day you trust me..."

—

He remembered her face.

Her flustered expression.

Her red cheeks.

—

His fingers tightened slightly behind his back.

—

"...I am fine."

—

His tone was calm.

But softer.

—

Lady Chen noticed.

—

A subtle change.

—

Not distance.

—

But—

Shift.

—

She smiled lightly.

"...That is good."

—

But inside—

A small unease formed.

—

Meanwhile—

The Dowager Empress and the grandmother had already begun talking.

—

"You never visit anymore."

—

"And you never invite properly."

—

"You still blame me?"

—

"Of course."

—

They laughed again.

—

The atmosphere grew lively.

—

Chen Guowei stepped forward respectfully.

"Please, come inside."

—

They all moved toward the main hall.

—

Servants rushed to prepare tea and snacks.

—

The main courtyard was filled with quiet admiration.

—

Whispers spread.

—

"They are so close..."

"I didn't know..."

—

The Emperor walked behind them.

—

But his thoughts—

Still lingered elsewhere.

—

Last night.

—

Her silence.

Her hesitation.

—

But also—

Her trust.

—

Even if small.

Even if fragile.

—

It was there.

—

And for the first time—

He didn't feel rushed.

—

Didn't feel the need to control.

—

He just wanted—

To protect it.

—

Grow it.

—

Beside him—

Lady Chen walked gracefully.

—

Perfect.

As always.

—

But her gaze—

Slightly sharper now.

—

Observing.

Measuring.

—

Because something inside her—

Whispered softly—

—

"...He is changing."

—

And she didn't know—

If she liked it.

—

Or feared it.

—

Inside the hall—

Tea was served.

Voices rose.

Laughter returned.

—

But beneath it all—

Currents shifted.

—

Unseen.

Unspoken.

—

Because while the past bonds grew stronger—

—

A new bond—

Was quietly forming somewhere else.

—

And soon—

Everyone would feel it.

Smiles That Hide Blades

The Chen residence, once known for its rigid discipline and quiet authority, was unusually lively that afternoon.

Servants moved quickly through the grand halls, arranging tea sets, incense burners, and silk cushions. The air carried the faint fragrance of sandalwood, mixed with something heavier—anticipation.

No one said it aloud.

But everyone knew—

Today's visit was not simple.

—

At the entrance, a line of servants stood in perfect order.

Heads bowed.

Eyes lowered.

—

The moment the announcement echoed—

"Dowager has arrived!"

—the entire residence stilled.

—

Chen Guowei, the head of the Chen family, stepped forward immediately.

His expression was calm.

But his back felt heavier than usual.

—

The gates opened.

—

The Dowager entered.

Dignified.

Cold.

Unapproachable.

—

Behind her, attendants followed like shadows.

—

Chen Guowei lowered his head deeply.

"This humble servant greets Dowager."

—

The rest of the family followed.

Voices echoed in unison.

—

The Dowager didn't respond immediately.

—

Her gaze swept across the courtyard.

Slow.

Sharp.

Judging.

—

Only after a long pause did she step forward.

"You may rise."

—

The atmosphere remained tight.

—

She walked inside without waiting.

As if she owned the place.

—

Inside the main hall—

Everyone took their seats.

Carefully.

According to hierarchy.

—

The Dowager sat at the highest position.

Naturally.

—

Chen Guowei stood slightly to the side.

Respectful.

Controlled.

—

Tea was served.

Silence lingered.

—

Then—

The Dowager spoke.

"I have heard."

—

Her tone was flat.

Emotionless.

—

"About the marriage."

—

Every word felt like a stone dropping in water.

—

Chen Guowei lowered his head slightly.

"Yes."

—

"I do not like it."

—

The words came directly.

Without hesitation.

—

The room froze.

—

Chen Ruyi, seated quietly beside her mother, felt her fingers tighten over her sleeves.

—

But before anyone could react—

The Dowager continued.

"...But I am not opposing it."

—

That—

Surprised everyone.

—

"Because it is already decided."

—

Her gaze sharpened.

"And once something is decided—"

"It should not be changed lightly."

—

A strange silence followed.

—

Then—

A soft laugh broke it.

—

The Grandmother of the Chen family.

Old.

Experienced.

Sharp in her own way.

—

"I also do not like it," she said calmly.

—

Her tone carried neither fear nor submission.

—

"But it is fixed."

—

She looked at the Dowager.

"Nothing can be changed now."

—

For a moment—

The air between the two elder women tightened.

—

Two forces.

Different.

But equally strong.

—

Then—

Before the tension could settle—

A voice interrupted.

—

Light.

Mocking.

—

"Of course nothing can be changed."

—

All eyes turned.

—

It was a distant cousin of the Chen family.

A young man.

With arrogance poorly hidden beneath his smile.

—

He leaned slightly forward.

"As expected... when the head of the family grows old..."

—

"...his judgment becomes muddled."

—

Silence.

—

"...He can no longer distinguish right from wrong."

—

The words fell like poison.

—

Then—

He smiled.

—

And some people—

Laughed.

—

Not loudly.

Not openly.

—

But enough.

—

Enough to humiliate.

—

Chen Guowei didn't move.

—

He didn't react.

—

He simply lowered his head slightly.

—

Accepted it.

—

As if used to it.

—

As if—

This wasn't new.

—

Chen Ruyi's chest tightened.

—

Her fingers curled harder.

—

Her gaze shifted toward her father.

—

She saw it.

—

The stillness.

The silence.

The weight he carried.

—

"...Father..."

—

But she said nothing.

—

Because she understood.

—

This was not the place.

—

Not the moment.

—

The Grandmother chuckled again.

—

"It is true."

—

Her tone carried faint amusement.

—

"But let us not forget—"

—

Her gaze turned toward the Dowager.

—

"...It is because of Dowager's marriage into the imperial family..."

"...and giving birth to the Emperor..."

—

"That our Chen family rose to such heights."

—

The room shifted again.

—

Power.

Status.

Influence.

—

All tied to that one fact.

—

The Dowager remained calm.

—

But her chin lifted slightly.

—

Acknowledgment.

—

The Grandmother continued.

"And now—"

—

She smiled faintly.

—

"With Lady Chen in the palace..."

—

"Our family continues to prosper."

—

Several people nodded.

—

Agreement.

Pride.

—

Chen Ruyi looked down.

—

Her heart felt heavier.

—

Because she knew—

These words weren't praise.

—

They were chains.

—

Chains tying people to power.

—

And sacrificing others in return.

—

Beside her—

Her mother finally spoke.

—

Gentle.

Measured.

—

"Dowager..."

—

"How is Lady Chen?"

—

A pause.

—

"...How is her relationship with His Majesty?"

—

The question was soft.

—

But loaded.

—

The Dowager's gaze shifted slightly.

—

Then—

She answered.

"...It is good."

—

Short.

Simple.

—

Perfect.

—

But—

Not convincing.

—

Because—

There was a pause before she spoke.

—

And Chen Ruyi's mother noticed.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly under her sleeves.

—

She didn't expose it.

—

Didn't question further.

—

Because she understood—

Now was not the time.

—

Not when the family itself—

Was unstable.

—

Because of—

This marriage.

—

The marriage everyone in the room pretended to accept.

—

But no one truly supported.

—

Chen Ruyi lowered her gaze further.

—

Her heart was restless.

—

Because in this room—

She could clearly see—

—

No one cared about happiness.

—

Only—

Power.

Status.

Control.

—

Her eyes flickered once—

Toward her father.

—

Still silent.

Still enduring.

—

Then—

Toward the Dowager.

—

Cold.

Observing.

Calculating.

—

And finally—

Toward the people laughing earlier.

—

Small.

Cruel.

—

Her lips pressed together.

—

"...This place..."

—

"...is suffocating."

—

But she said nothing.

—

Because she couldn't.

—

Not yet.

—

The Dowager placed her teacup down slowly.

—

Her voice echoed again.

—

"This marriage..."

—

"...should proceed smoothly."

—

Her gaze lingered on Chen Guowei.

—

A warning.

—

A reminder.

—

"You understand that, don't you?"

—

Chen Guowei bowed his head deeply.

—

"...Yes."

—

And with that—

The conversation ended.

—

But the tension—

Remained.

—

Because beneath polite words—

And controlled smiles—

—

A storm was building.

—

One that would not stay silent—

For long.