

## **Ghost 261**

### Chapter 261: Smiles Over Tea, Shadows Beneath Words

The next morning, the Duke residence stirred early.

The air carried a strange mix of excitement and tension.

Today was not just any visit—

It was the first formal meeting between both families after the marriage agreement.

—

Inside the main hall—

Servants moved swiftly, arranging gifts, tea sets, and silk cushions.

The Duchess supervised everything personally.

"No mistakes," she said calmly.

"This meeting will decide many things."

—

The Aunt adjusted her sleeves nervously.

"They won't make things difficult... right?"

—

The Grandmother gave a faint smile.

"That depends on them."

—

Nearby—

The Empress stood with her younger sister, Lian Hua.

"Why do I feel like a battle is about to happen?" Lian Hua whispered.

—

The Empress sighed.

"Because it is."

—

Lian Hua grinned.

"Good. I like battles."

—

"You're not fighting anyone."

—

"Emotionally, I am."

—

The Empress shook her head helplessly.

—

Soon—

The announcement came.

"The Chen family has arrived."

—

The atmosphere instantly shifted.

—

Everyone straightened.

Expressions turned composed.

Voices softened.

—

The doors opened.

—

Chen Guowei's wife entered first.

Elegant.

Graceful.

But her eyes—

Sharp.

Observing.

—

Behind her—

Chen Ruyi's Grandmother followed.

Slow.

But with authority.

—

Then—

Chen Ruyi herself.

Calm.

Gentle.

But slightly nervous.

—

The moment their gazes met—

The Empress noticed it.

—

That subtle tension.

—

Not hostility from everyone—

But from specific people.

—

Greetings were exchanged.

Formal.

Polite.

Measured.

—

"Welcome," the Duchess said with a smile.

—

"Thank you," Chen Ruyi's mother replied.

—

But her gaze—

Briefly lingered—

On the Empress.

—

Cold.

—

Almost—

Judging.

—

The Empress noticed.

But said nothing.

—

They all sat.

Tea was served.

—

For a moment—

Only the sound of pouring tea filled the space.

—

Then—

Chen Ruyi's grandmother spoke.

"So... this is the Empress."

—

Her tone was calm.

But her eyes—

Were not.

—

The room stilled slightly.

—

The Empress smiled politely.

"Yes."

—

A pause.

—

Then—

"I've heard a lot about you."

—

Not praise.

Not warmth.

—

Just—

A statement.

—

The Aunt shifted uncomfortably.

—

The Duchess intervened smoothly.

"Our daughter has worked hard to maintain her position."

—

Chen Ruyi's mother smiled faintly.

"Is that so?"

—

Another pause.

—

Then—

Her gaze moved again.

—

"To open restaurants... and mingle with commoners."

—

The words were polite.

But the meaning—

Was not.

—

The Empress remained calm.

—

"I believe understanding people strengthens a ruler's perspective."

—

The Grandmother beside her nodded approvingly.

"Well said."

—

But—

Chen Ruyi's grandmother didn't smile.

—

Instead—

She leaned slightly forward.

"In our time..."

"Royal women stayed within limits."

—

Silence.

—

The tension sharpened.

—

Lian Hua frowned immediately.

—

But before she could speak—

The Empress gently placed her hand over hers.

Stopping her.

—

Then she replied calmly.

"Times change."

—

"And so do responsibilities."

—

A direct answer.

—

The air shifted again.

—

Chen Ruyi glanced between them.

Clearly uncomfortable.

—

She spoke softly.

"Grandmother..."

—

But the older woman waved her off.

—

Then—

Her gaze shifted—

To the Aunt.

—

"And you..."

—

The Aunt stiffened slightly.

—

"You raised her like this?"

—

The question—

Was not innocent.

—

The Aunt forced a polite smile.

"We raised her to survive."

—

"And to stand strong."

—

The Grandmother from the Duke side added,

"And to think for herself."

—

A subtle counter.

—

Chen Ruyi's mother took a sip of tea.

Then spoke calmly.

"Strength is good."

—

"But control is better."

—

Another hidden remark.

—

Lian Hua couldn't hold back this time.

"So being weak and quiet is better?"

—

"Lian Hua," the Duchess warned softly.

—

But the damage was done.

—

Chen Ruyi's grandmother looked at her.

"Children should not interrupt elders."

—

Lian Hua leaned back.

"But elders should not insult others."

—

The tension peaked.

—

The Empress sighed softly.

Then spoke gently,

"Let's not turn this meeting into conflict."

—

Her voice—

Calm.

Firm.

—

Everyone paused.

—

Then—

Chen Ruyi finally spoke.

"I came here to build a relationship."

—

Her voice was soft—

But sincere.

—

She looked at the Empress.

"I respect you."

—

A clear statement.

—

That shifted everything.

—

The Empress smiled.

"And I welcome you."

—

For the first time—

Warmth appeared.

—

Even Chen Ruyi's mother's expression softened slightly.

—

The Grandmother from Chen side didn't speak further.

But her gaze—

Still held something.

—

Something unresolved.

—

—

Later—

They moved to the restaurant.

—

The Whisper Bowl.

—

The moment they entered—

The atmosphere changed.

—

The aroma of food.

The organized staff.

The lively yet disciplined environment.

—

Chen Ruyi's mother paused.

"...Impressive."

—

Even her grandmother looked around carefully.

—

The Empress noticed.

But said nothing.

—

They were seated.

—

Dishes were served.

—

Carefully prepared.

Beautifully presented.

—

Chen Ruyi took a bite.

Her eyes widened slightly.

"...It's delicious."

—

Her mother followed.

—

Then paused.

—

"...This is..."

—

Unexpected.

—

The Duchess smiled.

"Our daughter's work."

—

For the first time—

Genuine surprise appeared.

—

The tension softened slightly.

—

But not completely.

—

Because beneath the smiles—

There were still questions.

Still doubts.

Still pride.

—

And still—

Unspoken competition.

—

—

As the meal continued—

Conversations became lighter.

But the undercurrent remained.

—

The Empress watched quietly.

—

She understood now.

—

This marriage—

Was not just about love.

—

It was about families.

Power.

Pride.

—

And acceptance.

—

And not everyone—

Was ready to accept her.

—

Not yet.

—

But she didn't mind.

—

Because this time—

She wasn't alone.

—

Her family stood with her.

—

And slowly—

Even resistance—

Would break.

—

One moment at a time.

The Table Where Peace Was Chosen

The soft clinking of porcelain and the warm fragrance of freshly prepared dishes filled The Whisper Bowl.

Yet beneath that warmth—

There was still tension.

Unspoken.

Lingering.

Like a thread that refused to break.

—

The Empress noticed it clearly.

Every glance.

Every pause.

Every careful word.

—

This was not just a meal.

—

It was a negotiation.

A test.

A quiet battlefield wrapped in courtesy.

—

The Duke's mother—Grandmother Lian—watched everything silently.

Her sharp eyes missed nothing.

Not Chen Ruyi's nervous glances.

Not her mother's restrained pride.

Not the Empress's calm composure.

—

And finally—

She decided.

Enough.

—

She gently placed her cup down.

The soft sound drew attention.

—

Then she spoke.

Her voice steady.

Clear.

Holding authority that no one could ignore.

—

"We are not here to measure pride."

—

The room stilled.

—

Her gaze moved across the table—

From the Chen family—

To her own.

—

"We are here for a marriage."

—

A pause.

—

"A union."

—

"And a future."

—

Her words settled like weight.

Heavy.

Grounding.

—

She leaned slightly forward.

—

"So let us not bring old thoughts, old judgments, or unnecessary animosity into this."

—

Silence followed.

—

Even Chen Ruyi's grandmother—

Who had been the most rigid—

Did not interrupt.

—

Grandmother Lian continued,

"If we begin this relationship with tension..."

"...then what kind of future are we building for them?"

—

Her gaze shifted—

Toward Lian Rou and Chen Ruyi.

—

The two sat quietly.

Listening.

—

"...Marriage is not a battlefield," she added softly.

—

"It is a responsibility."

—

"And both families must support it."

—

The words were simple.

But undeniable.

—

Chen Ruyi's mother slowly placed her cup down.

Her expression changed.

—

Less sharp.

More thoughtful.

—

"...You are right," she said after a pause.

—

That single sentence—

Shifted the entire atmosphere.

—

Even Chen Ruyi looked surprised.

—

Her grandmother remained silent—

But she did not object.

—

That itself—

Was agreement.

—

The Duchess smiled gently.

"I'm glad we understand each other."

—

The Aunt relaxed slightly.

—

Lian Hua leaned toward the Empress and whispered,

"...She just ended the war."

—

The Empress hid a small smile.

—

"Yes," she murmured back.

—

"And she did it without raising her voice."

—

—

With that—

The conversation changed.

—

Completely.

—

No more hidden remarks.

No more sharp edges.

—

Now—

They spoke of arrangements.

—

"Since the banquet is in four days," the Duke began,

"We should finalize the ceremony structure."

—

Chen Ruyi's mother nodded.

"Yes."

—

"We prefer a traditional engagement announcement first."

—

The Duchess agreed.

"That is appropriate."

—

The Aunt added,

"Followed by the family blessing ceremony."

—

"And gift exchange," Chen Ruyi's grandmother finally spoke again.

—

Her voice still firm—

But no longer hostile.

—

"Of course," the Duke replied.

—

Then—

Attention shifted—

Toward the Empress.

—

Because one thing—

Had already been decided.

—

The food.

—

The Duke smiled.

"The banquet catering will be handled by The Whisper Bowl."

—

Chen Ruyi's mother looked at him.

"You trust them that much?"

—

The Duke didn't hesitate.

"I trust my daughter."

—

A direct answer.

—

Chen Ruyi glanced at the Empress.

Her eyes held admiration now.

—

"...I would like that," she said softly.

—

Her mother didn't argue.

—

Instead—

She nodded slowly.

"...Then we will proceed with it."

—

—

Next—

The discussion turned to guest arrangements.

—

"How many from your side?" the Duchess asked.

—

"Close relatives and important connections only," Chen Ruyi's mother replied.

—

"We prefer a controlled gathering."

—

"Agreed," the Duke said.

—

Then—

Decorations.

—

"Simple elegance," the Aunt suggested.

—

"No excessive display."

—

Chen Ruyi smiled slightly.

"I prefer that."

—

The Empress added,

"We can incorporate neutral tones with minimal gold accents."

—

Everyone looked at her.

—

She continued calmly,

"It will highlight both families equally without overshadowing either."

—

A thoughtful suggestion.

—

Chen Ruyi's mother nodded.

"That is... well considered."

—

Even her grandmother gave a faint approving hum.

—

—

Then—

Gifts.

—

"Traditional silk, jewelry, and symbolic items," the Duchess listed.

—

"We will prepare accordingly," Chen Ruyi's mother replied.

—

"And we will ensure equal exchange."

—

No superiority.

No imbalance.

—

Just—

Respect.

—

—

As the discussions continued—

The earlier tension faded completely.

—

Now—

There was structure.

Understanding.

—

And most importantly—

Mutual acceptance.

—

—

At one point—

Chen Ruyi quietly leaned toward the Empress.

"...Thank you."

—

The Empress looked at her.

"For what?"

—

"For making this easier."

—

The Empress shook her head slightly.

"This is your moment."

—

"I'm just helping."

—

Chen Ruyi smiled.

"...Still."

—

—

Meanwhile—

Lian Hua whispered again,

"I like her."

—

The Empress chuckled softly.

—

"Yes."

—

"So do I."

—

—

After finalizing all arrangements—

The Duke leaned back slightly.

"It seems everything is settled."

—

Chen Ruyi's mother nodded.

"Yes."

—

Then she looked at the Empress.

—

This time—

Her gaze was different.

—

No longer judging.

—

But measuring—

With a hint of respect.

—

"You've done well."

—

Simple words.

—

But meaningful.

—

The Empress inclined her head slightly.

"Thank you."

—

—

Chen Ruyi's grandmother finally spoke again.

"...You are not what I expected."

—

The room quieted slightly.

—

The Empress met her gaze calmly.

—

"And is that a good thing?"

—

A pause.

—

Then—

The older woman gave a faint smile.

"...We will see."

—

—

But this time—

There was no hostility in it.

—

Only curiosity.

—

—

Soon—

The meeting came to an end.

—

Chairs moved.

Servants approached.

—

The Chen family stood.

—

"It was a productive discussion," Chen Ruyi's mother said.

—

"We will prepare accordingly."

—

The Duchess smiled.

"We look forward to it."

—

Chen Ruyi stepped forward.

—

She looked at Lian Rou.

—

A quiet understanding passed between them.

—

Then she turned—

To the Empress.

—

"I'll see you soon."

—

"Yes," the Empress replied.

—

"Very soon."

—

—

Farewells were exchanged.

—

Polite.

But warmer than before.

—

—

As the Chen family left—

The room felt lighter.

—

Lian Hua immediately exhaled loudly.

"I survived."

—

The Aunt laughed.

"So did we."

—

The Duke smiled slightly.

"That went better than expected."

—

The Duchess nodded.

"Much better."

—

—

The Empress stood quietly.

—

Looking at the doorway—

Where the Chen family had just exited.

—

Her thoughts were calm.

—

This was only the beginning.

—

Not everything was resolved.

—

But something important—

Had changed.

—

Respect had begun.

—

And once that exists—

Acceptance follows.

—

—

Beside her—

The Emperor stood silently.

Watching her.

—

He didn't speak.

—

But his gaze—

Held quiet pride.

—

—

And for the first time—

This union—

Between two powerful families—

Did not feel like a clash.

—

But the start—

Of something stable.

—

Something lasting.

—

Something—

That could grow.

—

Slowly.

—

One step at a time.