

## **Ghost 207**

Chapter 207: sweet tea poison word

Lady Chen's courtyard was unusually quiet.

The festival lanterns outside were still glowing faintly, but inside her residence, the warmth felt hollow. Servants moved lightly, careful not to disturb her. They all knew their mistress's mood had soured since the Emperor walked through the festival wearing the Empress's scarf.

Lady Chen sat by the window, staring at the night sky. The scarf scene replayed in her mind again and again.

He wore her scarf.

In public.

Without shame.

Her fingers tightened around the porcelain cup in her hand.

For so long, she had believed she was the one closest to him.

Childhood memories.

Years of companionship.

Shared laughter.

Shared responsibilities.

She was always there when he was tired.

Always gentle when he was angry.

Always understanding when he was distant.

And yet...

In the end, he chose to wear another woman's clumsy scarf.

Her chest felt heavy.

Just then, soft footsteps approached.

"Reporting, Concubine Shin Gu seeks an audience."

Lady Chen's lashes fluttered.

Shin Gu?

She turned her head.

"Let her in."

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A Gentle Smile

Shin Gu entered with slow, graceful steps. Her expression was mild, her eyes lowered in respect.

"Greetings, Sister Chen," she said softly.

Lady Chen forced a polite smile.

"Sister Shin, what brings you here so late?"

Shin Gu glanced at her pale face and sighed gently.

"I heard that Sister Chen's mood was not well tonight. I worried you might be lonely."

Lady Chen was silent for a moment, then waved to the maid.

"Prepare tea and light snacks. Leave us."

The maid bowed and retreated.

Once they were alone, Shin Gu sat opposite Lady Chen, her posture gentle and unthreatening.

"I hope I am not intruding," Shin Gu said softly. "If you wish to rest, I can leave."

Lady Chen shook her head slowly.

"It's fine. Sit."

The tea arrived. Steam curled into the air.

Shin Gu held her cup but did not drink yet.

Instead, she studied Lady Chen's expression.

"You look... hurt," she said gently. "Did something trouble you at the festival?"

Lady Chen's fingers trembled slightly.

She laughed softly, but there was bitterness in the sound.

"Troubled? No. Just... tired."

Shin Gu smiled knowingly.

"Is it because of His Majesty?"

Lady Chen froze.

Shin Gu quickly bowed her head.

"I spoke too boldly. Please forgive me."

But Lady Chen didn't scold her.

After a long pause, she exhaled slowly.

"...He wore the Empress's scarf."

Shin Gu's eyes widened slightly.

"In public?" she asked softly.

Lady Chen nodded.

The tea in her cup rippled as her grip tightened.

Shin Gu frowned.

"That... must have hurt."

That simple sentence broke something inside Lady Chen.

She looked up, her eyes reddening.

"I stood by him for so many years," she said quietly. "I helped him when he was weak. I protected him when he was misunderstood. And now... he looks at her differently."

Shin Gu lowered her eyes, as if troubled for her.

"Sister Chen... men's hearts are fickle. Especially emperors."

Lady Chen closed her eyes.

"I know. But knowing doesn't make it hurt less."

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Shin Gu's Story

After a moment of silence, Shin Gu spoke again, her voice soft and heavy with emotion.

"I understand you."

Lady Chen looked at her.

Shin Gu smiled faintly.

"My marriage to Prince Liang... is not as peaceful as it seems."

Lady Chen's brows lifted slightly.

"Is he unkind to you?"

Shin Gu shook her head.

"He is kind... when he is with me. But his heart is not fully mine."

She looked down at her tea.

"He cares deeply for Princess Zhi. He protects her, worries for her. Even when he comes to me, it is because I cling to him first."

Lady Chen's eyes softened.

"You love him."

Shin Gu nodded slowly.

"I do. But love alone is not enough to keep a man's heart."

She smiled bitterly.

"He walks toward me because I pull him. But when I let go... his steps turn back to her."

Lady Chen felt her own pain mirrored in those words.

Shin Gu lifted her gaze.

"Sister Chen, you and I... are in the same position."

Lady Chen's breath caught.

"Both of us stand beside powerful men. Both of us love them. Both of us are watching another woman slowly take the place that should be ours."

The words were gentle.

But they sank deep.

Lady Chen's nails pressed into her palm.

"I don't want to lose him," she whispered.

Shin Gu leaned forward slightly.

"Neither do I."

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Poison Hidden in Honey

Shin Gu's eyes shimmered with sincerity.

"But the Empress..." she continued slowly, "she is different."

Lady Chen stiffened.

"She is not like us," Shin Gu said carefully. "She has no palace background. No powerful family in court. Yet His Majesty protects her openly."

Lady Chen frowned.

"That's because she's... pitiful."

Shin Gu tilted her head.

"Is it pity... or attachment?"

Lady Chen fell silent.

Shin Gu placed her cup down.

"Sister Chen, may I speak honestly?"

Lady Chen nodded.

"If this continues... one day, His Majesty will no longer look at you the way he used to."

The words were soft.

But cruel.

Lady Chen's chest tightened.

"What do you suggest?" she asked quietly.

Shin Gu hesitated, as if reluctant.

"There is... a way," she said slowly. "But it is dangerous."

Lady Chen looked at her sharply.

"What way?"

Shin Gu lowered her voice.

"We cannot fight the Empress openly. That would only make His Majesty hate us."

Lady Chen nodded.

"Then what?"

Shin Gu's lips curved faintly.

"We let her destroy herself."

Lady Chen's eyes widened.

"Destroy herself...?"

Shin Gu nodded.

"She is careless. Emotional. Easily dragged into trouble. If she is placed into the wrong situation... His Majesty will be forced to protect the throne, not her."

Lady Chen's heart pounded.

"You mean..."

Shin Gu leaned closer.

"Make her appear dangerous to the palace. To the dynasty. To the people."

Lady Chen inhaled sharply.

"That's treason..."

Shin Gu shook her head.

"No. Not treason. Just... suspicion."

She smiled faintly.

"No one will suspect us. The Empress already has a bad reputation. The Dowager dislikes her. The court doubts her. All it takes is one spark."

Lady Chen's mind raced.

"And you?" she asked.

Shin Gu's gaze darkened for just a fraction of a second.

"I only want Prince Liang's heart to stop wavering."

She smiled again.

"If the Empress falls... you gain the Emperor's full attention. And if Princess Zhi weakens... I gain Prince Liang's heart."

Lady Chen stared at her.

Two women.

Two loves.

One enemy.

The room felt colder.

"You're suggesting... eliminating the Empress," Lady Chen whispered.

Shin Gu shook her head slowly.

"No. I am suggesting removing her from His Majesty's heart."

Her eyes gleamed faintly.

"She doesn't need to die to be gone."

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A Dangerous Agreement

Lady Chen looked down at her tea.

Her reflection trembled.

She knew this was wrong.

But the pain in her chest was louder than her conscience.

"...No one will suspect me?" she asked.

Shin Gu smiled gently.

"No one."

Lady Chen closed her eyes.

The festival lanterns outside flickered.

And in that soft, beautiful light, two women sat quietly—

one desperate to hold onto love,

and one quietly sharpening the blade that would cut the palace apart.

The Empress sat quietly in her courtyard, the evening light falling gently across the stone floor. The lanterns were not yet lit, and the sky still carried the soft glow of sunset. The palace felt strangely peaceful tonight.

For the first time in a long while, her heart was not heavy.

She held the uneven scarf in her hands.

The scarf she had made with stiff fingers, pricked skin, and countless scoldings.

The scarf he wore.

She pressed it lightly against her palms.

He really wore it...

Not just for warmth.

Not just in private.

But in front of everyone.

The Empress didn't realize when her lips curved into a small smile.

It wasn't the kind of smile she wore to face nobles.

It wasn't polite.

It wasn't careful.

It was soft.

Genuine.

Unguarded.

For so long, she believed the Emperor only tolerated her.

That he only protected her out of duty.

That she was nothing more than a burden he had to carry because of the throne.

But today...

Today, he chose her work.

He chose to stand in public with something made by her hands.

He chose to protect her pride without saying a word.

Her heart felt... warm.

And unfamiliar.

Just as she was lost in thought, a cold wind brushed her cheek.

"Wow," a voice whispered beside her ear, "I didn't know the Empress could smile like that."

She jumped.

"Fen Yu!"

The female ghost floated in front of her, arms crossed, eyes sparkling mischievously.

Behind her, Wei Rong and Li Shen drifted closer, pretending not to watch—but very obviously watching.

"Smile?" Fen Yu leaned closer. "You're smiling like you just found treasure."

The Empress quickly wiped her expression.

"I'm not smiling."

Li Shen tilted his head.

"Your mouth is curved upward by five degrees."

Wei Rong nodded seriously.

"A soldier's instinct does not lie."

The Empress glared.

"Stop making things up."

Fen Yu floated around her in circles, laughing.

"Ohhh, I get it now. Our Empress is finally seeing the dog Emperor as... slightly human."

Wei Rong coughed.

"Slightly tolerable human."

Li Shen added calmly,

"Potentially husband-shaped."

The Empress threw a cushion at them.

"Shut up!"

Fen Yu caught it and hugged it.

"You were staring at that scarf like it was your first love."

The Empress stiffened.

"I was not!"

Li Shen drifted closer, his tone unusually gentle.

"But today, when he wore it... you felt something different, didn't you?"

The Empress didn't answer.

Her silence was the answer.

Wei Rong folded his arms.

"Hmph. That man is still dangerous. Don't forget how he treated you before."

Fen Yu nodded dramatically.

"He's cruel! Cold! Heartless! And he loves Lady Chen!"

The Empress lowered her gaze.

"I know."

Her voice was quiet.

"I'm not... stupid."

She took a slow breath.

"I know what kind of person he is. I know what kind of world this is. I don't expect love from him. I don't even expect kindness."

The ghosts stopped joking.

They could hear the sincerity in her voice.

"But... today was different."

She looked at the scarf again.

"For the first time, I felt like... I wasn't invisible to him."

Fen Yu floated closer, her teasing tone softening.

"That's how it starts. First a scarf. Next, you'll be worrying if he's cold at night."

The Empress rolled her eyes.

"Dream on."

Wei Rong scoffed.

"He still eats with Lady Chen."

Li Shen sighed.

"And still obeys the Dowager."

Fen Yu crossed her arms.

"He's complicated. And complicated men cause suffering."

The Empress nodded.

"I know."

She looked at them, her gaze gentle.

"But... for today, I want to allow myself to feel happy."

The three ghosts stared at her.

That simple sentence hit harder than any battle.

Fen Yu smiled faintly.

"...That's fair."

Wei Rong turned his head away.

"...Just don't fall too hard."

Li Shen bowed his head slightly.

"We'll watch him for you. If he hurts you again... we'll haunt his dreams."

The Empress laughed.

Her laughter rang softly in the courtyard.

For the first time since coming to this world,

her heart felt... light.

Not because she had hope.

But because she allowed herself to feel.