

Ghost 209

Chapter 209: the pact between women

Lady Chen did not sleep that night.

The palace lamps burned low in her chamber, their faint light trembling as if they, too, sensed the unrest in her heart. She sat on the edge of her bed, fingers clenched into the silk blanket.

The image would not leave her mind.

The Emperor's scarf.

That uneven, crooked scarf around his neck.

The way he smiled while wearing it.

Not for her.

For the Empress.

Her chest felt tight, as if someone had wrapped silk cords around her heart and pulled them slowly, mercilessly.

For years, she had been by his side.

For years, she had listened, comforted, waited.

She endured humiliation.

She endured the Dowager's sharp words.

She endured watching him walk past her door again and again.

And yet—

He chose that woman.

A woman who cooked.

A woman who smiled freely.

A woman who did not even understand palace etiquette.

Lady Chen's nails dug into her palm.

"I can't lose," she whispered.

Not after everything.

Slowly, she rose and wrapped a cloak around herself.

There was only one person in this palace who might understand her feelings.

Shin Gu.

The Visit

Shin Gu's courtyard was quiet.

Too quiet.

The lanterns were dimmer than elsewhere, as if light itself hesitated to linger there.

When Lady Chen entered, Shin Gu was seated beside a small table, arranging dried herbs into porcelain dishes.

She looked up and smiled.

"Sister Chen," she said gently.

"I did not expect a visit so late. Please, come in."

Lady Chen hesitated.

Something about Shin Gu's smile felt... calm in a way that made her uneasy.

But she stepped inside.

Shin Gu poured tea.

The steam rose slowly between them.

Lady Chen stared at the surface of the tea, watching her reflection tremble.

"I... I needed someone to speak to," she said quietly.

Shin Gu tilted her head.

"Is it about His Majesty?"

Lady Chen's breath hitched.

Shin Gu's gaze softened with practiced sympathy.

"It must be painful," Shin Gu said,

"to see him drift away when you have always been there for him."

Lady Chen's eyes burned.

"He used to come to my courtyard every few days," she whispered.

"Now... he spends his mornings with her. He eats her food. He wears what she makes."

Her voice trembled.

"I feel like I'm being erased."

Shin Gu's eyes darkened.

Erased.

Such a useful word.

The Confession

Lady Chen finally lifted her head.

Her eyes were wet, but her voice was steady.

"I can't accept this."

Shin Gu remained silent.

Lady Chen leaned forward.

"I want her gone."

The words hung heavy in the air.

"I want the Empress eliminated," Lady Chen said,

"the same way Princess Zhi lost her child."

The lantern flame flickered.

Shin Gu's smile froze.

For a single heartbeat, something cold flashed in her eyes.

Then her lips curved again.

"Those are dangerous words, Sister Chen," Shin Gu said softly.

Lady Chen swallowed.

"I know."

She clenched her fists.

"But I cannot watch her take everything from me."

Shin Gu studied her for a long moment.

The silence stretched.

Finally, Shin Gu spoke.

"I can help you."

Lady Chen's eyes widened.

"But," Shin Gu continued calmly,

"I need certainty."

Lady Chen frowned.

"What certainty?"

Shin Gu leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"That you will never speak of this to anyone.

Not the Dowager.

Not His Majesty.

Not even yourself, when you wake in the middle of the night afraid."

Lady Chen's heart pounded.

"You mean... you want my silence."

Shin Gu nodded slowly.

"This path has no return," she said gently.

"If you take it, you cannot step back and pretend you were innocent."

Lady Chen's hands trembled.

She thought of the scarf.

The laughter.

The way the Emperor looked at the Empress.

Her fear turned into bitterness.

"I will not speak," she said.

"To anyone."

Shin Gu smiled again.

But this time, the smile did not reach her eyes.

Shin Gu's True Face

Shin Gu stood and walked to the window.

Outside, the moonlight cast long shadows.

"The palace is changing," she said.

"And change is dangerous."

She turned back to Lady Chen.

"People think darkness comes loudly.

But it comes softly.

Quietly.

Like oil on a stone path."

Lady Chen's breath caught.

"You... you did that," she whispered.

Shin Gu did not confirm.

She did not deny.

Instead, she said,

"Sometimes, a small push creates a large fall."

Lady Chen felt a chill crawl up her spine.

"Can you... do the same to the Empress?" she asked.

Shin Gu's gaze sharpened.

"I can arrange an accident," she said calmly.

"Something no one can trace.

No poison.

No blade."

Lady Chen closed her eyes.

Her chest hurt.

But she nodded.

"Yes."

Shin Gu approached her and placed a hand over Lady Chen's clenched fists.

"Good," she said softly.

"Then we walk this path together."

The Pact

They stood facing each other in silence.

Two women.

Two different fears.

One shared enemy.

Lady Chen's voice shook.

"Will His Majesty... hate me if something happens to her?"

Shin Gu smiled faintly.

"He will mourn," she said.

"But grief fades.

Power remains."

Lady Chen's eyes darkened.

"Then do it," she whispered.

"Before he falls too deep."

Shin Gu nodded.

"Rest," she said.

"I will arrange everything."

Lady Chen turned to leave.

At the door, she paused.

"Shin Gu," she asked softly,

"Why are you helping me?"

Shin Gu's gaze was distant.

"Because," she said slowly,

"some women do not deserve to sit where they sit."

Lady Chen left.

The door closed.

Shin Gu remained standing in the lamplight, her shadow stretching long across the floor.

Her smile faded.

In its place, something cold and calculating settled in her eyes.

"The Empress," she murmured.

"You are not my enemy because you tried to be.

You are my enemy because you are in the way."

The lantern flickered again.

And somewhere in the palace,

danger quietly took its first step forward.

Chapter — The Second Letter

The study of Chen Guowei was silent except for the faint crackling of the incense burner.

The old minister sat behind his desk, his fingers resting on the wooden surface, eyes fixed on the thin envelope placed before him.

No seal.

No name.

No scent.

Only threat.

He had ordered every servant to leave the room.

His heartbeat was loud in his ears.

Slowly, he picked up the letter.

The paper was coarse, not the kind sold in official shops. The ink was uneven, but the handwriting was careful — deliberate.

The same hand.

His face drained of color.

"Minister Chen Guowei,

Your silence has been noted.

Your obedience has not.

You were warned once.

You ignored it.

If Chen Ruyi is not engaged to Lian Rou within ten days,

the secrets you buried will be delivered to the Emperor's desk.

Do not test how much truth the palace can swallow."

The letter slipped from his fingers.

His body went cold.

Ten days.

The enemy had shortened the time.

His breath trembled as he pressed his palm against his chest.

"Who... who is doing this to me...?"

He had done many things in his life.

Some for power.

Some for survival.

Some because the palace demanded cruelty disguised as loyalty.

But those sins were buried.

Buried so deep that even he sometimes forgot them.

Yet now...

Someone knew.

Not just one thing.

But everything.

His gaze moved to the window.

Outside, the garden was quiet.

Too quiet.

It felt as if the shadows themselves were listening.

The Father's Fear

Chen Guowei closed his eyes.

He remembered the first letter.

Do not send Chen Ruyi to the palace.

Marry her to Duke Lian's nephew.

At the time, he had thought it was a political trick.

A warning from a rival minister.

But now—

This second letter proved the sender was watching him.

Closely.

His fingers clenched.

"If I give in," he whispered,

"I betray my daughter's future."

If I don't...

I betray my own life.

And the lives of everyone connected to me.

He knew what would happen if his secrets reached the Emperor.

Not punishment.

Erasure.

The kind of erasure that removed families from records.

The kind that left no graves.

Chen Ruyi's Innocence

The door creaked.

"Father?"

Chen Ruyi stood at the entrance, holding a book.

She looked up and froze.

Her father's face was pale.

His hands were shaking.

"Father... what's wrong?"

Chen Guowei forced a smile.

"Nothing. You should go rest."

She walked closer, concern in her eyes.

"You're lying."

He sighed deeply.

Ruyi had always been too observant.

He reached out and patted her head.

"Ruyi," he said quietly,

"if... if I told you that your marriage may need to happen sooner than expected... what would you say?"

Her heart skipped.

She knew.

She knew exactly what he meant.

She lowered her eyes.

"If it's for the family," she said softly,

"I will obey."

His chest tightened.

So obedient.

So innocent.

Too gentle for palace politics.

He suddenly hated himself.

He turned away.

"You may leave," he said hoarsely.

She bowed and left.

As the door closed, Chen Guowei's shoulders sagged.

The room felt too large.

Too empty.

The Hand Behind the Curtain

That night, Chen Guowei summoned his most trusted guard.

"Find out," he said in a low voice,

"who is watching my house."

The guard bowed.

"Yes, Master."

But Chen Guowei already knew.

Whoever was behind this did not fear him.

They feared only time.

And they wanted to push him into action.

Elsewhere — Lian Rou

In Duke Lian's garden, Lian Rou laughed with his attendants.

He had no idea that his name had become a weapon.

To him, the future was simple.

He would marry Chen Ruyi.

They would live freely.

Away from palace intrigue.

He did not know...

That someone was using his love

as leverage.

And far away in the palace,

two women were already weaving darker plans.