

Ghost 226

Chapter 226: fake smile

Lady Chen's courtyard was unusually bright that evening.

Lanterns glowed softly along the curved corridors, casting warm gold light across polished stone. A gentle breeze carried the faint scent of jasmine through the air.

From the outside, it looked peaceful.

Refined.

Serene.

Inside—

Something colder stirred.

Lady Chen sat elegantly at the stone table, dressed in pale blue silk. Her posture was perfect, her expression composed.

Across from her sat Shin Gu.

Calm.

Graceful.

Eyes unreadable.

Tea steamed between them.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Lady Chen exhaled slowly.

"Five days," she murmured.

Shin Gu's lips curved slightly.

"Yes."

Lady Chen lowered her voice.

"She will not wake, will she?"

It was not asked with sorrow.

It was asked with calculation.

Shin Gu lifted her cup, blowing gently over the rim before answering.

"She has already crossed too far."

Her tone was soft.

Almost gentle.

"But..." Lady Chen leaned closer, eyes sharpening, "there is no mistake?"

Shin Gu's gaze flickered briefly — something dark flashing in its depths.

"No mistake."

The air seemed to grow heavier.

Lady Chen released a breath she had not realized she was holding.

Then—

She smiled.

Relief softened her features.

"Then it is done."

Shin Gu watched her carefully.

Lady Chen continued, voice quieter now.

"She was becoming... troublesome."

"She had the Duke's support. The Emperor's attention."

Her fingers tightened slightly around her teacup.

"I underestimated her."

Shin Gu nodded.

"You did."

Lady Chen did not take offense.

She merely sighed.

"I thought she was harmless. A common-minded girl who only knew cooking."

She glanced toward the palace center.

"But she grew roots."

Her voice lowered further.

"And His Majesty... began looking at her differently."

Shin Gu tilted her head slightly.

"You noticed."

Lady Chen's smile thinned.

"I always notice."

A long silence passed between them.

The lantern flames flickered.

Lady Chen's eyes hardened.

"When she is gone... I must act quickly."

Shin Gu's expression did not change.

"And what will you do?"

Lady Chen straightened slightly.

"I will comfort him."

Her tone was steady.

"Grief makes men weak."

"Vulnerable."

"He will need stability. Familiarity."

She folded her hands gracefully.

"I will be that."

Shin Gu's gaze lingered on her for a moment too long.

"And if grief turns into obsession?"

Lady Chen's smile faded slightly.

"It won't."

She spoke firmly.

"It cannot."

"He and I share years of understanding."

"She came later."

Her fingers tapped lightly against the table.

"I will remind him of that."

Shin Gu watched her carefully.

There was confidence in Lady Chen's voice.

But beneath it—

Fear.

Lady Chen leaned forward slightly.

"I need you to ensure..."

She paused.

"That nothing interferes."

Shin Gu's lips curved faintly.

"You doubt me?"

Lady Chen's eyes met hers steadily.

"I trust results."

Shin Gu leaned back, gaze drifting toward the moon.

"She is already drifting."

Her voice was almost distant.

"Her soul is far from her body."

Lady Chen swallowed lightly.

"And there is no return?"

Shin Gu's eyes gleamed faintly.

"Even if she tries... she will find the door difficult to reopen."

A chill ran through the courtyard.

Lady Chen exhaled slowly.

"Good."

For a moment—

Silence.

Then Lady Chen added softly,

"Once this ends... there will be no one between me and the throne."

Shin Gu's eyes flickered at that.

No one?

She hid her smile carefully.

Lady Chen believed she was clearing obstacles.

She did not realize—

She was only moving into position.

Shin Gu's voice softened.

"Be patient."

Lady Chen nodded.

"I have waited long enough."

Her gaze sharpened.

"I will not lose now."

A servant approached carefully, bowing deeply.

"Your Majesty, His Majesty has not left the Empress's chamber."

Lady Chen's fingers tightened again.

Shin Gu observed quietly.

Lady Chen forced a smile.

"He mourns."

Her tone was calm.

"He will grow tired."

Shin Gu's eyes darkened slightly.

"Men's grief can turn unpredictable."

Lady Chen looked at her sharply.

"What do you mean?"

Shin Gu's lips curved faintly.

"Love discovered too late burns deeply."

Lady Chen's expression faltered for the first time.

"That is impossible."

Shin Gu simply sipped her tea.

Inside her gaze—

Something calculating shifted.

If the Empress died—

Power would rearrange itself.

Lady Chen believed she would rise.

But Shin Gu understood something deeper.

The palace array was stirring.

Darkness had been released.

And such forces did not serve loyalty.

They served chaos.

Lady Chen reached across the table slightly.

"You will remain by my side."

It sounded like a request.

But it was a demand.

Shin Gu smiled gently.

"Of course."

But in her eyes—

There was no loyalty.

Only strategy.

Far across the palace—

In a dim chamber—

Three ghosts clung desperately to a fading thread.

And in the space between worlds—

A soul hesitated.

Shin Gu looked toward the Empress's direction.

Very faintly—

She felt something tug.

Her smile flickered.

"Strange," she murmured.

Lady Chen frowned.

"What?"

"Nothing."

But her gaze lingered.

Something was resisting.

And she did not like resistance.

The sixth morning arrived without sunlight.

Clouds covered the sky, pressing low over the palace roofs as if even the heavens did not dare shine.

Inside the Empress's chamber, the air was thick.

Not with incense this time.

But with dread.

The healer stood beside the bed, fingers resting lightly on her wrist.

He had been checking her pulse every two hours.

Every hour during the night.

Now—

His hand trembled.

The pulse beneath his fingertips was no longer weak.

It was disappearing.

Fading like a distant drumbeat growing slower and slower.

He swallowed hard.

Her skin had grown colder despite the layers of blankets.

Her breathing was no longer shallow—

It was erratic.

Gaps stretched between breaths.

Longer than before.

Too long.

The healer closed his eyes briefly.

He had seen death many times.

On battlefields.

In childbirth.

From illness.

But this—

This felt heavier.

Because an entire palace was holding onto this fragile thread.

And he could feel it snapping.

The Weight of Fear

He dared not speak.

Not yet.

If he said it aloud—

If he admitted what his hands already knew—

The Emperor would shatter.

Or worse.

The Emperor would blame him.

He remembered the rage in His Majesty's eyes days ago.

The way he had lifted him by the collar.

"If anything happens to her—"

The healer's throat tightened.

He had children.

A wife.

A family outside the palace walls.

He could not afford imperial anger.

But neither could he lie to himself.

Her body was giving up.

Not violently.

Not dramatically.

Quietly.

As if her soul had already stepped away and left only a shell behind.

He glanced toward her face.

Her expression was strangely peaceful.

Too peaceful.

Like someone already somewhere else.

"Your Majesty..." he whispered under his breath.

"You must want to live."

But the body beneath his hand did not respond.

He sighed softly.

Not in frustration.

But in sorrow.

"She is not fighting," he murmured.

That was the worst sign of all.

The will to live was absent.

Outside the Chamber

In the courtyard, the atmosphere was suffocating.

The Duke stood unmoving, staring toward the chamber door as if his gaze alone could anchor his daughter's soul.

The Duchess whispered prayers nonstop, lips cracked from dehydration.

Lian Rou paced back and forth like a caged beast.

Princess Zhi knelt again, her prayer beads slipping through trembling fingers.

Her friends from the restaurant sat near the stone steps, silent.

No one dared speak loudly.

Hope was fragile.

Too fragile to disturb.

The Emperor stood near a pillar, eyes fixed on the closed door.

He had not returned to court that morning.

He had not changed clothes.

He had not rested.

He looked like a man already grieving.

But still refusing to accept it.

Inside the Room

The healer adjusted the blanket gently around the Empress's shoulders.

He pressed a warm cloth to her forehead.

He listened again.

Her breathing skipped.

Then resumed.

Then skipped again.

The silence between breaths stretched longer.

He inhaled slowly.

This was the final stage.

He knew it.

He had seen it before.

When the body begins to let go, it grows tired of fighting.

The healer's eyes lowered.

He felt a heavy sadness settle in his chest.

"She is not willing to return," he thought.

It was not illness alone.

It was something deeper.

As if she had found somewhere else she preferred.

The thought chilled him.

The Emperor Enters

The door slid open softly.

The Emperor stepped inside.

He did not ask permission.

He did not announce himself.

He walked straight to the bedside.

The healer bowed immediately.

"How is she?" the Emperor asked quietly.

The healer's throat dried.

He hesitated.

A heartbeat.

Two.

"My Emperor..."

The words stuck.

He could not say it.

He could not tell him that this might be the last day.

He lowered his gaze instead.

"The Empress's condition... remains critical."

The Emperor studied his face carefully.

He was not a fool.

He saw the hesitation.

He saw the sorrow.

His jaw tightened.

"Say what you mean."

The healer's hands trembled slightly.

"She grows weaker, Your Majesty."

Silence.

Heavy.

Thick.

The Emperor moved closer to the bed.

He sat beside her slowly.

He took her hand.

Cold.

Too cold.

His throat tightened painfully.

"She cannot leave," he murmured.

It was not a plea.

It was a command.

As if he believed he could order fate itself.

The healer lowered his head.

"She must wish to return."

The Emperor's fingers tightened around her hand.

"She will."

His voice was firm.

But his eyes—

They betrayed him.

Fear.

Raw.

Unfiltered.

A Fading Breath

Another long gap between breaths.

The healer stepped forward slightly.

His ears strained.

Her chest barely rose.

The Duke entered quietly behind them.

He stood frozen at the sight.

His daughter.

Unmoving.

The Duchess followed.

She stifled a sob with her sleeve.

Princess Zhi appeared at the doorway, her face pale.

The Emperor leaned closer.

"Lian An."

His voice was rough.

"You don't get to leave like this."

Another pause.

Another fragile breath.

The healer felt his pulse racing in his own chest.

"She is taking her last breaths," he thought.

He could feel it.

The room could feel it.

Time slowing.

As if the world itself held still.

The Emperor bent closer to her ear.

"If you wake up—"

His voice broke.

"I will never let you feel alone again."

Silence.

"I will stand beside you in court."

Silence.

"I will protect you first."

Her breathing faltered again.

The Duchess began crying openly now.

Princess Zhi's chant grew louder.

The Duke gripped his sleeve so tightly his knuckles whitened.

The healer closed his eyes briefly.

"She is slipping."

He felt helpless.

Powerless.

A man of medicine—

Unable to heal the most important person in the palace.

And terrified of the consequences.

The Emperor's Realization

The Emperor rested his forehead against her hand.

His shoulders trembled faintly.

He did not care who saw.

He did not care who whispered.

"I love you."

He said it again.

Clear.

Firm.

As if speaking louder would reach her wherever she was.

"I was blind."

His voice cracked.

"I thought I had time."

Her chest barely moved.

The healer felt panic rising.

This was it.

The final moment.

He stepped closer.

Prepared to declare—

Prepared to face whatever wrath followed.

Then—

A pause.

Too long.

The room fell into stunned silence.

No breath.

No movement.

The Duchess let out a broken cry.

Princess Zhi covered her mouth.

The Duke stepped forward in disbelief.

The Emperor froze.

The healer leaned in—

Straining—

Listening—

And then—

A faint breath returned.

So faint it was almost imaginary.

The healer exhaled sharply.

Not gone.

Not yet.

But hanging by a thread thinner than silk.

He stepped back slowly.

"She is not willing to live," he thought again.

And that thought frightened him more than death itself.

Because if the soul chooses departure—

No medicine can force it to stay.

Outside — The Ghosts

Unseen by mortal eyes—

Three ghostly figures hovered near the ceiling.

Exhausted.

Fading.

Crying.

"She's almost gone," Fen Yu whispered brokenly.

The General clenched his fists.

The Scholar closed his eyes.

"Call her again."

Their voices overlapped in desperate whispers.

"Come back."

"Don't leave."

"Please."

The thread trembled.

And somewhere—

Between worlds—

A soul stood at the edge.

Uncertain.