

## **Ghost 232**

Chapter 232: a bad omen

The afternoon sun had already begun to fade when the news finally reached Lady Chen's courtyard.

Unlike the rest of the palace, her residence was quiet and orderly. The servants moved carefully, their footsteps light against the polished stone floor. A faint fragrance of sandalwood incense lingered in the air.

Lady Chen sat near the open window, calmly embroidering a delicate silk sleeve. The thread between her fingers shimmered pale gold under the soft sunlight.

Her movements were graceful and precise.

Anyone who saw her would think she was completely at peace.

But her mind was not.

For several days the palace had been filled with rumors.

Whispers of the Empress drowning.

Whispers of death.

Whispers of mourning.

And although Lady Chen had kept her composure, a strange uneasiness had been quietly growing inside her chest.

The sound of hurried footsteps broke the silence.

A maid rushed into the room and immediately dropped to her knees.

"Lady Chen!"

Lady Chen did not look up at first.

"What is it?"

Her voice was calm.

But the maid's next words made the embroidery needle slip from Lady Chen's fingers.

"The Empress... has awakened."

Silence filled the chamber.

Lady Chen slowly lifted her head.

"What did you say?"

The maid trembled slightly.

"The Empress has regained consciousness."

"The healer confirmed she is no longer in danger."

For a moment Lady Chen simply stared at her.

The words seemed impossible.

Her lips parted slightly.

"...Awakened?"

"Yes, my lady."

"The entire palace is speaking of it."

"They say it is a miracle."

Lady Chen leaned back slowly in her chair.

Her heart began beating faster.

Impossible.

She had heard the reports herself.

The Empress's pulse had nearly vanished.

The healer had prepared for her death.

The palace had already begun hanging mourning banners.

Yet now—

She was alive.

Lady Chen pressed her fingers lightly against the table.

"How...?"

The maid shook her head quickly.

"No one knows."

"They say she suddenly gasped and opened her eyes."

"His Majesty has not left her side since."

Lady Chen's gaze darkened slightly.

The Emperor had not left her side.

Something twisted inside her chest.

Not jealousy.

Not exactly.

Something closer to unease.

She slowly stood and walked toward the window.

Outside, servants could be seen removing the white mourning banners from the palace walls.

The wind carried fragments of their conversation.

"Her Majesty must be blessed."

"Heaven protected her life."

"No ordinary person could survive such fate."

Lady Chen's fingers tightened around the window frame.

Blessed.

Protected by heaven.

The words echoed unpleasantly in her mind.

For a brief moment, she felt something cold slide down her spine.

A bad omen.

She had never been a superstitious person.

But the situation felt... unnatural.

The Empress had been as good as dead.

And yet she had returned.

Lady Chen closed her eyes briefly.

Her thoughts drifted toward someone else.

Shin Gu.

The mysterious concubine had once spoken strange words.

Words about fate.

About destiny.

About removing obstacles from one's path.

Lady Chen had dismissed them as meaningless conversation at the time.

But now...

Her heart beat uneasily.

Was this coincidence?

Or had something else been involved?

Lady Chen exhaled slowly.

She did not like things she could not understand.

The palace was already unstable.

Princess Zhi had lost her child.

The Emperor had grown distant.

The Dowager had become unpredictable.

And now the Empress—

Someone who should have died—

had returned.

Lady Chen looked toward the distant direction of the Empress's courtyard.

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"...Something is wrong."

The wind stirred the silk curtains behind her.

For the first time since entering the palace, Lady Chen felt a quiet, unsettling thought form in her mind.

If the Empress had truly been protected by heaven...

Then perhaps the palace itself had begun to change.

And not necessarily in her favor.

The atmosphere inside the Empress's courtyard had completely changed.

Only hours earlier, the place had been drowning in sorrow.

Now laughter and relieved voices filled the air.

Sunlight streamed through the courtyard trees, casting warm patterns across the stone floor. Servants moved in and out carrying fresh soup, medicine, and tea. Even the usually silent maids could not hide their smiles.

The Empress sat propped against soft pillows on the bed.

Her face was still pale, but color had slowly begun returning to her cheeks.

Beside her sat Princess Zhi, who had not stopped talking since the Empress woke up.

"You should have seen the palace this morning," Princess Zhi said with excitement. "Everyone was crying yesterday, and today they are saying heaven protected you."

The Duchess gently fed the Empress a spoonful of warm soup.

"Slowly," she said softly. "You are still weak."

The Empress nodded obediently.

Across the room, her friend and the twins whispered happily among themselves, while the Duke stood near the window speaking quietly with the healer.

And not far from the bed stood the Empress's cousin.

He had been silent for a long time.

Unlike the others who were celebrating her recovery, his expression was serious.

His eyes moved slowly across the room.

He saw the relief on everyone's faces.

Then his gaze stopped on the Emperor.

The Emperor stood near the bed, watching the Empress quietly.

His expression was calm, but there was something else beneath it.

Something heavy.

Something unresolved.

The cousin narrowed his eyes slightly.

Finally he stepped forward.

The room slowly grew quiet.

He stopped beside the bed and looked directly at the Empress.

"Tell us something."

His voice was firm.

The Empress blinked in confusion.

"What is it?"

He folded his arms.

"Why did you do it?"

The question hung heavily in the air.

The Empress frowned.

"Do what?"

"Jump into the lake."

The entire room froze.

Princess Zhi looked up in surprise.

The Duchess stopped holding the soup bowl.

The Duke turned slowly toward the bed.

Even the Emperor's gaze sharpened.

The cousin's voice grew slightly harsher.

"Everyone in the palace says the same thing."

"You tried to end your life."

He glanced briefly at the Emperor before continuing.

"So I want to hear the truth."

Princess Zhi quickly spoke.

"Yes... I also want to know."

Her voice trembled slightly.

"You would never do such a thing."

The Duchess gently touched her daughter's arm.

"Tell us what happened."

The room fell silent again.

Everyone waited.

The Empress stared at them in shock.

"Suicide?"

Her voice was weak but clear.

"I didn't try to kill myself."

Her words immediately caused murmurs in the room.

Her friend leaned forward.

"Then what happened?"

The Empress took a slow breath.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to remember.

"That night... something felt strange."

Her fingers tightened slightly around the blanket.

"The palace atmosphere felt heavy."

Her gaze drifted toward the window as she spoke.

"It was difficult to breathe in the room."

Princess Zhi nodded slowly.

"I remember that day."

"Everyone said the air felt strange."

The Empress continued.

"I couldn't sleep."

"So I went outside to get some fresh air."

Her brow furrowed as she tried to recall the memory.

"At first everything was normal."

"But when I reached the garden..."

Her voice grew quieter.

"It felt like my body wasn't my own."

The Duke stepped forward slightly.

"What do you mean?"

The Empress looked down at her hands.

"It felt like someone was pulling me."

The room became completely silent.

Her friend frowned.

"Pulling you?"

The Empress nodded slowly.

"My body kept moving forward."

"I tried to stop... but I couldn't."

Her words sent a chill through the room.

Princess Zhi's face turned pale.

"You mean... you were forced?"

The Empress shook her head slightly.

"I don't know."

Her voice was filled with confusion.

"It felt like I was walking inside a dream."

"I could see everything around me."

"But I couldn't control my own body."

The Emperor's expression darkened.

The Empress continued quietly.

"I remember reaching the lake."

Her fingers trembled slightly.

"And then..."

Her eyes closed briefly.

"...everything became dark."

The Duchess gasped softly.

"What happened after that?"

The Empress shook her head.

"I don't know."

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"I fell asleep."

"And then..."

Her gaze slowly returned to the room.

"I had a strange dream."

Everyone leaned closer.

"What dream?" her cousin asked.

The Empress hesitated.

Her eyes flickered briefly toward the Emperor.

Then she spoke softly.

"I saw a bright white light."

"And someone was calling me."

The room remained silent.

But the uneasiness inside the chamber grew heavier.

The cousin slowly straightened.

"So you're saying..."

"You didn't jump willingly?"

The Empress shook her head firmly.

"I would never do such a thing."

Her voice carried quiet determination.

"I have too many people who care about me."

Her gaze moved across the room.

Her mother.

Her father.

Her sister.

Princess Zhi.

Her friends.

Then finally...

The Emperor.

A faint smile touched her lips.

"I would never leave them like that."

The room remained silent.

But one thought slowly formed in everyone's mind.

If the Empress had not jumped willingly...

Then something far more dangerous had happened that night.

And somewhere inside the palace—

Someone might be responsible.

The Emperor's gaze darkened slightly.

Because the moment he heard her words...

He realized one thing clearly.

The Empress had been attacked.