

Ghost 233

Chapter 233: the shadow behind the palace

The room had grown quiet again.

Only moments earlier, the courtyard had been filled with relief and laughter after the Empress woke up.

But now the atmosphere had changed.

A heavy silence settled over the chamber.

Everyone stared at the Empress.

Her words echoed inside their minds.

"I didn't jump."

The Empress sat against the pillows, still weak but determined.

Her eyes moved slowly across the faces around her.

Her mother.

Her father.

Her sister.

Her cousin.

Her friend.

Princess Zhi.

And finally—

The Emperor.

They all looked stunned.

The first to speak was her friend.

"That's impossible."

Her voice carried disbelief.

"The guards said you jumped into the lake."

The Empress shook her head slightly.

"I remember walking toward the garden."

"But I didn't choose to jump."

Her fingers tightened slightly on the blanket.

"It felt like my body was moving on its own."

Her sister's face turned pale.

"You mean someone forced you?"

The Empress hesitated.

"I don't know."

"But it felt like I was being pulled."

Her cousin stepped forward slowly.

His expression turned serious.

"Pulled?"

"Yes."

The Empress looked down.

"I tried to stop walking."

"But my body kept moving."

A chill passed through the room.

The Duchess covered her mouth softly.

The Duke's brows furrowed deeply.

Even the Emperor's gaze darkened.

Something was very wrong.

Princess Zhi's Realization

Princess Zhi suddenly stepped forward.

Her eyes widened as if something had clicked inside her mind.

"I felt the same thing."

Everyone turned toward her.

"What do you mean?" the Duchess asked.

Princess Zhi took a slow breath.

Her voice trembled slightly.

"The day I lost my child..."

The room fell silent.

Her hands trembled slightly as she spoke.

"That morning I felt strange."

She looked at the Empress.

"Just like you described."

The Emperor's eyes narrowed.

Princess Zhi continued quietly.

"My mind felt foggy."

"My body felt heavy."

"And I suddenly walked down the garden path."

Her voice grew softer.

"I didn't see the oil on the ground."

"But even when I realized it was slippery..."

Her expression became uneasy.

"...I couldn't stop myself."

The memory clearly frightened her.

"I fell before I could react."

Her gaze slowly lifted.

"And then I lost the baby."

A heavy silence filled the room.

The Duke's expression turned grave.

The Emperor's hand clenched slightly.

Because now two incidents shared the same pattern.

Both victims felt strange.

Both lost control of their bodies.

Both nearly died.

This was no coincidence.

The Emperor's Suspicion

The Emperor stood slowly.

His presence instantly commanded the room.

His voice was low.

"There is someone behind this."

His gaze turned toward the window.

Somewhere inside the palace...

Someone was manipulating events.

Someone powerful.

Someone dangerous.

He slowly turned back.

"Someone is using dark techniques."

The room grew tense.

Everyone knew the empire had strict laws against forbidden magic.

Such practices had been outlawed centuries ago.

Anyone caught using them faced execution.

The Duke suddenly spoke.

His voice was deep and thoughtful.

"There is only one explanation."

Everyone looked at him.

He folded his arms.

"When I was young..."

His gaze drifted toward the courtyard outside.

"...something similar happened in several villages."

The Empress looked at him curiously.

"What happened?"

The Duke's expression turned serious.

"People started behaving strangely."

"They walked into rivers."

"They jumped from cliffs."

"They claimed their bodies were not their own."

The room grew colder.

The Duke continued.

"At first people thought it was madness."

"But later..."

His voice lowered.

"...the truth was discovered."

The Emperor's eyes sharpened.

"What truth?"

The Duke spoke slowly.

"It was dark magic."

The words seemed to echo through the room.

The Duchess gasped softly.

Princess Zhi looked horrified.

The Empress felt a chill run down her spine.

The Duke continued.

"A group of cultists were practicing forbidden rituals."

"They used spiritual manipulation."

"They could control weak minds."

"Pull people toward death."

The Emperor's expression hardened.

"That magic was banned."

The Duke nodded.

"Yes."

"The imperial army destroyed the cult."

"And the techniques were forbidden forever."

The Empress whispered softly.

"But if it was destroyed..."

The Duke finished her thought.

"...then who is using it now?"

A Dangerous Realization

The room fell into deep silence.

Everyone understood what the Duke meant.

If someone inside the palace knew such forbidden techniques...

Then that person was extremely dangerous.

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

Because the enemy was not outside the empire.

The enemy was inside the palace.

Inside the very walls meant to protect them.

The Empress felt unease settle inside her chest.

The Emperor looked toward her.

His voice softened slightly.

"You are certain you didn't jump willingly?"

The Empress nodded firmly.

"I would never do such a thing."

Her eyes moved across the room.

"I have too many reasons to live."

Her gaze briefly met the Emperor's again.

He held her gaze for a moment.

Then he turned away slowly.

His expression had already changed.

The calm ruler had returned.

But beneath that calm—

A storm was forming.

The Beginning of an Investigation

The Emperor spoke quietly.

"This matter cannot be discussed outside this room."

Everyone nodded immediately.

The Duke's voice was firm.

"If dark magic has returned..."

"...then we are facing a very serious threat."

The Emperor looked toward the courtyard.

His voice turned cold.

"Whoever did this..."

"...will be found."

His gaze hardened.

"And when they are..."

"...they will wish they had never entered this palace."

Unseen Eyes

Far away in another courtyard...

A woman stood silently near her window.

The wind stirred her long sleeves.

Her eyes slowly lifted toward the Empress's residence.

A faint smile touched her lips.

But behind that smile...

Her gaze was dark.

Very dark.

Because the Empress had survived.

And now—

The palace had begun searching for the truth.

The game had just become far more dangerous.

The night was unnaturally quiet in Shin Gu's courtyard.

Moonlight filtered through the thin branches of the plum trees, casting pale shadows across the stone floor. The courtyard that usually appeared calm and refined now felt cold and tense.

Inside the chamber, the incense that usually burned peacefully had long since turned to ash.

Shin Gu stood before her altar.

Her back was straight.

Her hands rested slowly on the wooden table where the ritual objects were arranged.

But the calm appearance she maintained was only a thin mask.

Inside—

Rage was boiling.

Her fingers slowly tightened until her nails dug into her palms.

For a long moment she did not move.

The words she had heard earlier continued echoing in her mind.

"The Empress has awakened."

Impossible.

Absolutely impossible.

Shin Gu slowly lifted her head.

Her eyes reflected the pale candlelight, but the gentleness she usually showed in public had completely disappeared.

Only cold anger remained.

The ritual she performed was not ordinary magic.

It was an ancient soul-pulling technique.

A forbidden method used by cultivators who practiced dark arts.

Once the ritual was completed, the victim's soul would gradually detach from their body, becoming weaker until it drifted away entirely.

The person would either die...

Or lose their mind forever.

Shin Gu had performed this ritual many times before.

Every single time—

It had succeeded.

Never once had she failed.

Yet tonight she had heard the news with her own ears.

The Empress had returned from the brink of death.

Her pulse had stabilized.

She had spoken.

She had smiled.

She had even begun recovering.

Shin Gu's hand suddenly slammed against the altar.

The candle fell over, its flame flickering wildly.

"How?"

Her voice was low and furious.

The small wooden idol placed on the altar cracked slightly under the pressure of her palm.

"This is impossible..."

Her breathing became uneven.

The ritual had been perfect.

She had prepared everything carefully.

The spiritual array had been activated at midnight.

The Empress's soul had been dragged toward the void.

Shin Gu had even felt the life thread weaken.

She had felt the soul drifting.

Everything had gone exactly as planned.

Then why—

Why was the Empress alive?

Her mind raced quickly through every possibility.

Had someone interfered?

Had another cultivator protected the Empress?

Shin Gu's eyes narrowed.

That possibility seemed unlikely.

The empire had banned dark spiritual practices centuries ago.

Very few people even knew such techniques existed.

And none of the palace monks had enough power to break her ritual.

Her gaze slowly turned toward the direction of the Empress's courtyard.

A cold wind passed through the window.

For the first time since entering the palace...

Shin Gu felt something unfamiliar.

Unease.

The Empress was not supposed to survive.

Not after the ritual had already begun draining her soul.

Unless—

Unless something had pulled her back.

Shin Gu's expression darkened.

"The Emperor..."

She murmured the thought quietly.

The Emperor had refused to leave the Empress's side for five days.

The entire palace knew it.

His stubborn refusal to believe she would die had already become gossip among the servants.

Shin Gu's lips curled slightly.

Love.

Humans often underestimated the strength of that emotion.

But even so—

Love alone could not break a ritual like hers.

No.

Something else had happened.

Something she could not yet see.

Her eyes moved slowly across the ritual altar.

A faint crack ran through the wooden symbol carved into its center.

The spiritual energy that once filled the room had already faded.

Her ritual had been broken.

The realization made her anger flare again.

For the first time in years...

She had failed.

Her fingers tightened again.

The room seemed to grow colder.

Shin Gu slowly straightened her posture.

The anger inside her slowly cooled.

Not disappearing—

But sharpening.

"Very well."

Her voice became calm again.

Cold.

Controlled.

"If the first attempt failed..."

Her gaze returned toward the distant palace courtyard.

"...then I will simply try again."

A faint smile appeared on her lips.

This time she would be more careful.

More patient.

She had underestimated the Empress.

That mistake would not happen twice.

Shin Gu gently relit the fallen candle.

The flame flickered to life once more.

Its small light reflected in her eyes.

Dark.

Dangerous.

Because the Empress's survival had not ended the game.

It had only made Shin Gu more determined.

And the next time she moved—

She would make sure there was no miracle waiting to save the Empress.