

Ghost 234

Chapter 234: a promise another death

The night air in the palace had turned strangely cold.

Even though the mourning banners had been removed and the palace returned to its usual rhythm, an uneasy atmosphere still lingered within the walls. Servants moved quietly through the corridors, whispering about the miracle of the Empress's survival.

But not everyone in the palace welcomed that miracle.

In a secluded corner of the inner palace stood Shin Gu's courtyard, silent and shadowed beneath the pale moonlight.

Unlike other residences where lanterns glowed warmly, Shin Gu's courtyard felt unnaturally calm. The wind barely stirred the leaves of the trees. Even the insects seemed quiet, as if something in the air warned them to stay silent.

Inside the main chamber, Shin Gu stood beside her ritual altar.

The candlelight flickered softly against her pale face as she slowly rearranged the small ritual objects on the table. To an outsider, she looked calm, almost serene.

But the faint crack in the wooden talisman on the altar told another story.

Her ritual had failed.

For the first time in years.

A faint sound of footsteps broke the silence outside the chamber.

Moments later, the curtain at the entrance lifted.

Lady Chen stepped inside.

Her usually graceful expression was strained tonight.

Even the elegance she carefully maintained in public could not hide the uneasiness in her eyes.

The moment she entered, her gaze locked onto Shin Gu.

"You said she would die."

Her voice was low but sharp.

Shin Gu did not turn immediately.

She calmly finished placing the incense stick into the holder before finally looking over her shoulder.

"The palace walls carry many ears," she said quietly.

"You should lower your voice."

Lady Chen stepped further into the room, her frustration barely contained.

"There is no one here."

Her hands clenched slightly.

"You told me the Empress would not survive the night."

Shin Gu finally turned completely to face her.

Her expression was unreadable.

"I told you the ritual had begun."

"That is different."

Lady Chen's voice grew colder.

"She was dying."

"The healer himself said she would not last."

Lady Chen's eyes narrowed.

"Yet she woke up."

The candlelight flickered between them.

For a moment, neither woman spoke.

Lady Chen finally stepped closer.

"How did this happen?"

Her voice carried something deeper now.

Fear.

Because if Shin Gu's methods failed...

Then the situation inside the palace had become unpredictable.

Shin Gu studied Lady Chen silently.

Then she smiled faintly.

"A miracle."

Lady Chen did not return the smile.

"I do not believe in miracles."

Shin Gu's eyes darkened slightly.

"Neither do I."

She turned back toward the altar slowly.

"The ritual was perfect."

"I felt her soul leaving her body."

Her fingers lightly touched the cracked talisman.

"But something interfered."

Lady Chen frowned.

"Interfered?"

"Yes."

Shin Gu's voice remained calm, but the faint tension behind it was unmistakable.

"Someone pulled her soul back."

Lady Chen felt a chill pass through her spine.

"Who?"

Shin Gu shook her head slightly.

"That is what I must discover."

Lady Chen paced slowly across the room.

The soft rustle of her silk robes echoed against the stone floor.

"The Emperor has not left her side since she woke up."

She stopped walking.

"If she recovers fully..."

Her voice dropped.

"...everything will change."

Shin Gu watched her carefully.

"You fear losing your position."

Lady Chen's eyes flashed.

"I fear losing control."

The two women stared at each other in silence.

Lady Chen finally spoke again.

"You said the Empress would disappear."

"You said no one would suspect anything."

"And yet she sits in her courtyard surrounded by everyone."

Her voice trembled with frustration.

"Even the Dowager is beginning to soften toward her."

Shin Gu's expression remained calm.

But her eyes had grown colder.

"You are impatient."

Lady Chen laughed softly.

"Of course I am."

"She was supposed to be gone."

"If the Emperor continues growing closer to her..."

She did not finish the sentence.

But the meaning was clear.

Lady Chen slowly leaned closer to Shin Gu.

"Tell me the truth."

"Can you still remove her?"

For a moment the room was completely silent.

Then Shin Gu smiled.

A slow, unsettling smile.

"You doubt my ability."

Lady Chen did not answer.

She simply waited.

Shin Gu turned back toward the altar again.

The candle flame flickered in her eyes.

"Do not worry."

Her voice was calm.

Too calm.

"This time the Empress survived."

She lightly touched the cracked talisman.

"But that was only the first attempt."

Lady Chen's eyes narrowed.

"You mean..."

Shin Gu looked back at her.

"Yes."

"She will die."

Lady Chen held her gaze carefully.

"When?"

Shin Gu's smile deepened slightly.

"When the opportunity is perfect."

She stepped closer to Lady Chen.

"So that no one can save her."

Lady Chen remained silent for several moments.

Then she slowly nodded.

"Good."

But the unease inside her chest had not disappeared.

Because even she could feel it.

Something in the palace had changed.

The Empress had returned from death.

And that kind of miracle often meant something else was at work.

Something powerful.

Something dangerous.

Shin Gu walked to the window and looked toward the distant palace courtyard where the Empress rested.

Her eyes darkened.

"Next time..."

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"...she will not wake up."

Outside the chamber, the night wind stirred gently through the trees.

And somewhere across the palace grounds...

The Empress slept peacefully.

Unaware that the woman who had already tried to kill her was preparing for another attempt.

One far more deadly than the first.

The atmosphere inside the Empress's chamber was quiet and heavy.

The windows were open slightly, allowing the evening breeze to enter, but the cool air did nothing to ease the tension filling the room.

Empress Lian An sat on the bed, pale but conscious now. Though she had woken up, her body was still weak from the days spent between life and death. A warm blanket rested over her legs while the healer's medicine bowl sat untouched beside the bed.

Around her stood the people who had refused to leave her side.

The Emperor stood near the window, arms folded behind his back, his expression serious.

Princess Zhi sat close to the bed, her hands wrapped tightly around her prayer beads.

Across the room, the Duke and Duchess sat beside each other, worry written clearly on their faces.

Lian Hua, the Empress's younger sister, stood near the bedside, occasionally glancing at her sister as if afraid she might disappear again.

And leaning against one of the wooden pillars was Yao Qing, the Empress's childhood friend.

Everyone was deep in thought.

Because the Empress's explanation had only made things more confusing.

She had not tried to commit suicide.

Something had controlled her body.

Something had forced her toward the lake.

The silence stretched until Yao Qing suddenly spoke.

"Actually..."

Her voice made everyone look at her.

"I just remembered something strange."

The Emperor's eyes immediately focused on her.

"What is it?"

Yao Qing rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"When my father was still alive, he traveled a lot for business."

She slowly stepped forward.

"He used to visit many distant regions outside the capital."

The Duke frowned slightly.

"What does that have to do with this?"

Yao Qing continued.

"One time he returned from a northern province and told me something unusual."

Princess Zhi leaned forward slightly.

"What kind of unusual thing?"

Yao Qing shrugged.

"He said people in that area believed strange things were happening."

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"Explain."

Yao Qing crossed her arms while recalling the memory.

"My father said villagers believed there were strange forces in their kingdom."

She looked around the room.

"They said sometimes people suddenly gained incredible strength overnight."

The Duke frowned deeper.

"What do you mean?"

"They meant ordinary people suddenly becoming powerful for no reason."

Yao Qing replied.

"And there were other rumors too."

She paused before continuing.

"Some villagers claimed they saw people who were supposed to be dead... walking again."

Lian Hua gasped softly.

"You mean... ghosts?"

Yao Qing shook her head.

"No one knew."

She continued.

"My father was curious, so he tried to investigate."

The Emperor spoke immediately.

"And what did he find?"

Yao Qing shrugged again.

"Nothing."

Everyone stared at her.

"My father spent weeks asking questions," she explained. "He spoke to travelers, villagers, even local officials."

"And?"

The Emperor asked.

"He discovered the stories came from a few people spreading rumors."

Yao Qing gave a small laugh.

"In the end, the investigation concluded those villagers had simply played a prank to scare others."

The Duke leaned back slowly.

"So there was nothing real?"

Yao Qing nodded.

"That's what the investigation report said."

But the Emperor's expression remained serious.

He slowly walked across the room.

"That is strange."

Everyone looked at him.

"Why?"

Princess Zhi asked quietly.

The Emperor folded his hands behind his back again.

"If such rumors truly spread across a province, the palace should have received reports."

His voice became colder.

"But I have never seen any record of this."

Yao Qing frowned.

"Maybe the officials decided it wasn't important."

The Emperor shook his head.

"No."

"If villagers truly believed people were gaining unnatural strength or returning from death..."

His eyes darkened.

"...then it would have been considered a dangerous disturbance."

The Duke slowly nodded.

"That kind of rumor could cause panic."

"Exactly."

The Emperor replied.

"Yet there are no official records."

Silence filled the chamber again.

Princess Zhi looked toward the Empress.

"And now Lian An experienced something similar."

The Duchess gently held her daughter's hand.

"What if those stories were not completely false?"

No one spoke for several seconds.

Because everyone was thinking the same thing.

If those strange rumors had once existed...

And the Empress had been controlled by an unseen force...

Then perhaps something much darker was hiding behind the palace walls.

The Emperor finally spoke again.

His voice was calm.

But there was steel beneath it.

"If such forces truly exist..."

His eyes slowly moved toward the window where the palace courtyard stretched beyond.

"...then someone in this palace is using them."

And whoever that person was—

They had already tried to kill the Empress once.