

Ghost 238

Chapter 238: jealousy

The imperial palace was peaceful that afternoon.

After the morning court session ended, most officials had already returned to their residences, leaving the inner palace unusually calm. The Emperor's courtyard was quiet except for the faint sound of bamboo leaves swaying in the winter breeze.

Inside the courtyard, servants carefully arranged lunch on a long wooden table.

The Emperor had just finished reviewing the last of the court documents when a familiar figure appeared at the entrance.

The guards stepped aside immediately.

None of them stopped her.

Lady Chen entered gracefully.

Her robes of pale lavender silk flowed gently as she walked across the courtyard. The soft sound of her jade ornaments chimed faintly with each step.

For years, this courtyard had been a place she could enter freely.

The Emperor noticed her the moment she arrived.

A small smile appeared on his face.

"Chen'er."

He put down the scroll he was reading.

"You came."

Lady Chen bowed lightly.

"Your Majesty."

Her voice was gentle as always.

"I heard you had not eaten yet, so I thought I might accompany you."

The Emperor gestured toward the chair beside him.

"Sit."

She sat down elegantly across from him.

The servants quickly finished placing dishes on the table and withdrew quietly, leaving the two of them alone.

Lunch was simple today.

Steamed rice, braised fish, clear soup, and several small vegetable dishes.

Lady Chen poured tea into the Emperor's cup before speaking again.

"You look tired."

The Emperor leaned back slightly in his chair.

"Court matters never end."

Lady Chen smiled softly.

"You work harder than anyone."

The Emperor chuckled faintly.

"That is what an emperor is supposed to do."

They began eating.

The conversation between them flowed naturally.

Lady Chen asked about the morning court session.

The Emperor spoke about disputes between ministers and preparations for upcoming events in the capital.

Their conversation was calm, comfortable.

It had always been this way between them.

For years Lady Chen had been someone the Emperor trusted deeply.

But today something felt slightly different.

While they were speaking, a eunuch approached the table and bowed respectfully.

"Your Majesty."

The Emperor looked up.

"What is it?"

The eunuch stepped aside.

Behind him stood one of the imperial dressmakers, holding a small scroll in her hands.

She bowed deeply.

"This servant greets Your Majesty."

The Emperor nodded.

"Speak."

The dressmaker lowered her head respectfully.

"This servant came to report that Her Majesty the Empress has finished selecting her garments for the upcoming wedding."

Lady Chen's chopsticks paused slightly.

But she remained silent.

The Emperor seemed pleased.

"Has she chosen a design?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The dressmaker unrolled the scroll and carefully showed the embroidered patterns.

"Her Majesty selected a jade green ceremonial robe embroidered with silver cranes."

The Emperor studied the design briefly.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"That suits her."

Lady Chen quietly watched the interaction.

The Emperor then reached into the sleeve of his robe and removed a small pouch of gold.

He handed it to the dressmaker.

"Prepare the garments immediately."

He spoke calmly but firmly.

"And include matching jewelry and accessories."

The dressmaker looked surprised.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Emperor continued.

"Make sure everything is delivered to the Empress's courtyard before the wedding."

The dressmaker bowed deeply.

"This servant understands."

She carefully accepted the gold pouch.

"Your Majesty is most generous."

The Emperor waved his hand lightly.

"You may go."

The dressmaker bowed again and left the courtyard.

For a moment, the courtyard returned to silence.

But something had changed.

Lady Chen lowered her eyes slightly.

She had watched the entire exchange quietly.

And the feeling that slowly grew inside her chest was not pleasant.

Because she remembered clearly—

The Emperor had never done such a thing for her.

He had given her gifts before, of course.

Jewelry.

Fine silk.

Rare books.

But never like this.

Never personally ordering a dressmaker to prepare a full set of garments with accessories.

Never showing such immediate attention.

Lady Chen forced a small smile.

But inside, something twisted painfully.

At the very least...

He could have said something simple.

He could have turned to her and said—

"You may choose something as well."

She was sitting right there.

Yet the Emperor had said nothing.

He had only thought about the Empress.

Lady Chen suddenly felt her appetite disappear.

The Emperor noticed her silence.

"What's wrong?"

She quickly shook her head.

"Nothing."

She set her chopsticks down gently.

"I suddenly remembered something I must take care of."

The Emperor frowned slightly.

"You are leaving already?"

"Yes."

Lady Chen stood gracefully.

"I will visit again another day."

She bowed politely.

"Your Majesty, please continue your meal."

The Emperor nodded lightly.

"Very well."

Lady Chen turned and walked toward the courtyard gate.

Her steps remained steady and elegant.

But once she stepped outside and the guards closed the gate behind her—

Her expression changed.

The calm smile disappeared.

A cold shadow passed through her eyes.

The Emperor had never treated her like that before.

Never ignored her presence so completely.

Lady Chen slowly clenched her fingers inside her sleeve.

For the first time since entering the palace—

She felt something dangerous growing inside her heart.

Jealousy.

Lady Chen walked quickly through the palace corridor.

Her steps were graceful as always, but anyone who looked closely would notice the tightness in her posture.

The conversation in the Emperor's courtyard replayed repeatedly in her mind.

The dressmaker.

The money.

The order for jewelry and accessories.

All for the Empress.

And she had been sitting there the entire time.

Yet the Emperor had not even glanced at her.

Her chest tightened.

The Empress had survived everything.

The plague.

The purity test.

And even death itself.

Lady Chen clenched her hands inside her sleeves.

"How is this possible..."

She whispered under her breath.

Her anger had been building slowly since the Empress awakened. But after what she had witnessed today, the frustration inside her heart could no longer be contained.

Without thinking, she turned her steps toward another courtyard.

The guards outside the residence bowed respectfully as she approached.

They did not stop her.

Everyone knew this was the residence of Shin Gu.

Lady Chen pushed open the courtyard gate.

The wind rustled the branches of the plum trees inside the courtyard, scattering petals across the stone floor.

The place was unusually quiet.

Inside the main chamber, Shin Gu was sitting calmly beside a small incense burner.

Her expression was peaceful, as if she had been waiting.

The moment Lady Chen stepped inside—

Her anger exploded.

"You said she would die!"

Her voice echoed sharply through the room.

Shin Gu slowly lifted her gaze.

Her calm eyes studied Lady Chen carefully.

Lady Chen stepped closer.

Her composure was completely gone now.

"You told me the ritual would succeed!"

"You said the Empress would never wake up!"

She slammed her hand onto the table beside Shin Gu.

"But she is alive!"

Her breathing grew uneven.

"She survived the plague!"

"She survived the purity test!"

"And now she even returned from death!"

Lady Chen's voice trembled with rage.

"And now..."

"...she is taking my place beside the Emperor!"

Shin Gu remained completely still.

Her expression did not change.

That calmness only made Lady Chen more furious.

"You failed."

Shin Gu finally spoke.

Her voice was soft.

"Lower your voice."

Lady Chen laughed bitterly.

"Why?"

"Are you afraid someone will hear the truth?"

Shin Gu's eyes darkened slightly.

But she still did not raise her voice.

"You are letting your emotions control you."

Lady Chen pointed toward the palace courtyard outside.

"That woman should already be dead!"

Shin Gu slowly stood up.

Her movements were calm and controlled.

"You think I don't know that?"

Lady Chen stared at her.

"Then why is she still breathing?"

For a moment, silence filled the room.

Then Shin Gu walked slowly toward the window.

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

"The situation has changed."

Lady Chen frowned.

"What do you mean?"

Shin Gu spoke quietly.

"After what happened, the Emperor increased the guards around the Empress."

"Her family is also staying close to her."

"And the palace monks have begun their purification rituals."

She turned back toward Lady Chen.

"If I act now..."

"...I will be discovered."

Lady Chen's anger flared again.

"So you're just going to do nothing?"

Shin Gu's lips curved slightly.

"Did I say that?"

Lady Chen froze.

Shin Gu stepped closer.

Her voice became colder.

"You are impatient."

"The Empress survived because we underestimated her."

"But mistakes can be corrected."

Lady Chen stared at her.

"And how do you plan to correct it?"

Shin Gu looked toward the flickering incense on the table.

"Right now the entire palace is watching her."

"If anything happens to the Empress at this moment..."

"...everyone will suspect foul play."

Lady Chen clenched her teeth.

"So what do we do?"

Shin Gu smiled faintly.

"A hunter does not attack when the prey is surrounded."

She walked back to the altar slowly.

"The hunter waits."

Lady Chen frowned.

"Wait?"

"Yes."

Shin Gu replied calmly.

"We wait until everyone feels safe again."

Her eyes gleamed faintly.

"Until they believe the danger has passed."

"Until the guards relax."

"Until the Emperor stops watching her every moment."

She paused.

"And then..."

Lady Chen leaned forward slightly.

"...Then what?"

Shin Gu's smile deepened.

"Then we strike."

Lady Chen's heart beat faster.

Shin Gu's voice lowered to a whisper.

"A single moment."

"That is all I need."

Her gaze turned cold.

"When no one expects it."

"When no one is watching."

Lady Chen slowly exhaled.

Her anger began cooling slightly.

"You're sure?"

Shin Gu nodded.

"This time..."

"...she will not come back."

Lady Chen remained silent for a long moment.

Then she finally straightened her posture.

The fury in her expression had been replaced by something colder.

Something darker.

"Good."

She turned toward the door.

"Because this time..."

Her voice was quiet but sharp.

"...I want to make sure the Empress dies."

Behind her, Shin Gu watched silently.

The incense smoke curled slowly into the air.

And a faint smile appeared on her lips.

Because patience—

Was the deadliest weapon of all.