

Ghost 249

Chapter 249: storm beneath

The night had deepened by the time the carriage reached the gates of the Duke residence.

But unlike a usual night—

The residence was not quiet.

It was awake.

Lit.

Waiting.

—

Torches burned brightly along the entrance.

Servants stood in rows.

Guards were stationed with unusual alertness.

The moment the carriage stopped—

The doors opened before anyone inside could move.

—

"Miss!"

"Young Master!"

The voices came in a rush.

Concern.

Urgency.

Fear.

—

Lian Hua blinked.

"...Why is everyone here?"

Before anyone could answer—

The Duke himself stepped forward.

His face—

Usually composed and dignified—

Was now tight with tension.

Behind him stood the Duchess, her hands clenched, eyes filled with worry.

And further behind—

Family members.

Servants.

Even guards who rarely left their posts.

—

The moment Lian An stepped down—

The Duchess rushed forward.

"An'er!"

Her voice trembled.

She grabbed her hands, looking her over quickly.

"Are you hurt?"

"Did anything happen?"

—

Lian An shook her head gently.

"I'm fine."

But before she could say more—

Lian Hua burst out:

"We were attacked!"

—

Silence.

Heavy.

Sudden.

—

The Duke's expression darkened instantly.

"...Explain."

—

Inside the main hall—

Everyone gathered.

No one sat casually.

No one relaxed.

Even the servants stood still, listening.

—

Lian Rou stepped forward.

"We were ambushed on the road."

"Seven attackers."

"Trained."

"Not ordinary bandits."

—

The Duke's gaze sharpened.

"...Were they after you?"

Lian Rou didn't answer immediately.

Instead—

He glanced at Chen Ruyi.

Then at Lian An.

—

"...They were targeting her."

—

The words landed heavily.

—

The Duchess covered her mouth.

"...An'er..."

Lian Hua clenched her fists.

"They aimed at the carriage!"

"They tried to get inside!"

—

Chen Ruyi spoke softly,

"...They didn't try to rob us."

"They didn't say anything else."

"Only..."

She paused.

"...'Leave the girl.'"

—

The room grew colder.

—

The Duke's fingers tightened behind his back.

His voice dropped.

"...So it was targeted."

Not random.

Not coincidence.

Planned.

—

He turned toward the guards.

"Were they captured?"

Lian Rou shook his head.

"Some escaped."

"Some..."

"...didn't survive."

—

The Duke closed his eyes briefly.

Then opened them again—

Now filled with something darker.

—

"...How did they know?"

—

No one answered.

But the question hung in the air.

—

How did they know—

That the Empress would be out tonight?

That she would be in that exact location?

That she would be vulnerable?

—

The Duchess spoke quietly,

"Could it be... palace information?"

—

Lian Hua immediately shook her head.

"But we didn't tell anyone!"

—

Chen Ruyi added softly,

"We came directly after leaving the restaurant."

"No announcement."

"No escort."

—

Lian An finally spoke.

Calm.

Steady.

"That's what makes it dangerous."

All eyes turned to her.

—

"This wasn't coincidence."

"It was information."

"Precise."

"Timed."

—

The Duke nodded slowly.

"Yes."

Then his gaze hardened.

"...Which means someone is watching you."

—

The words sent a chill through the room.

—

Lian Rou stepped forward.

"They were strong."

"Stronger than normal soldiers."

"For a moment..."

He hesitated.

"...their strength felt unnatural."

—

The Duke's eyes flickered.

"...Unnatural?"

—

Lian An didn't speak.

But her silence said enough.

—

The Duke turned away, walking slowly toward the window.

His hands clasped behind his back.

His mind moving rapidly.

—

"...Outside the palace."

He spoke slowly.

"...The attack happened outside."

"...No witnesses."

"...No interference."

—

Then he turned back.

His voice firm.

"They want us to believe the threat is outside."

—

Lian Hua frowned.

"...Isn't it?"

—

The Duke looked at her.

"...No."

—

Silence again.

—

"If someone truly wanted her dead..."

"They would have acted inside the palace."

"Where she is unguarded."

"Where suspicion is harder to trace."

—

He paused.

"...But instead..."

"They chose outside."

—

Lian Rou's expression changed.

"...To mislead."

—

The Duke nodded.

"Yes."

—

A realization slowly spread across the room.

—

Chen Ruyi whispered,

"...So this attack..."

"...was not just to kill..."

"...but to send a message."

—

Lian An's eyes darkened slightly.

"...And to create a false direction."

—

The Duchess stepped forward.

"But then..."

"Where is the real danger?"

—

No one answered immediately.

Because they all—

Knew the answer.

—

Inside.

—

The Duke's voice turned sharp.

"From now on—"

"No one moves without guards."

"Increase surveillance."

"Double the night patrol."

—

He turned to Lian Rou.

"You will not leave her side."

—

Then to Lian An.

"Until we find out who is behind this..."

"You are not safe."

—

Lian Hua stepped closer to her sister.

"We'll stay together."

—

Chen Ruyi nodded softly.

"...Yes."

—

But Lian An didn't respond immediately.

Instead—

She looked down slightly.

Her thoughts deeper.

More complex.

—

Because she knew something they didn't.

—

This wasn't just human.

This wasn't just political.

—

This was connected to something darker.

Something hidden.

Something—

Already inside the palace.

—

The Duke continued,

"...This proves one thing."

—

Everyone looked at him.

—

"There is an enemy."

—

His voice dropped.

"...And they know exactly where to strike."

—

Outside—

The wind picked up slightly.

The torches flickered.

Shadows danced along the walls.

—

Inside the Duke residence—

No one felt safe anymore.

—

And somewhere—

Far away—

Someone was watching.

Waiting.

For the next move.

Night had settled over the palace, but the Emperor's study remained lit.

Scrolls lay open on the table.

Ink had dried in places where his brush had paused too long.

Yet—

His mind was not on governance.

It had been restless since evening.

As if something unseen was moving.

Waiting.

—

A faint knock broke the silence.

The Emperor didn't look up.

"Enter."

The door opened quietly.

A shadow slipped inside.

One of his hidden spies.

Dressed in dark robes, face partially concealed.

They knelt immediately.

"Your Majesty."

The Emperor finally raised his gaze.

"...Report."

—

There was a brief pause.

Even the spy seemed to choose words carefully.

"Tonight... the Empress was attacked."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor froze.

The brush in his hand slipped slightly, leaving a dark streak across the paper.

"...What did you say?"

His voice was low.

Too calm.

—

The spy lowered their head further.

"The Empress, her cousin, younger sister, and Miss Chen were ambushed on the way back."

"Seven attackers."

"Armed."

"Trained."

—

The Emperor stood up abruptly.

"Is she hurt?"

The question came instantly.

Without hesitation.

Without control.

—

The spy shook their head.

"No, Your Majesty."

"They are safe."

—

The Emperor's shoulders stiffened—

Then slowly relaxed.

A breath he didn't realize he was holding—

Finally escaped.

—

"...Good."

Just one word.

But it carried weight.

—

He turned away slightly, walking toward the window.

The night outside looked calm.

Unbothered.

As if nothing had happened.

—

"...Explain everything."

—

The spy continued,

"The attackers specifically targeted the carriage."

"They attempted to isolate the Empress."

"No robbery."

"No other motive displayed."

—

The Emperor's gaze darkened.

"...Assassination."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

—

"Were they captured?"

"Some escaped. Some were killed in the encounter."

"No clear identity found."

—

The Emperor's fingers tightened behind his back.

"...How did they know?"

—

That question.

The same one asked at the Duke residence.

Now echoed here.

—

The spy replied carefully,

"That is unclear, Your Majesty."

"There was no public knowledge of her outing."

"No official escort."

"No announcement."

—

The Emperor's eyes narrowed.

Then—

"...Which means this was planned."

—

Silence.

—

His mind began moving rapidly.

Every detail.

Every possibility.

—

"Outside the palace..."

he murmured.

"...on a deserted road."

"...precise timing."

"...target confirmed."

—

He turned sharply.

"Who knew she would be out?"

—

The spy answered,

"Only those present at the Duke residence and the restaurant."

"No external leak confirmed."

—

The Emperor's expression hardened.

"...Or someone watching her movements."

—

The spy didn't respond.

But the implication—

Was clear.

—

The Emperor walked back slowly.

His steps measured.

Controlled.

But inside—

A storm had begun.

—

"...Double the surveillance."

"All entry and exit points."

"Anyone suspicious—report immediately."

—

"Yes, Your Majesty."

—

"Send shadow guards to the Duke residence."

"Discreetly."

"No one should notice."

—

The spy nodded.

"It will be done."

—

The Emperor paused.

Then added—

"...And the Empress."

"Assign protection."

"Hidden."

"No interference unless necessary."

—

The spy bowed.

"Yes."

—

The Emperor dismissed them.

The door closed.

And once again—

He was alone.

—

Silence filled the room.

But it was no longer calm.

—

He sat down slowly.

His gaze falling on the unfinished document.

But he didn't pick up the brush again.

—

Instead—

His thoughts drifted.

—

The lake.

That night.

Her empty eyes.

Her body moving without control.

—

Then—

The attack.

—

Two incidents.

Different.

But connected.

—

"...No."

He spoke softly to himself.

"This is not coincidence."

—

His fingers tapped lightly against the table.

A habit when thinking deeply.

—

"If someone wanted to kill her..."

"They could have done it inside the palace."

—

He leaned back slightly.

"...But they didn't."

—

His eyes sharpened.

—

"They chose outside."

"Where it's visible."

"Where it creates fear."

—

A slow realization formed.

—

"...They want us to believe the threat is outside."

—

He stood again.

Walking slowly across the room.

—

"But then..."

"...what is happening inside?"

—

His gaze turned colder.

—

The miscarriage.

The strange energy.

The lake incident.

The monk's warning.

—

Everything pointed to one thing.

—

"...Something is already here."

—

His jaw tightened.

—

"And now..."

"They are trying to divert attention."

—

A knock came again.

—

"Enter."

—

The General stepped in.

He bowed.

"You summoned me, Your Majesty?"

—

The Emperor looked at him.

"...There was an attack tonight."

—

The General's expression sharpened instantly.

"...Where?"

—

"Outside the palace."

"The Empress was targeted."

—

The General stepped forward.

"...Is Her Majesty safe?"

—

"Yes."

—

A brief pause.

Then the Emperor spoke again.

"Strengthen patrols."

"No blind spots."

"No assumptions."

—

The General nodded.

"It will be done."

—

Then the Emperor added—

"...But do not focus only outside."

—

The General looked at him.

"...You believe the threat is inside?"

—

The Emperor didn't answer immediately.

Instead—

He walked toward the window again.

Looking out at the dark palace grounds.

—

"...I believe..."

"...we are being misled."

—

The General remained silent.

—

The Emperor's voice lowered.

"...And whoever is behind this..."

"...is far more dangerous than we thought."

—

A cold wind brushed past the window.

—

The palace looked peaceful.

Still.

Unmoving.

—

But the Emperor knew—

That peace was false.

—

Because now—

The game had changed.

—

And somewhere—

Hidden in shadows—

The real enemy was watching.

Waiting.

—

For the moment—

When everyone would look the wrong way.

