

Ghost 259

Chapter 259: Shadows Beneath the Palace

The palace—once filled with celebration, laughter, and the echoes of the festival—had begun to change.

Not visibly.

Not loudly.

But something... had shifted.

—

It began quietly.

Almost unnoticed.

—

The night before the grand banquet.

—

The Dowager Empress's courtyard was calm, as always.

Lanterns burned steadily.

Servants moved with practiced discipline.

The Dowager sat with Lady Chen and Shin Gu, finishing her evening meal.

—

Her expression was composed.

Dignified.

As if nothing in the world could disturb her.

—

Lady Chen poured tea carefully.

"Mother, you should rest early. Tomorrow will be a long day."

—

The Dowager nodded.

"Yes. The banquet must not have any flaws."

—

Shin Gu smiled softly, her tone gentle.

"I have prepared a tonic for Your Majesty. It will help you sleep peacefully."

—

The Dowager glanced at her.

"...You are thoughtful."

—

She accepted it.

Drank.

—

Everything seemed normal.

—

Until—

A few moments later.

—

Her fingers trembled slightly.

—

The teacup slipped.

Clattered against the table.

—

Lady Chen froze.

"...Mother?"

—

The Dowager's expression twisted.

Her breath grew uneven.

—

Pain.

Sudden.

Sharp.

—

Her hand gripped the edge of the table tightly.

—

"What... is..."

—

Her voice faltered.

—

Then—

Her body collapsed.

—

"Your Majesty!!"

—

Chaos erupted instantly.

—

Servants rushed forward.

Guards were summoned.

—

Lady Chen's face turned pale.

"Call the healer! NOW!"

—

Shin Gu stepped back slightly.

Her eyes lowered.

Silent.

Observing.

—

Within moments—

The imperial healer arrived.

—

He checked her pulse.

His expression changed.

—

"...Poison."

—

The word fell like thunder.

—

Lady Chen staggered back.

"...Poison...?"

—

The healer spoke quickly.

"It is mild... but dangerous if not treated immediately."

—

"Treat her!" Lady Chen snapped.

—

He began working instantly.

Applying medicine.

Forcing antidotes.

Stabilizing her breathing.

—

Hours passed.

—

Slowly—

Her condition stabilized.

—

She did not wake.

—

But she lived.

—

The Emperor was informed.

—

But—

He did something unexpected.

—

He gave a strict order.

"No one is to speak of this."

—

The entire courtyard froze.

—

Even the healer hesitated.

"Your Majesty... this is—"

—

"Silence."

—

His voice was cold.

Controlled.

—

"This matter stays within these walls."

—

"...Yes, Your Majesty."

—

Because he understood something.

—

This was not random.

—

This was not an accident.

—

Someone—

Was testing the palace.

—

—

The next day—

The banquet at the Duke residence proceeded.

—

No one knew.

—

Not the nobles.

Not the guests.

—

Not even—

The Empress.

—

The Emperor maintained his composure.

Spoke.

Ate.

Smiled.

—

But his mind—

Was elsewhere.

—

Watching.

Thinking.

Calculating.

—

Something was wrong.

—

And it was getting worse.

—

—

That night—

After returning from the Duke residence—

—

He did not go to rest.

—

Instead—

He went straight to the Dowager's chamber.

—

The atmosphere there—

Was heavy.

—

Too quiet.

—

The healer stood nearby.

Servants knelt silently.

—

The Emperor stepped inside.

—

And froze.

—

The Dowager's condition—

Had worsened.

—

Her breathing was unstable.

Her face pale.

Sweat covered her forehead.

—

"...What happened?"

—

His voice dropped.

—

The healer bowed immediately.

"Your Majesty... the poison—"

—

"I thought you said it was minor."

—

"It was... but..."

—

"But what?"

—

The healer hesitated.

Then spoke.

"...It has spread again."

—

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

—

"That is not possible."

—

"I... I do not understand either."

—

The healer's voice trembled slightly.

—

"The antidote worked."

"...Her pulse stabilized."

"...But after some time..."

"...the poison resurfaced."

—

Silence.

—

Heavy.

Oppressive.

—

The Emperor stepped closer.

—

He looked at the Dowager.

—

For the first time—

She did not look untouchable.

—

She looked—

Fragile.

—

"...Fix it."

—

His voice was low.

Dangerous.

—

The healer swallowed.

"I am doing everything I can, Your Majesty."

—

"You will do more."

—

"...Yes."

—

The Emperor turned away.

—

His mind—

Racing.

—

First—

The Empress.

—

Dragged toward death by an unseen force.

—

Then—

The Dowager.

—

Poisoned.

—

And now—

The poison behaves unnaturally.

—

Not human.

—

Not ordinary.

—

"...This is not coincidence."

—

His jaw tightened.

—

Something was moving inside the palace.

—

Something—

He could not see.

—

—

Meanwhile—

In another courtyard—

—

Shin Gu stood by the window.

—

Her expression calm.

—

But her eyes—

Dark.

—

A faint smile touched her lips.

—

"Still alive..."

—

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

—

"But not for long."

—

—

Lady Chen paced anxiously.

"What is happening...?"

—

Shin Gu turned toward her slowly.

—

"Why are you afraid?"

—

"...Mother was poisoned."

—

"And she lived."

—

Shin Gu's gaze deepened.

—

"That means..."

"...someone is playing carefully."

—

Lady Chen frowned.

"What do you mean?"

—

Shin Gu stepped closer.

—

"...This is not a simple attack."

—

"...This is a warning."

—

—

Back in the Dowager's chamber—

—

The Emperor remained.

—

He did not leave.

—

Hours passed.

—

He watched.

—

Waited.

—

As the healer continued working.

—

Sweat formed on the healer's forehead.

—

Because he understood.

—

If the Dowager died—

—

He would not survive.

—

—

The Emperor closed his eyes briefly.

—

"...First her."

"...Now my mother."

—

His fists clenched.

—

"...Whoever you are..."

—

"...You are in my palace."

—

"...And you think I cannot find you."

—

He opened his eyes.

—

Cold.

Sharp.

—

"...You are wrong."

—

—

Outside—

The palace seemed peaceful.

—

But beneath—

—

Something dark—

Was spreading.

—

Slowly.

—

Silently.

—

And now—

It had begun to strike—

Openly.

The night in the palace was quiet.

Too quiet.

—

A cold breeze moved through the long corridors, brushing past hanging lanterns that flickered uncertainly—as if even the flames felt uneasy.

—

Inside Lady Chen's courtyard, the atmosphere was far from calm.

—

She sat stiffly on the carved wooden chair, her fingers gripping the armrest tightly.

Her face—

Composed.

But her eyes—

Burning.

—

The news had spread.

The Empress had not only survived—

She had returned.

From death.

—

Lady Chen's chest rose and fell slowly.

"...Impossible."

—

She whispered it again.

As if repeating it would change reality.

—

"She was dead..."

—

The memory of that night.

The whispers.

The certainty.

—

Everything had pointed to one truth.

—

Yet now—

That truth had shattered.

—

"Call Shin Gu."

—

Her voice was low.

Cold.

—

The maid bowed immediately.

"Yes, my lady."

—

Moments later—

The soft sound of footsteps approached.

—

The door slid open.

—

Shin Gu entered.

—

She was calm.

Elegant.

As always.

—

A faint smile rested on her lips.

But her eyes—

Were darker tonight.

—

"My Lady Chen."

—

Lady Chen did not return the smile.

—

Instead—

She stood abruptly.

Walking straight toward her.

—

"Did you do it?"

—

Direct.

Sharp.

—

Shin Gu tilted her head slightly.

"...Do what?"

—

Lady Chen's patience snapped.

"Don't play games with me!"

—

Her voice rose.

Echoing faintly in the chamber.

—

"You attacked the Empress."

"You used your methods."

"You said she would die."

—

Her breathing became heavier.

—

"And yet—"

"She is alive."

—

Silence.

—

The tension thickened.

—

Shin Gu watched her quietly.

Unmoved.

—

Then—

She spoke.

Softly.

—

"...I did not attack the Dowager."

—

Lady Chen froze.

—

"...What?"

—

Her brows furrowed.

—

"You didn't?"

—

Shin Gu shook her head slowly.

—

"No."

—

Her voice was calm.

Too calm.

—

"I did not touch her."

—

Lady Chen stepped back slightly.

Her mind racing.

—

"...Then who did?"

—

Her voice dropped.

Now filled with something new.

—

Fear.

—

Because if it wasn't Shin Gu—

Then someone else—

—

Someone else in the palace—

—

Was using power.

—

Dark power.

—

Shin Gu turned her gaze toward the window.

Her expression thoughtful.

—

"...That is what interests me."

—

Lady Chen stared at her.

—

"...You mean—"

—

Shin Gu interrupted quietly.

—

"There is another."

—

The words felt heavy.

—

"...Another what?" Lady Chen asked.

—

Shin Gu's lips curved slightly.

But there was no warmth in it.

—

"...Another player."

—

Silence fell again.

—

The realization settled slowly.

—

The palace—

Was no longer under control.

—

Not hers.

Not Shin Gu's.

—

Something else—

Was moving.

—

Lady Chen's fingers trembled slightly.

"...No..."

"This is not possible..."

—

Shin Gu turned back to her.

—

"Everything is possible."

—

Her voice dropped lower.

—

"Especially when forbidden things are involved."

—

Lady Chen's throat tightened.

—

"...You said you handled everything."

—

"I did."

—

"Then why is she alive?!"

—

Her voice cracked.

—

This time—

Shin Gu didn't answer immediately.

—

She walked slowly toward the table.

Poured tea.

—

Then spoke.

—

"...Because she returned."

—

Lady Chen blinked.

—

"...What does that mean?"

—

Shin Gu looked at her.

—

"Her soul was taken."

—

"...But it came back."

—

A chill ran through the room.

—

Lady Chen's eyes widened.

—

"That... shouldn't happen..."

—

Shin Gu nodded.

—

"It shouldn't."

—

Her gaze deepened.

—

"But it did."

—

Silence.

—

Heavy.

Oppressive.

—

Lady Chen sat down slowly.

Her legs weak.

—

"...Then she is not normal..."

—

Shin Gu smiled faintly.

—

"She never was."

—

The room felt colder.

—

Lady Chen looked up sharply.

—

"...Then what do we do now?"

—

Her voice was no longer arrogant.

No longer confident.

—

It carried uncertainty.

—

For the first time—

She felt it.

—

She was no longer in control.

—

Shin Gu placed the teacup down gently.

—

"...We wait."

—

Lady Chen frowned.

—

"Wait?"

—

"Yes."

—

"For the right moment."

—

Her eyes darkened.

—

"And for the right mistake."

—

Lady Chen clenched her fists.

—

"...And this 'other person'?"

—

Shin Gu's gaze turned distant.

—

"...We observe."

—

A pause.

—

"Because if they can interfere with my work..."

—

Her lips curved slightly.

—

"Then they are dangerous."

—

A flicker of something—

Almost excitement—

Passed through her eyes.

—

"I would like to meet them."

—

Lady Chen shivered.

—

"...You're not afraid?"

—

Shin Gu looked at her.

—

"...Should I be?"

—

Her calmness was unsettling.

—

Lady Chen looked away.

—

Because she realized something.

—

Shin Gu wasn't scared.

—

She was curious.

—

And that—

Was far more dangerous.

—

The lantern flickered again.

—

Casting shadows on the walls.

—

Two women sat in silence.

—

Bound by ambition.

—

But now—

Surrounded by something neither fully understood.

—

Because in the palace—

—

There was no longer just one darkness.

—

There were many.

—

And none of them—

Were visible.

—

Yet.