

Ghost 272

Chapter 272: The Same Words, Different Deaths

The palace had returned to its usual rhythm.

Servants moved quietly through corridors.

Officials came and went.

But inside the Emperor's study—

The air felt heavy.

Unsettled.

—

Scrolls lay open.

Documents stacked neatly.

Yet—

The Emperor's attention was fixed on something else.

—

Four thin sheets of paper.

—

Suicide notes.

—

He picked one up again.

His fingers brushed lightly over the ink.

His gaze sharpened.

—

"...Same."

—

He placed it beside the others.

Lined them up carefully.

—

Same structure.

Same words.

Same tone.

—

As if—

Written by the same person.

—

His brows furrowed.

—

"...Impossible."

—

A man's last words—

Should be unique.

Desperate.

Emotional.

—

Not—

Copied.

—

His fingers tapped slowly on the table.

—

"...Four different people."

"...Four different lives."

"...Same ending."

—

"...Same words."

—

Something was wrong.

—

Very wrong.

—

A faint knock interrupted his thoughts.

—

"Enter."

—

The door opened.

Lady Chen stepped inside.

—

She was calm.

Elegant as always.

—

But her sharp eyes immediately caught his expression.

—

"...Your Majesty seems troubled."

—

The Emperor didn't respond immediately.

Instead—

He picked up the notes.

—

"Look at these."

—

She stepped forward.

Took them gently.

—

Her eyes moved across the pages.

Once.

Twice.

—

Then—

She laughed softly.

—

"...This?"

—

The Emperor's gaze lifted.

"...You find it amusing?"

—

She placed the papers back down.

—

"It's ridiculous."

—

Her tone was light.

But firm.

—

"This is not how a person writes before ending their life."

—

She picked one up again.

—

"Look at this line..."

—

She read softly,

"I cannot bear the shame of interrupting the Duke's banquet..."

—

Then she looked at him.

—

"...Who would die for that?"

—

Silence.

—

She continued,

—

"Even someone mentally unstable..."

"...would not choose death for such a trivial reason."

—

Her voice sharpened slightly.

—

"This is not guilt."

"This is not despair."

—

"This is... forced reasoning."

—

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"...Exactly."

—

She placed the note down.

—

"And all four wrote the same thing?"

—

"Yes."

—

Her brows lifted slightly.

—

"...Then this is not coincidence."

—

The Emperor leaned back slightly.

—

"That's what I'm thinking."

—

"...Either they were forced..."

"...or..."

—

He paused.

—

"...they were made to write this."

—

Lady Chen's gaze sharpened.

"...Controlled?"

—

The word hung in the air.

—

Neither confirmed it.

—

But both—

Understood.

—

Then—

A knock.

Urgent.

—

"Enter."

—

A guard rushed in.

Kneeling immediately.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

"What is it?"

—

"The merchant's corpse has arrived."

—

Silence.

—

Lady Chen frowned.

"...Already?"

—

The Emperor stood.

"...Let's go."

—

The Corpse Hall

The air inside the inspection hall was thick.

Heavy.

—

The smell—

Unpleasant.

Rotten.

—

Servants stood at a distance.

Covering their noses.

—

The moment the Emperor entered—

Everyone bowed.

—

At the center—

A covered body lay on a wooden platform.

—

The cloth was pulled back.

—

And even the Emperor paused.

—

The body—

Was barely recognizable.

—

Skin darkened.

Decayed.

—

Features distorted.

—

Lady Chen stepped forward slightly—

Then stopped.

—

"...This..."

—

Her expression changed.

—

"...This is not possible."

—

The Emperor didn't speak.

—

But his gaze hardened.

—

"How long since death?" he asked.

—

The official replied carefully,

"...Last night, Your Majesty."

—

Silence.

—

Lady Chen turned sharply.

"...Last night?"

—

"Yes."

—

She stepped closer.

Looking carefully.

—

Then shook her head.

—

"No."

—

"This level of decay..."

"...takes days."

—

Her voice was firm.

Confident.

—

"This is not one night."

—

The Emperor's eyes narrowed.

—

"...Explain."

—

The official hesitated.

"...We cannot, Your Majesty."

—

The merchant's family stepped forward.

—

"That is him."

—

They pointed.

—

"His clothes."

"His jewelry."

"His height."

"The mark on his shoulder."

—

Lady Chen looked again.

—

Everything matched.

—

Except—

The body.

—

"...Too fast," she murmured.

—

The Emperor turned slightly.

—

"...Take it away."

—

The official hesitated.

"...Your Majesty?"

—

"Preserve what remains."

"Do not destroy it."

—

His voice turned cold.

—

"...There is something wrong here."

—

The guards immediately obeyed.

—

The body was covered again.

—

Carried away.

—

Silence filled the hall.

—

Lady Chen stood still.

—

Then slowly spoke.

—

"...This is not natural."

—

The Emperor didn't respond.

—

Because he already knew.

—

This wasn't just suicide.

—

This wasn't just death.

—

This was—

Something else.

—

Something hidden.

—

Something dangerous.

—

His mind returned to the notes.

—

Same words.

Same reasoning.

—

And now—

Bodies that didn't follow natural rules.

—

"...We are missing something."

—

Lady Chen looked at him.

"...Or someone."

—

Their eyes met.

—

Understanding passed silently.

—

This was no longer a simple investigation.

—

This was—

A pattern.

—

A design.

—

And somewhere—

Behind all of this—

—

Someone was pulling the strings.

—

The palace returned to silence.

But beneath that silence—

A storm had begun.

—

And this time—

The truth would not stay hidden for long.

Echoes of the Forbidden Past

The night in the palace had turned unusually heavy.

Even the wind that passed through the corridors carried a strange chill.

—

Inside the Dowager's courtyard, warm lantern light glowed softly, but the atmosphere was far from comforting.

A low table was set.

Delicate dishes arranged.

Steam rising gently from bowls.

—

But no one was truly eating.

—

The Dowager sat upright, her expression tight.

Her fingers tapped lightly against the table—an unusual sign of unrest.

—

Across from her—

The Emperor.

Silent.

Thinking.

—

And beside him—

Lady Chen.

Composed.

But observant.

—

"...This is unacceptable," the Dowager finally spoke.

Her voice calm—but strained.

—

"In my entire life..."

"I have never seen the kingdom so unsettled."

—

She placed her chopsticks down.

—

"Strange deaths."

"Unexplained incidents."

"Whispers among the people."

—

Her gaze turned sharp.

—

"...This is your reign."

—

The words were not loud.

But they carried weight.

—

The Emperor did not react immediately.

—

"I am aware."

—

The Dowager leaned slightly forward.

—

"Are you?"

—

"Because if this continues..."

"...the people will begin to lose faith."

—

Her voice lowered.

—

"And once that begins..."

"...protests will follow."

—

Silence.

—

Lady Chen spoke gently,

"Mother, His Majesty is already investigating."

—

The Dowager didn't look convinced.

—

"Investigating is not enough."

—

"We need answers."

—

The Emperor's fingers tightened slightly on the table.

—

"...We will have them."

—

Before the conversation could continue—

A guard rushed in.

—

"Your Majesty!"

—

The Dowager frowned.

"How dare you interrupt—"

—

The Emperor raised his hand slightly.

"...Let him speak."

—

The guard stepped forward.

Knelt immediately.

—

"General requests urgent audience."

—

"...Send him in."

—

Moments later—

The General entered.

—

Dust still clung to his armor.

His expression—

Grave.

—

He bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty."

—

"What is it?"

—

The General did not hesitate.

—

"I have returned from the burial site of the girls."

—

The room stilled.

—

"And?"

—

He spoke slowly.

—

"...Their bodies..."

"...were rotten."

—

Silence.

—

Complete.

—

Lady Chen's eyes widened.

"...What?"

—

The Dowager's hand froze mid-air.

—

The Emperor leaned forward slightly.

"...Explain."

—

The General continued,

—

"The level of decay..."

"...is not natural."

—

"It resembles..."

—

He hesitated.

—

"...the merchant's corpse."

—

A cold wave passed through the room.

—

Lady Chen spoke first.

—

"That is impossible."

—

"They died recently."

—

"Yes," the General replied.

—

"But their bodies..."

"...do not reflect that."

—

The Emperor's gaze darkened.

—

"...How long would such decay normally take?"

—

"Days."

"Possibly longer."

—

"...And this?"

—

"...Hours."

—

Silence.

—

The Dowager slowly leaned back.

—

Her face—

Had changed.

—

Not anger.

—

Recognition.

—

"...Rotten corpses..."

—

Her voice was quieter now.

Almost distant.

—

"I have seen this before."

—

The Emperor's eyes turned to her.

"...When?"

—

She didn't answer immediately.

—

Her gaze drifted.

As if looking at something far away.

—

"...When I was young."

—

The room held its breath.

—

"There was a time..."

"...when such deaths occurred."

—

Lady Chen frowned slightly.

"...What kind of deaths?"

—

The Dowager's voice lowered.

—

"...Black magic."

—

The word landed heavily.

—

The General stiffened.

—

The Emperor's expression did not change—

But his eyes sharpened.

—

"...Explain clearly."

—

The Dowager continued,

—

"People died suddenly."

"No wounds."

"No illness."

—

"But within hours..."

"...their bodies decayed."

—

"Rotten."

"Unrecognizable."

—

Lady Chen's fingers tightened slightly.

—

"...And the cause?"

—

The Dowager's gaze turned cold.

—

"Dark rituals."

"Forbidden practices."

—

"Power gained through unnatural means."

—

The General spoke quietly,

"...Was it stopped?"

—

"Yes."

—

The Dowager nodded.

—

"The empire banned it."

—

"Anyone involved..."

"...was executed."

—

"Records were destroyed."

—

"Practices erased."

—

She paused.

—

"And after that..."

"...it disappeared."

—

Silence.

—

Heavy.

—

Lady Chen spoke slowly,

—

"...But now..."

"...it's happening again."

—

The Emperor stood.

—

"No."

—

His voice was firm.

—

"We cannot jump to conclusions."

—

The Dowager looked at him sharply.

"...You think this is coincidence?"

—

"I think..."

—

He stepped forward.

—

"...we do not have enough proof."

—

Lady Chen nodded.

—

"Your Majesty is right."

—

"Dark magic is not something we can accuse lightly."

—

The General added,

—

"But the pattern..."

"...is similar."

—

The Emperor's gaze hardened.

—

"...Then we investigate."

—

"Thoroughly."

—

"No assumptions."

—

"No fear-driven decisions."

—

The Dowager watched him.

—

For a moment—

She saw not just her son—

—

But a ruler.

—

And she nodded slowly.

—

"...Very well."

—

"But be careful."

—

Her voice softened slightly.

—

"If this is truly what I think it is..."

—

"...then the enemy is not simple."

—

The Emperor didn't respond.

—

Because he already knew.

—

This was no longer about isolated incidents.

—

This was—

A pattern.

—

And patterns meant design.

—

Which meant—

—

Someone—

Was behind it.

—

The General stepped back.

—

"The people are already afraid."

—

"Rumors are spreading."

—

"They want answers."

—

The Emperor's expression turned cold.

—

"Then we give them control."

—

"Increase patrols."

—

"Control information."

—

"No panic."

—

The General nodded.

"It will be done."

—

He left.

—

Silence returned.

—

But it felt different now.

—

Heavier.

—

More dangerous.

—

Lady Chen spoke quietly,

—

"...If this is truly dark magic..."

"...then the person behind it..."

"...is not ordinary."

—

The Emperor's gaze turned distant.

—

"...I know."

—

His mind flashed—

—

The Empress.

—

The lake.

—

The unnatural movement.

—

The repeated patterns.

—

The monk's warning.

—

Everything—

Connected.

—

"...And they are already inside the palace."

—

The words were not spoken aloud.

—

But they existed—

—

Clear.

—

Certain.

—

The Dowager stood slowly.

—

"...We will talk more tomorrow."

—

She turned.

—

But before leaving—

She paused.

—

"...Protect her."

—

The Emperor looked at her.

—

"...Who?"

—

The Dowager didn't turn back.

—

"...The Empress."

—

Then she left.

—

Lady Chen remained silent.

—

Watching him.

—

Observing.

—

Then she spoke softly,

—

"...You trust her."

—

The Emperor didn't answer.

—

But his silence—

Was answer enough.

—

Outside—

The palace stood still.

—

But beneath that stillness—

—

Something ancient had begun to stir again.

—

Something—

That should have remained buried.

—

And this time—

—

It had returned—

—

Stronger.