

Ghost 274

Chapter 274: storm rising

Back in the palace—

A maid rushed into Lady Chen's courtyard.

Her breath uneven.

—

"Madam—"

"The Empress has returned."

—

Lady Chen paused.

Her fingers still.

—

"...She returned?"

—

The maid nodded.

"Yes."

"From the Duke residence."

—

A slow smile formed on Lady Chen's lips.

—

"...And?"

—

"She did go to Your Majesty first."

—Seeing him with you, she stopped in her tracks. she walked away.

Silence.

—

Then—

A faint laugh escaped Lady Chen.

—

"Of course."

—

Her eyes softened.

—

For a moment—

She felt relief.

—

Without the Empress—

Everything had been simple.

—

The Emperor had spent time with her.

Shared meals.

Conversations.

—

Peace.

—

But now—

She had returned.

—

And with her—

Complication.

—

Still—

This news...

Was comforting.

—

"...Good."

—

Lady Chen stood.

"Prepare."

"We're going to the Dowager's courtyard."

—

Dowager's Chamber

The atmosphere here was different.

—

Quiet.

Heavy.

Sacred.

—

The Dowager sat on a raised seat.

A string of prayer beads in her hand.

Soft chants filled the room.

—

Lady Chen entered quietly.

—

She bowed.

"Greetings, Dowager."

—

The Dowager opened her eyes slowly.

"...You came early."

—

Lady Chen lowered her gaze.

"I have something to report."

—

The Dowager frowned slightly.

"Then speak."

—

Lady Chen hesitated.

Perfectly timed.

Perfectly controlled.

—

"...I don't know if I should say it."

—

The Dowager's tone sharpened.

"Say it."

—

"...I do not wish to create misunderstanding."

—

The Dowager's patience thinned.

"Enough."

"Speak clearly."

—

Lady Chen bowed her head.

"Yes."

—

Then softly—

"As you know... my younger sister's wedding happened recently with duke nephew and empress cousin."

—

The Dowager nodded.

"...And?"

—

"The banquet food..."

—

She paused deliberately.

—

"...was catered by Whisper Bowl."

—

The Dowager's fingers stilled.

"...That restaurant?"

—

"Yes."

—

Lady Chen raised her eyes slightly.

"And I discovered something."

—

Silence deepened.

—

"That restaurant..."

—

"...belongs to the Empress."

—

The air froze.

—

The prayer beads stopped moving.

—

The Dowager's expression changed.

—

"...What?"

—

Lady Chen continued gently,

"She opened it with a merchant."

"And her friend."

—

"And..."

She added quietly—

"...many people already know."

—

The Dowager's face darkened.

—

"...She did what?"

—

Lady Chen lowered her head again.

"I only found out recently."

—

"...Everyone is praising her."

—

The Dowager's gaze turned sharp.

"...Praising?"

—

"Yes."

"They say..."

—

Lady Chen's voice softened further.

"...She is the first Empress who holds power both inside and outside the palace."

—

Silence.

—

Dangerous silence.

—

The Dowager's grip tightened.

—

"...Does the Emperor know?"

—

Lady Chen shook her head.

"I am not sure."

—

That answer—

Was deliberate.

—

The Dowager exhaled slowly.

—

Anger simmered beneath the surface.

—

"...An Empress..."

"...doing business..."

—

Her voice dropped.

—

"...Without permission."

—

Her eyes burned with fury.

—

"Are we not providing enough?"

"Food?"

"Clothes?"

"Status?"

—

"Why does she need to earn?"

—

Lady Chen remained silent.

—

Letting the fire grow.

—

The Dowager stood.

—

"No palace woman is allowed to engage in commerce."

—

"This is a rule."

—

Her voice turned colder.

—

"And she..."

—

"...breaks it openly."

—

Her mind raced.

—

Cooking—

Already tolerated.

—

But business?

—

Expansion?

—

Influence?

—

Outside power?

—

This was different.

—

This was dangerous.

—

"...She never informed me."

—

Her eyes darkened further.

—

"She hides things."

—

"She acts freely."

—

"She disrespects authority."

—

Lady Chen finally spoke softly,

"I thought... you should know."

—

The Dowager turned toward her.

—

For a moment—

She studied her.

—

Then nodded.

—

"You did well."

—

Lady Chen lowered her gaze.

—

Inside—

A faint satisfaction bloomed.

—

The Dowager sat again.

But now—

Her mind was no longer calm.

—

"When did it open?"

—

"How did she manage it?"

—

"Who is supporting her?"

—

Each question—

Sharpened her anger.

—

"...Tomorrow."

—

Her voice turned cold.

—

"I will deal with her."

—

Lady Chen remained still.

—

The trap—

Was set.

—

And outside—

The palace remained quiet.

—

Unaware—

That the next storm—

Was already forming.

Shadows Beneath the Throne

Night had already deepened over the palace.

Yet—

The Emperor's chamber remained lit.

Scrolls covered the desk.

Reports piled high.

Seals broken.

Ink still fresh.

—

But his mind—

Was not at peace.

—

He had not rested properly for days.

Festival.

Court matters.

Strange incidents.

—

And something else—

Something he could not explain—

Weighed heavily on him.

—

A knock echoed.

"Enter."

—

The door opened.

Prince Liang stepped inside.

His expression serious.

Different from his usual careless charm.

—

"You look worse than usual," he said casually.

—

The Emperor didn't respond immediately.

"Speak."

—

Prince Liang walked closer.

"I went out today."

—

That caught the Emperor's attention.

"...And?"

—

Prince Liang leaned slightly against the table.

"The atmosphere outside has changed."

—

The Emperor frowned.

"Explain clearly."

—

Prince Liang exhaled.

"Yesterday, everyone was still whispering about those incidents."

"The strange deaths."

"The so-called suicides."

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"And today?"

—

Prince Liang's tone darkened.

"Today..."

"...they believe it was all suicide."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor's fingers paused mid-air.

"...What?"

—

Prince Liang nodded.

"They're saying those girls were mentally unstable."

"That they couldn't handle pressure."

"That they were weak."

—

The Emperor's expression hardened instantly.

"That's impossible."

—

Prince Liang stepped forward.

"I know."

"I've seen them."

—

His voice grew serious.

"They were nobles."

"They attended banquets."

"They spoke normally."

"They laughed."

—

"They were not... broken."

—

Silence filled the room.

—

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"...Who spread this?"

—

Prince Liang shook his head.

"No one knows."

"It just... appeared."

—

The Emperor turned away slowly.

—

"Rumors don't spread like this without direction."

—

Prince Liang nodded.

"Exactly."

—

"They're controlling the narrative."

—

The Emperor's voice lowered.

"...Changing perception."

—

Prince Liang crossed his arms.

"And fast."

—

Silence again.

—

The Emperor's mind began connecting everything.

—

The strange deaths.

The manipulation.

The control.

—

"...What else did you hear?"

—

Prince Liang hesitated slightly.

Then spoke.

"...There's more."

—

The Emperor turned.

—

"Some merchants..."

"...are saying something strange."

—

"...Speak."

—

Prince Liang's voice dropped.

"They're saying someone... came back."

—

The Emperor froze.

—

"...What do you mean?"

—

Prince Liang looked directly at him.

"A merchant."

"Declared dead."

—

"...Was seen again."

—

Silence.

—

Heavy.

Cold.

—

The Emperor's heartbeat slowed.

Then—

"...And?"

—

Prince Liang continued,

"Then he died again."

—

The room seemed to still.

—

The Emperor's eyes narrowed slowly.

—

"...Say that again."

—

Prince Liang repeated,

"He died."

"Came back."

"Then died again."

—

A chill ran through the room.

—

The Emperor turned completely now.

His expression—

No longer calm.

—

"...Where did this happen?"

—

"In the northern region."

—

The Emperor's breath stilled.

—

North.

—

The same place.

—

The same place connected to—

—

"...Ghost-human breeding."

—

Prince Liang didn't speak.

But his silence—

Confirmed everything.

—

The Emperor walked slowly toward the window.

—

His mind was racing now.

—

Pieces connecting.

—

The strange strength.

The unnatural behavior.

The shifting rumors.

The manipulation.

—

"...This isn't coincidence."

—

Prince Liang nodded.

"No."

—

The Emperor clenched his fist slightly.

"...They're testing something."

—

Prince Liang looked at him.

"...Or perfecting it."

—

The Emperor's voice dropped.

"...Control over life and death."

—

Silence.

—

The weight of those words—

Heavy.

Terrifying.

—

Prince Liang exhaled slowly.

"...If this is true..."

"...then we are not dealing with ordinary enemies."

—

The Emperor turned.

"...We never were."

—

He walked back to the desk.

—

"...This is bigger than the palace."

—

Prince Liang frowned.

"...What are you thinking?"

—

The Emperor didn't answer immediately.

—

Instead—

He picked up a report.

—

"...If they can revive the dead..."

"...or create something that mimics life..."

—

He placed the report down slowly.

—

"...Then they can also control minds."

—

Prince Liang's expression darkened.

"...Like what happened to her."

—

The Emperor's eyes flickered.

—

The lake.

That night.

—

Her empty gaze.

—

"...Yes."

—

Silence again.

—

Prince Liang stepped forward.

"Then what do we do?"

—

The Emperor's voice became firm.

—

"...We don't panic."

—

"We don't reveal."

—

"We don't alert them that we know."

—

Prince Liang frowned.

"...You're going to hide this?"

—

The Emperor looked at him.

"...For now."

—

"Because if they realize we understand..."

"...they will go deeper."

"...Hide better."

—

"...And strike harder."

—

Prince Liang clenched his jaw.

"...And until then?"

—

The Emperor's eyes turned cold.

—

"...We prepare."

—

"Quietly."

—

"Carefully."

—

"And completely."

—

He stepped closer.

—

"...Strengthen the army."

—

"Increase surveillance in the north."

—

"Watch every movement."

—

"Every rumor."

—

"Every death."

—

Prince Liang nodded slowly.

"...Understood."

—

Then he paused.

"...And the palace?"

—

The Emperor's gaze darkened.

—

"...The palace..."

—

"...is already part of this."

—

Silence.

—

Prince Liang straightened.

"...Then we're surrounded."

—

The Emperor didn't deny it.

—

"...Yes."

—

"But that doesn't mean we lose."

—

His voice steadied.

—

"It means..."

—

"We become more dangerous."

—

A faint cold smile appeared.

—

"...Than them."

—

Prince Liang exhaled slowly.

"...Now you sound like yourself again."

—

The Emperor didn't respond.

—

But his eyes—

Held something new.

—

Not confusion.

Not hesitation.

—

Clarity.

—

War had not been declared.

—

But it had already begun.

—

In shadows.

—

In silence.

—

In secrets.

—

And this time—

The enemy was not outside the gates.

—

But within reach.

—

Watching.

Waiting.

—

Just like him.