

Ghost 277

Chapter 277: Chains Beneath Silence

Chains Beneath Silence

The afternoon sun filtered gently through the leaves.

A quiet breeze swayed the branches.

And beneath the large tree in the courtyard—

The Empress sat on a wooden swing.

Slowly moving.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

—

Her gaze was distant.

Fixed on the small shrine visible beyond the garden walls.

—

It was peaceful here.

Too peaceful.

—

For a moment—

She allowed herself to breathe.

To rest.

To exist without pressure.

—

"...It feels calm today..."

she murmured softly.

—

She didn't know—

That far from her quiet moment—

Storms were already rising.

—

The Palace — Silent Punishment

Inside the palace—

The atmosphere had shifted.

Cold.

Tense.

Watching.

—

Earlier—

A servant had quietly entered the Empress's shrine chamber.

Placed a small container carefully near the altar.

—

Ointment.

—

Sent by the Emperor.

—

No announcement.

No message.

—

Just silent care.

—

And just as quietly—

The guards stationed nearby had withdrawn.

—

As if instructed.

—

As if something had changed.

—

Duke Residence — Shock and Restraint

Back at the Duke residence—

News arrived like a sudden thunderclap.

—

"She was punished?"

—

The Duchess stood abruptly.

Her face pale.

—

"For what reason?!"

—

The Duke's expression darkened.

"...Because of the restaurant."

—

Silence fell.

Heavy.

Sharp.

—

The Grandmother's grip tightened on her cane.

"...I told you."

—

Her voice was low.

But firm.

—

"We should not have revealed her work so openly."

—

Lian Hua clenched her fists.

"So what if we did?!"

"She did nothing wrong!"

—

The Aunt shook her head.

"It's not about right or wrong."

"It's about power."

—

Chen Ruyi lowered her gaze.

"...They are targeting her."

—

The room grew colder.

—

Lian Rou spoke quietly,

"...We should go to the palace."

—

The Duchess immediately nodded.

"Yes."

—

But the Duke raised his hand.

"No."

—

Everyone turned to him.

—

"If we go now..."

"...it will make things worse."

—

Lian Hua frowned.

"How can it get worse?!"

—

The Duke's voice hardened.

"You underestimate the Dowager."

—

Silence.

—

"She already sees the Empress as a threat."

"If we intervene now—"

"...she will punish her even more."

—

The words struck deep.

—

The Grandmother closed her eyes briefly.

"...Then we wait."

—

Lian Hua whispered,

"...I don't like this."

—

No one did.

—

But they understood.

—

Sometimes—

Waiting was the only protection.

—

The Palace — Princess Zhi's Defiance

Inside the palace—

Another storm brewed.

—

Princess Zhi stood before the Dowager.

Her posture straight.

Her eyes—

Firm.

—

"I want to go to the shrine."

—

The Dowager didn't look at her immediately.

She sipped her tea slowly.

—

"For what?"

—

"To pray."

—

"For my unborn son."

—

A pause.

—

Then—

The Dowager's eyes lifted.

Sharp.

Cold.

—

"...Or to see her?"

—

Princess Zhi froze for a second.

—

But didn't deny it.

—

"...She is alone."

—

The Dowager placed the cup down.

The sound echoed sharply.

—

"You care too much."

—

"She is my friend."

—

"She is trouble."

—

"She is innocent."

—

The Dowager's gaze darkened.

—

"Innocent?"

"You call defiance innocent?"

—

Princess Zhi stepped forward.

Her voice steadier now.

—

"She did nothing wrong."

—

"She built something on her own."

—

"At least she is not dependent on anyone."

—

The words—

Cut deep.

—

Too deep.

—

The room fell silent.

—

The Dowager's face changed.

—

Not loud anger.

Not shouting.

—

But something far more dangerous.

—

Cold fury.

—

"...You dare."

—

Princess Zhi didn't step back.

—

For the first time—

She stood against her.

—

"For once..."

"...I'm speaking the truth."

—

The Dowager stood slowly.

—

Her aura—

Oppressive.

—

"You've changed."

—

"...Because I see clearly now."

—

A sharp sound echoed.

—

The Dowager's hand struck the table.

—

"Enough."

—

Silence shattered.

—

"You speak like this because of her."

—

"You defend her like this because of her."

—

"She is poisoning your mind."

—

Princess Zhi shook her head.

"No."

—

"She's showing me what strength looks like."

—

That was the final line.

—

The Dowager turned away.

—

"...Guards."

—

Two guards stepped forward immediately.

—

"From today—"

—

Princess Zhi's breath stilled.

—

"...You are confined."

—

Silence.

—

"You will not leave your courtyard."

—

"You will not meet anyone."

—

"You will reflect."

—

Princess Zhi's eyes widened slightly.

—

"...Mother—"

—

"This is my final decision."

—

No anger.

No shouting.

—

Just authority.

Absolute.

—

The guards stepped beside her.

—

Princess Zhi lowered her gaze slowly.

—

Her heart—

Heavy.

—

"...I accept."

—

Not because she agreed.

—

But because she knew—

There was no other choice.

—

Two Worlds — Unaware

Under the tree—

The Empress still sat quietly.

—

The swing moved gently.

The breeze soft against her face.

—

She looked at the shrine again.

—

"...I should go there later..."

—

She had no idea.

—

No idea—

That someone had been punished for her.

—

No idea—

That her family was holding back their anger.

—

No idea—

That tension in the palace had deepened.

—

No idea—

That she had become the center—

Of something far more dangerous.

—

The wind shifted slightly.

—

For a brief moment—

A chill passed through the air.

—

She frowned faintly.

—

"...Strange..."

—

But then—

It disappeared.

—

And everything returned to calm.

—

But that calm—

Was fragile.

—

Because beneath it—

—

Storms were gathering.

—

Unseen.

—

Unstoppable.

A Decision in the Quiet Storm

The afternoon had deepened into a calm, golden silence.

The swing beneath the tree moved gently.

Leaves rustled softly.

And the Empress still sat there—

Unaware that everything around her had already begun to shift.

—

Then—

A sudden gust of wind.

Cold.

Unnatural.

—

Three figures appeared.

The ghosts.

Their usual playful expressions—

Gone.

—

Serious.

Heavy.

—

The Empress immediately noticed.

"...What happened?"

—

No teasing.

No bickering.

—

The female ghost, Fen Yu, stepped forward first.

Her voice—

Lower than usual.

"...Something happened in the palace."

—

The Empress's fingers tightened slightly on the swing rope.

"...What?"

—

The scholar ghost spoke next.

"...Princess Zhi."

—

Her heart skipped.

"...What about her?"

—

The general ghost exhaled.

"...She's been confined."

—

Silence.

—

The world seemed to pause.

—

"...Confined?"

—

Fen Yu nodded.

"...Because she argued with the Dowager."

—

"...For you."

—

The words landed softly—

But struck deeply.

—

The Empress froze.

—

"...For me?"

—

The scholar ghost continued,

"She went to ask permission to visit you."

"The Dowager refused."

"They argued."

—

Fen Yu clenched her fists.

"That old woman couldn't tolerate it."

"She punished her immediately."

—

The Empress lowered her gaze slowly.

—

Her chest tightened.

—

"...She did that..."

"...for me..."

—

For a long moment—

She didn't speak.

—

Something stirred inside her.

—

Not pain.

Not anger.

—

Something deeper.

—

"...At least..."

she whispered,

"...someone in that palace truly cares."

—

The ghosts fell silent.

—

Because they knew—

What she wasn't saying.

—

How alone she had been.

—

The general ghost snorted.

"That palace is rotten."

—

Fen Yu crossed her arms.

"The Dowager, the Emperor, Lady Chen—"

"They're all the same."

—

"Selfish."

"Cruel."

"Blind."

—

The scholar nodded slightly.

"They don't deserve you."

—

The Empress didn't stop them this time.

—

She didn't defend anyone.

—

Instead—

She slowly stood up.

—

Her eyes—

Clear.

Decided.

—

"...You're right."

—

The ghosts blinked.

—

She looked toward the palace direction.

—

"...I've had enough."

—

Her voice was calm.

But firm.

—

"I don't want to stay there anymore."

—

Silence.

—

The wind stilled.

—

"I've tried."

"I've endured."

"I've adjusted."

—

"But what did I get?"

—

Her lips pressed slightly.

—

"Suspicion."

"Punishment."

"Control."

—

Her gaze hardened slightly.

—

"...And now..."

"...someone else is suffering because of me."

—

Fen Yu stepped forward.

"Then leave."

—

The general nodded.

"Why stay where you're not valued?"

—

The scholar added,

"We'll support you."

—

The Empress closed her eyes briefly.

Then opened them.

—

Resolved.

—

"...When I return..."

"...I will give him a divorce letter."

—

Silence fell again.

—

Even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

—

"I will leave the palace."

—

"I don't want power."

"I don't want status."

—

"I want peace."

—

The ghosts looked at each other.

—

Then—

All three nodded.

—

"We're with you."

—

Fen Yu smiled slightly.

"Anywhere you go."

—

The general crossed his arms.

"Even if it means causing chaos."

—

The scholar adjusted his sleeve.

"...Which it definitely will."

—

For the first time since hearing the news—

The Empress smiled faintly.

—

"...Thank you."

—

Then—

Suddenly—

The scholar ghost's expression changed.

"...Someone is coming."

—

The general turned.

"...Strong presence."

—

Fen Yu's eyes widened.

"...That monk."

—

Without another word—

They vanished.

—

Gone.

—

The air returned to stillness.

—

Moments later—

Footsteps approached.

Slow.

Measured.

—

The Empress turned.

—

And saw—

The Monk.

—

He walked calmly into the courtyard.

His presence—

Quiet.

But powerful.

—

The Empress stepped forward and bowed slightly.

"Master."

—

The monk nodded gently.

—

"...You seem troubled."

—

She paused.

Then replied honestly,

"...A little."

—

He observed her silently.

—

Then said,

"...Your energy has changed."

—

She didn't deny it.

—

"...I've made a decision."

—

The monk didn't ask what.

—

Instead—

He looked toward the sky.

—

"...Before making any final decision..."

"...strengthen your mind."

—

The Empress listened quietly.

—

He continued,

"...There are things happening around you..."

"...that you still don't fully see."

—

Her eyes flickered slightly.

—

"...I know."

—

The monk turned back to her.

—

"...Come to the shrine."

—

"...At dawn."

—

"...Four in the morning."

—

She blinked.

"...That early?"

—

He nodded.

—

"Discipline sharpens awareness."

—

"Awareness reveals truth."

—

A pause.

—

Then he added,

"...After your daily duties—"

"...cooking..."

"...cleaning..."

"...you can come again."

—

"To meditate."

—

"To understand."

—

"To protect yourself."

—

The last words—

Held weight.

—

The Empress understood.

—

This wasn't just about peace.

—

It was preparation.

—

She bowed slightly.

"...I will come."

—

The monk nodded.

—

"...Good."

—

Then—

Without another word—

He turned and left.

—

The courtyard fell silent again.

—

But something had changed.

—

The Empress stood there.

Looking toward the path he had taken.

—

Her thoughts—

No longer just about leaving.

—

But about understanding.

—

About strength.

—

About truth.

—

Behind her—

Unseen—

The ghosts slowly reappeared.

—

"...That monk..."

Fen Yu muttered.

"...He knows something."

—

The scholar nodded.

"He always does."

—

The general looked at the Empress.

—

"...Whatever happens next..."

—

"...it won't be simple."

—

The Empress didn't turn.

—

But her voice was steady.

—

"...I know."

—

The wind moved again.

—

This time—

Not cold.

—

But carrying something else.

—

A beginning.

—

Of change.

—

Of truth.

—

Of a path—

She was finally ready—

To walk.