

## **Ghost 289**

### Chapter 289: Shadows Behind Loyalty

The palace corridors were quieter than usual that afternoon.

A faint breeze moved through the carved windows, carrying the scent of incense and old stone. Inside the Dowager Empress's chamber, a rare conversation had just ended.

—

The Emperor stepped out.

His expression—

Different.

—

Not cold.

Not distant.

—

But... light.

—

For the first time in days—

Relief.

—

He had received permission.

—

The punishment placed on the Empress—

Lifted.

—

No more shrine.

No more isolation.

No more distance.

—

He paused for a moment in the corridor.

His thoughts drifting.

—

"...I'll bring her back myself."

—

A faint smile touched his lips.

—

"...I won't tell her."

"...It'll be a surprise."

—

For a man who ruled an empire—

This small thought felt strangely... personal.

—

And rare.

—

He turned.

Walking away with steady steps.

—

But unseen—

A pair of eyes had been watching.

—

Lady Chen's Unease

Inside her courtyard—

Lady Chen stood still.

—

The news had reached her.

—

"The Empress's punishment... has been lifted."

—

Her fingers tightened slowly.

—

"...Why now?"

—

Her chest felt heavy.

Uncomfortable.

—

Something was wrong.

—

Too many things—

Were slipping out of control.

—

The Empress survived.

The attack failed.

And now—

Even the punishment was gone.

—

"...No."

—

Her eyes darkened.

—

"This cannot continue."

—

Without wasting another moment—

She turned.

And walked quickly—

Toward a place she hadn't visited openly in days.

—

Shin Gu's courtyard.

—

The Empty Courtyard

The path felt colder than usual.

—

No maids.

No guards.

No sound.

—

Lady Chen frowned.

"...Where is everyone?"

—

She stepped inside.

—

The courtyard was empty.

Still.

Unnaturally still.

—

A strange chill ran down her spine.

—

"...Shin Gu?"

—

No answer.

—

Then—

Faintly—

From inside—

—

Voices.

—

Low.

Whispering.

—

Not conversation.

—

Chanting.

—

Lady Chen's heart skipped.

—

"...What is that?"

—

She moved slowly.

Carefully.

—

Toward the inner chamber.

—

The door was slightly open.

—

Just enough—

To see inside.

—

What She Was Never Meant to See

Lady Chen froze.

—

Inside—

The room was dark.

—

Only a few candles burned.

—

Their flames—

Unstable.

Flickering violently.

—

At the center—

Shin Gu.

—

Sitting cross-legged.

—

Her eyes closed.

Her lips moving.

—

Chanting.

—

And around her—

—

Objects.

—

Paper talismans.

Black threads.

Strange markings drawn on the floor.

—

And—

—

Portraits.

—

Laid carefully in a circle.

—

The Emperor.

The Empress.

The Dowager Empress.

Princess Zhi.

Several nobles.

—

Each one—

Connected.

—

Bound.

—

Lady Chen's breath caught.

—

"...What is this..."

—

Then—

Shin Gu's voice changed.

—

Lower.

Heavier.

—

Not human.

—

"I will break what binds you..."

—

"I will tear what protects you..."

—

"I will claim what is owed..."

—

The candles flared.

—

The shadows twisted.

—

Lady Chen staggered back slightly.

—

"...Black magic..."

—

Her mind raced.

—

"...This..."

"...This was never part of the plan..."

—

She had believed—

Shin Gu was helping her.

—

Helping her remove the Empress.

—

But this—

—

This was something else entirely.

—

Something darker.

—

Something dangerous.

—

"...The lake..."

"...The attack..."

—

Realization struck.

—

"...It was her."

—

All of it.

—

The accident.

The strange events.

The manipulation.

—

"...She's behind everything..."

—

Fear gripped her chest.

—

"...I have to tell the Emperor."

—

Without thinking—

She turned.

—

And ran.

—

The Sound That Changed Everything

Her steps were quick.

Uncontrolled.

—

Her sleeve caught slightly—

Against a wooden frame.

—

A small ornament—

Hidden within her dress—

Slipped.

—

Fell.

—

Clink.

—

The sound echoed.

Sharp.

Clear.

—

Inside the chamber—

The chanting stopped.

—

Silence.

—

Then—

Shin Gu's eyes opened.

—

Slowly.

—

Cold.

—

"...Someone is here."

—

She rose.

—

Walked toward the door.

—

Each step—

Deliberate.

—

Outside—

Lady Chen froze.

—

"...No..."

—

She moved again—

Faster now.

—

But it was too late.

—

The door creaked open.

—

Shin Gu stepped out.

—

Her gaze scanned the courtyard.

—

Empty.

—

But she smiled.

—

"...Lady Chen."

—

A whisper.

—

Soft.

—

Knowing.

—

The Hunter Turns

Lady Chen hid behind the outer pillar.

Her breath uneven.

Her heart racing.

—

"...She knows..."

—

Shin Gu stepped further into the courtyard.

—

Her fingers moved slightly.

Drawing something in the air.

—

A symbol.

—

Invisible.

But powerful.

—

"...You should not have seen that."

—

Her voice carried lightly.

—

But beneath it—

Something darker.

—

Something ancient.

—

"...Now..."

—

Her smile deepened.

—

"...I have no choice."

—

The air shifted.

—

Heavy.

—

Unnatural.

—

Lady Chen felt it immediately.

—

"...What is she doing—"

—

Before she could finish—

—

A sudden pressure wrapped around her.

—

Like invisible chains.

—

Her body stiffened.

—

She couldn't move.

—

"...No..."

—

Shin Gu's voice echoed again.

—

"You were useful."

—

A pause.

—

"But now..."

—

"...you are a problem."

—

The candlelight from inside flickered violently.

—

Shadows stretched unnaturally across the courtyard.

—

And Shin Gu—

—

Laughed.

—

Soft.

Low.

—

Cold.

The night swallowed the sound.

And within the silent palace—

A new danger had just awakened.

One that no one—

Not even the Emperor—

Had fully seen yet.

When the Darkness Strikes Again

The palace night stood unnaturally still.

Even the wind seemed to hesitate between the tall stone walls.

—

Inside the imperial courtyard, torches flickered softly.

Guards stood at their posts.

Everything appeared normal.

—

But something—

Was wrong.

—

Lady Chen's Struggle

Lady Chen walked quickly through the long corridor leading toward the Emperor's courtyard.

Her steps were uneven.

Unsteady.

—

Her breath came faster than usual.

Her chest felt tight.

—

"...I have to tell him..."

—

Her mind raced.

Images flashing—

Shin Gu.

The black ritual.

The portraits.

The chanting.

—

"...She's not just targeting the Empress..."

"...She wants everything..."

—

Her fingers trembled.

—

"The Emperor... the Dowager... everyone..."

—

She tried to quicken her pace—

But suddenly—

Her body faltered.

—

A sharp pain shot through her chest.

—

"...What—"

—

She stopped.

—

Her hand gripped the wall.

—

Her breathing became shallow.

—

"...No..."

—

She opened her mouth—

—

"Your—"

—

But no sound came out.

—

Her throat tightened.

—

Her voice—

Gone.

—

Her eyes widened in fear.

—

"...I can't speak..."

—

Then—

Another wave of pain.

Stronger.

—

Her vision blurred.

—

"...Shin Gu..."

—

A horrifying realization struck.

—

"She never intended to just eliminate the Empress..."

—

"She..."

—

"...planned everything."

—

Her knees weakened.

—

"...I have to warn him..."

—

But her body—

Was no longer listening.

—

The Emperor's Courtyard

Not far ahead—

The Emperor stood in discussion with a general.

—

"Double the night watch."

"No one enters or leaves unnoticed."

—

"Yes, Your Majesty."

—

His voice was firm.

Controlled.

—

But beneath it—

A quiet tension still lingered.

—

The attack.

The doubts.

The unseen threat.

—

He had not let his guard down.

—

Not even for a moment.

—

Then—

Something shifted.

—

A faint sound.

—

Not loud.

—

But enough.

—

The Emperor turned slightly.

—

His eyes narrowed.

—

"...Who's there?"

—

The general followed his gaze.

—

And then—

They saw her.

—

Collapse

At the far end of the courtyard—

A figure stumbled.

—

Then—

Fell.

—

Hard.

—

"Lady Chen!"

—

The Emperor moved instantly.

—

No hesitation.

No thought.

—

He reached her in seconds.

—

And froze.

—

Her body—

Cold.

—

Her eyes—

Wide open.

—

Too wide.

—

Almost... unnatural.

—

Her lips trembled slightly—

But no words came.

—

Then—

—

Blood.

—

A thin line—

Slowly spilling from the corner of her mouth.

—

The Emperor's expression changed instantly.

—

"...No."

—

He lifted her immediately.

—

"Call the healer!"

—

"Now!"

—

The guards ran.

—

The general's face turned grim.

—

This—

Was not normal.

—

The Chamber of Urgency

Lady Chen was carried into the Emperor's chamber.

Placed carefully on the bed.

—

Her breathing—

Shallow.

Uneven.

—

Her pulse—

Fading.

—

The Emperor stood beside her.

His hands clenched tightly.

—

"...Stay awake."

—

But she couldn't hear him.

—

Or maybe—

She couldn't respond.

—

Moments later—

The healer arrived.

—

He rushed forward.

Checked her pulse.

Her eyes.

Her breath.

—

Then—

His expression changed.

—

"...This..."

—

The Emperor's voice sharpened.

"Speak."

—

The healer hesitated.

—

Then said slowly—

"...It is the same condition."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

"...What do you mean?"

—

The healer swallowed.

—

"...The same as the Empress."

—

The room froze.

—

The Dowager Arrives

The doors opened again.

—

The Dowager Empress entered.

—

Her expression serious.

—

"What happened?"

—

Her gaze fell on Lady Chen.

—

Then—

Her face changed.

—

"...Not again..."

—

She turned to the healer.

"Is she—"

—

The healer lowered his head.

"...Her condition is critical."

—

The Emperor's Breaking Point

The Emperor stood still.

—

His mind—

Empty.

Full.

Heavy.

—

First—

The Empress.

—

Then—

Unusual incidents.

—

Now—

Lady Chen.

—

One after another.

—

People around him—

Falling.

—

"...I couldn't protect her..."

—

His jaw tightened.

—

"...What kind of Emperor am I..."

—

The words were quiet.

—

But filled with frustration.

—

The Dowager looked at him.

—

But didn't speak.

—

Because she saw it.

—

This wasn't just anger.

—

This was guilt.

—

A Command Born from Desperation

The Emperor turned sharply.

—

His gaze locked onto the healer.

—

"...Save her."

—

The healer froze.

—

"Your Majesty—"

—

"I don't care how."

—

His voice dropped.

Cold.

Sharp.

—

"Use everything."

—

"Anything."

—

"By hook or by crook—"

—

"Save her."

—

Silence.

—

The weight of the command—

Heavy.

Unavoidable.

—

The healer bowed deeply.

"...I will do my best."

—

But inside—

He knew.

—

This was no ordinary illness.

—

This was something else.

—

Something—

Beyond medicine.

—

The Night Grows Darker

The room fell quiet again.

—

Only the faint sound of Lady Chen's breathing remained.

—

Weak.

Fragile.

—

The Emperor stood beside her.

Watching.

—

Not moving.

—

Because now—

He understood.

—

This was not coincidence.

—

This was not random.

—

Someone—

Was targeting them.

—

One by one.

—

And this time—

The enemy had struck—

Inside the palace.

—

Without being seen.

—

Without being stopped.

—

The torches outside flickered violently.

—

As if the darkness itself—

Was closing in.

—

And somewhere—

Hidden.

Watching.

—

Shin Gu smiled.

—

Because the game—

Had finally begun.

—

End of Chapter