

Ghost 56

Chapter 56: heads and shadow

The sun had barely risen when the drums began.

Their low, steady beat rolled through the streets of the capital, waking every home, every whisper, every fear.

The crowd gathered along the execution grounds outside the Western Gate — merchants, farmers, servants, courtiers pretending to be commoners — all drawn by the same morbid pull: to see the once-proud Chen Family brought to ruin.

The crimson banner of the Imperial Guard fluttered in the wind.

The execution platform stood in its shadow.

And upon it knelt Chen Wei, the disgraced uncle of Lady Chen — once draped in silk, now stripped to coarse robes, his hair unbound and face ghost-pale.

His wife and children stood shackled nearby, their eyes hollow, their tears dry.

The Imperial Crier raised his scroll.

"By decree of His Majesty, the Emperor of Tianlong, Chen Wei is found guilty of treason, corruption, and conspiracy against the crown. His life is forfeit at dawn, and his household shall serve as bond-slaves to the northern borders for the remainder of their days. This is the law, and the law is just."

A murmur rippled through the crowd — a mix of fear, pity, and the thrill of scandal.

One merchant whispered, "That's Lady Chen's uncle, isn't it? The Emperor's favorite consort's kin?"

Another answered, "Used to be. Now look — even a favored branch can burn when the trunk catches fire."

A third spat quietly. "Favor changes with the wind. The Emperor is cleaning house. Best no one stands too close."

The drums thundered once more.

The executioner raised his blade.

And with a single swift arc of steel — it was done.

Blood pooled darkly on the wooden boards.

The sky seemed to shudder.

The crowd bowed instinctively as the herald announced, "Justice has been served in the name of His Majesty."

As the heads were taken away, a carriage bearing the imperial crest passed silently through the streets.

Inside, eunuchs sealed the royal edict: The Chen family's lands confiscated. Their name struck from the registry. Their kin sent north under guard.

The people watched the procession vanish, some with awe, some with unease.

For years, the Chen family had basked under the Emperor's favor. Now, their fall marked a shift no one could ignore.

The city felt colder that day, as if power itself had drawn a deep breath — and exhaled a warning.

In the Phoenix Hall

The Dowager Empress, regal as frost, sat beneath the golden canopy, her phoenix crown glinting beneath the morning light.

Her hands, pale and slender, gripped a string of prayer beads so tightly that her knuckles whitened.

When the eunuch announced the Emperor's arrival, she did not rise.

"Let him come," she said coldly.

Zhao Rui entered, robes sweeping behind him like dark wings. He bowed perfunctorily, the gesture respectful yet distant.

The Dowager's eyes were sharp. "You could have confined the Chen household, stripped them of titles — but beheading?"

Her voice trembled, not with fear but anger. "Do you know what you've done to your own court? You've turned loyal servants into trembling leaves!"

Zhao Rui met her gaze evenly. "Loyal servants have no reason to tremble."

She struck the arm of her throne, the beads in her hand snapping apart, scattering across the floor.

"You speak as if you rule without consequence! The Chen family served your father, and your grandfather before him. Their blood runs in this empire's veins. You could have shown mercy!"

He was silent for a long moment.

Then, slowly, he said, "If I had shown mercy, I would not be standing here to speak with you."

Her brows furrowed. "What nonsense—"

"My father showed mercy," Zhao Rui said quietly. "He spared my mother's kin when they sold secrets to the southern lords. And what did they do? They slit his throat in his own palace. They smiled at him while feeding his death to his wine."

The hall fell silent. The Dowager's breath caught, her eyes flickering.

Zhao Rui continued, each word measured and calm.

"I was a boy when I found him. I remember the smell of iron, the way the courtiers bowed even as they whispered which of them would be next to fall. I learned then — pity has no place on the throne."

The Dowager's lips trembled, her fury dimming beneath the weight of old grief.

"You think I am cruel," Zhao Rui said, stepping closer, voice low but steady. "But cruelty is mercy when it cuts rot before it spreads. If I had not acted, the Chen family would have done to me what my mother's kin did to my father. And you would have wept again, for another son lost to your own silence."

Her hand fell to her lap, the broken beads slipping soundlessly onto the floor.

For a long moment, the hall was still except for the faint hum of incense.

Then, with a tired sigh, the Dowager said softly, "Perhaps you are right. But righteousness without temper becomes tyranny. The people fear you now, my son. Fear breeds distance — and distance, rebellion."

Zhao Rui inclined his head. "Fear keeps the wolves from the door. But I hear your warning, Mother."

Her eyes lifted to his face — and the grief there softened her tone. "Then at least show the world that your heart still beats. Take care of Lady Chen. She has lost much because of your actions. Let her know compassion. And..."

She hesitated, then smiled faintly, forcing lightness into her words. "I still wait for news that you will give me a grandchild. A son to carry our line. It's time."

Zhao Rui's expression didn't change, but a shadow crossed his gaze. "In time, perhaps."

The Dowager frowned slightly. "You have been wed long enough. The court grows restless. Even Lady Chen, despite her grief, still dreams of her duty. Do not make her wait. And as for that unruly Empress of yours..."

Her tone sharpened again. "If she stirs another scandal upon returning to the palace, she will be punished. I will not have a Queen who forgets her manners."

Zhao Rui's jaw tightened. "As you wish, Mother."

He bowed, turned, and walked from the hall, his robes trailing behind him like ripples of ink across stone.

The Dowager watched him go, her fingers tightening around a broken string of beads. "So much like your father," she murmured. "Strong — and just as haunted."

The Emperor's Silence

Outside, the Emperor paused under the great arch of the Phoenix Pavilion.

The winter sun burned pale above the city roofs.

He could still hear his mother's voice echoing in his mind — Take care of Lady Chen. Punish the Empress.

He closed his eyes briefly, exhaling.

Lady Chen's tears, her trembling hands, her desperate smiles — he had once been moved by them. But now they felt hollow, rehearsed.

And the Empress... Lian An.

She burned brighter than the others. She didn't plead or flatter. She fought, laughed, defied. She made him furious — and alive.

He clenched his fists inside his sleeves. "Damn her," he muttered under his breath, though the corner of his mouth curved slightly.

When he mounted the palace steps, the eunuchs bowed low.

"Your Majesty, the execution has been completed," one said softly.

"Good," Zhao Rui replied, his voice distant. "Let the city remember this day."

And then, more quietly, he added, "Send the convoy to the Duke's residence. Make sure the Empress receives my order to rest there another week."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

By noon, every tavern, every market stall, every whispering household in the capital buzzed with the same tale:

The Emperor had executed the Chen family.

The Emperor had rewarded the Lian family.

The Emperor had defied his mother's will.

To some, it was justice.

To others, a warning.

And to a few — especially one woman trembling behind the silk curtains of her lonely chamber — it was the birth of vengeance.

Lady Chen sat before her mirror, her eyes hollow yet gleaming. "You took everything from me," she whispered, touching the tiny vial hidden in her sleeve. "But soon, I'll take back what's mine."

Outside, thunder rumbled over the palace roofs.

The winds were changing again — and this time, they carried the scent of blood and fate.