

Ghost 260

Chapter 260: Calm Before the Storm

The palace had finally begun to settle.

After days of chaos, fear, whispers, and tension—

There was... calm.

But it was not peace.

It was the kind of silence that comes before something dangerous unfolds.

—

Morning sunlight filtered softly into the Dowager Empress's courtyard.

Incense burned steadily.

Servants moved quietly, their steps cautious.

Even their voices were hushed—

As if afraid to disturb something unseen.

—

Inside the chamber—

The Dowager Empress sat upright against silk cushions.

Her complexion had improved.

The pale weakness from her fever had faded.

Her breathing was steady.

Her posture regained its usual authority.

—

But—

Her eyes were different.

—

There was something lingering in them.

Something she hadn't spoken about.

Something she couldn't fully understand.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly around the teacup.

—

"...It was not a dream."

—

She murmured softly to herself.

—

The shadow she had seen.

The presence.

The feeling of being watched.

—

Even now—

She could not forget it.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

A maid's voice broke her thoughts.

—

"The Prince has arrived."

—

The Dowager lifted her gaze.

"...Let him enter."

—

Moments later—

The door opened.

—

Prince Liang stepped in first.

Behind him—

Shin Gu.

—

The moment they entered—

Both bowed respectfully.

"Greetings, Mother."

—

The Dowager nodded slightly.

"Rise."

—

Prince Liang straightened first.

His expression carried a mix of concern and restraint.

"...We heard you were unwell."

—

Shin Gu stepped slightly forward, her voice soft and gentle.

"We came to check on Your Majesty."

—

Her tone was perfect.

Too perfect.

—

The Dowager observed them both carefully.

—

"I am fine now."

—

Her voice was steady.

Controlled.

—

Prince Liang exhaled slightly.

"That is good."

—

He stepped closer.

Taking a seat near her.

—

"...The palace has been unsettled recently."

—

The Dowager gave a faint hum.

"You noticed as well."

—

"It would be difficult not to."

—

His tone held seriousness.

—

Shin Gu remained standing slightly behind him.

Her expression calm.

Her eyes lowered.

—

But—

For a brief second—

Her gaze flickered upward.

—

Sharp.

Observant.

—

Then gone.

—

The Dowager noticed.

But said nothing.

—

"...Sit."

—

She gestured toward Shin Gu.

—

Shin Gu bowed slightly.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

—

She sat gracefully.

Her movements precise.

Controlled.

—

Too controlled.

—

The Dowager's fingers tapped lightly against her armrest.

—

"...Tell me."

—

She looked at Prince Liang.

"What do you think of what is happening in the palace?"

—

Prince Liang frowned slightly.

—

"...It is not normal."

—

He spoke carefully.

—

"The miscarriage."

"The strange incidents."

"The... recent events involving the Empress."

—

He paused.

—

"...It does not feel like coincidence."

—

Silence.

—

The Dowager's eyes darkened slightly.

"...Good."

—

"At least someone is thinking."

—

Prince Liang looked slightly surprised.

—

"...Mother?"

—

She leaned slightly forward.

—

"You think I do not see it?"

—

Her voice sharpened.

—

"This palace has changed."

—

Her gaze turned toward the window.

—

"There is something here."

—

"Something... wrong."

—

The air in the room grew heavier.

—

Shin Gu lowered her gaze further.

—

Hiding the faint curl of her lips.

—

Prince Liang's expression grew serious.

"...Then we must investigate."

—

The Dowager gave a cold laugh.

"Investigate?"

—

"You think something like this can be found so easily?"

—

Her eyes turned sharp.

—

"This is not human."

—

Silence.

—

Prince Liang's brows tightened.

"...You mean—"

—

Before he could finish—

She interrupted.

—

"Do not speak unnecessary words."

—

Her voice cut through the room.

—

The atmosphere turned tense.

—

Shin Gu finally spoke.

Softly.

Carefully.

—

"...Your Majesty."

—

Both of them turned toward her.

—

"I have heard... in some distant lands..."

—

"...there are things beyond human control."

—

Her voice remained gentle.

Measured.

—

"...Spiritual disturbances."

"...Dark forces."

—

Prince Liang frowned slightly.

"You believe in such things?"

—

Shin Gu smiled faintly.

—

"I believe... when logic fails... we must consider other possibilities."

—

The Dowager's gaze sharpened.

—

"...You speak as if you know more."

—

For a brief moment—

The room stilled.

—

Shin Gu lowered her eyes again.

—

"I only speak what I have heard."

—

A perfect answer.

—

Careful.

Safe.

—

But—

Too smooth.

—

The Dowager leaned back.

Studying her.

—

"...Hmph."

—

She did not press further.

—

Prince Liang sighed slightly.

—

"...Regardless, we must increase vigilance."

—

"No one should move carelessly."

—

The Dowager nodded slowly.

—

"Yes."

—

"Especially now."

—

Her gaze turned cold.

—

"The Empress... has survived."

—

Silence.

—

Prince Liang's expression changed slightly.

—

"...That itself is strange."

—

Shin Gu remained still.

—

But inside—

Something twisted.

—

The Dowager continued.

—

"A person who was on the brink of death..."

"...returns."

—

Her fingers tightened.

—

"This is not luck."

—

"...Or perhaps it is."

—

Her tone carried doubt.

—

Prince Liang nodded slowly.

—

"...We cannot take this lightly."

—

Shin Gu finally spoke again.

—

"...Your Majesty."

—

Her voice was softer now.

—

"Perhaps... we should also protect the palace."

—

"Strengthen spiritual defenses."

—

The Dowager's eyes narrowed.

—

"...The Emperor has already summoned monks."

—

"...We will see what they find."

—

A brief silence followed.

—

Then—

The Dowager waved her hand slightly.

—

"You may leave."

—

Prince Liang stood immediately.

—

"...Rest well, Mother."

—

Shin Gu bowed gracefully.

—

"We are relieved you are well."

—

They turned to leave.

—

But—

As Shin Gu stepped out—

She paused for a fraction of a second.

—

Her gaze shifted slightly—

Toward the shadows of the courtyard.

—

Unseen.

—

Unnoticed.

—

A faint smile appeared on her lips.

—

Cold.

Dark.

—

Then disappeared.

—

Outside—

Prince Liang walked ahead.

—

"...Things are becoming complicated."

—

He muttered.

—

Shin Gu walked beside him.

—

"...They always were."

—

Her voice was calm.

—

But her eyes—

Held something deeper.

—

Something dangerous.

—

Something waiting.

—

And inside the Dowager's chamber—

She sat still.

—

Her expression thoughtful.

—

"...Not human..."

—

She repeated softly.

—

Her gaze darkened.

—

"...Then what are you..."

—

The wind outside shifted.

—

And somewhere—

Hidden beneath the palace—

Something stirred.

—

Watching.

—

Waiting.

—

For the right moment—

To strike again

Not just within the palace.

But around it.

Beyond it.

—

And most importantly—

Within the people closest to it.

—

By dawn—

He had already decided.

—

He would return to the palace.

And observe.

Carefully.

—

The palace gates opened as the Emperor's carriage entered.

The guards bowed deeply.

The atmosphere—

Still carried that faint, suffocating heaviness.

—

Even now.

Even after days.

—

"...It hasn't disappeared," he murmured.

—

The General beside him nodded.

"No, Your Majesty."

—

Without wasting time—

The Emperor went straight toward the Dowager Empress's courtyard.

—

Inside—

The air smelled faintly of medicinal herbs.

Incense burned softly.

—

The Dowager Empress was seated upright now.

Her condition—

Much better than before.

—

But her face still held traces of fatigue.

—

When she saw him—

She straightened.

"You're here."

—

He nodded.

"How are you feeling?"

—

"Better."

—

Her tone was calm.

But something else lingered beneath it.

—

Unease.

—

He noticed immediately.

"...Something happened?"

—

She didn't answer immediately.

Instead—

She gestured for the maids to leave.

—

The doors closed.

Silence fell.

—

Then—

She spoke.

—

"Liang came."

—

The Emperor's brows furrowed slightly.

"Prince Liang?"

—

"Yes."

—

"And... Shin Gu."

—

The moment that name was spoken—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

—

"...What about them?"

—

The Dowager leaned slightly forward.

"They said something strange."

—

The room seemed to grow colder.

—

"They said..."

—

"...they felt it too."

—

"The same... suffocating presence."

—

The Emperor didn't interrupt.

—

"They said the energy in the palace—"

—

"...is not normal."

—

A pause.

—

"...Dark."

—

The word lingered.

Heavy.

—

The Emperor's expression hardened.

—

"...Continue."

—

The Dowager's eyes narrowed slightly.

"...It wasn't just Liang."

—

"It was her."

—

"Shin Gu."

—

Silence.

—

"She spoke as if she understood it."

—

"As if she had seen something like this before."

—

The Emperor's fingers tightened slightly behind his back.

—

"...What exactly did she say?"

—

The Dowager repeated slowly.

—

"She said..."

—

"...in distant lands—"

—

"...there are practices forbidden by most kingdoms."

—

"Dark arts."

—

"Things that manipulate the human body..."

"...and the soul."

—

The Emperor's heart skipped.

—

Ghost breeding.

—

The word echoed silently in his mind.

—

But he didn't speak it.

—

"...She mentioned it casually," the Dowager continued.

"As if it wasn't new to her."

—

Now—

That was wrong.

—

Very wrong.

—

The Emperor's gaze turned colder.

—

"...She has never left the palace."

—

The Dowager nodded.

"That's what troubles me."

—

"She spoke like someone who had seen it."

—

"...Not heard."

—

Silence fell again.

—

Then—

The Dowager added something that made everything heavier.

—

"She also said..."

—

"...this kind of power doesn't appear randomly."

—

"It's controlled."

—

"Directed."

—

"And..."

—

"...already inside the kingdom."

—

The Emperor's breathing slowed.

—

Careful.

Measured.

—

"...Did Liang react?"

—

The Dowager let out a small sigh.

"He didn't question her."

—

"He believed her."

—

That was another problem.

—

Prince Liang—

Was not someone easily convinced.

—

Unless—

Something was influencing him.

—

"...Where are they now?"

—

"In his courtyard."

—

The Emperor nodded slowly.

—

But he didn't move immediately.

—

Instead—

He stood still.

Thinking.

—

Connecting.

—

Pieces.

—

Princess Zhi's miscarriage.

—

The oil that no one saw.

—

The empress being controlled.

—

The lake incident.

—

The sleepwalking.

—

The suffocating energy.

—

The monk's warning.

—

And now—

Shin Gu.

—

"...Too many coincidences," he murmured.

—

The Dowager watched him carefully.

"You're thinking the same thing, aren't you?"

—

He didn't answer.

—

Because saying it out loud—

Would make it real.

—

And dangerous.

—

"...Mother," he finally said.

"Did she show any fear while saying all this?"

—

The Dowager paused.

Thinking back.

—

Then—

"...No."

—

That answer—

Was enough.

—

The Emperor's eyes darkened.

—

"Someone who senses unknown danger..."

"...should show uncertainty."

—

"But she didn't."

—

"She spoke like she understood it."

—

"...Or controlled it."

—

Silence.

—

The Dowager's fingers tightened slightly.

"...Are you saying—"

—

He raised his hand.

Stopping her.

—

"Not yet."

—

"We don't have proof."

—

But his mind—

Had already begun forming a conclusion.

—

Shin Gu—

Was not what she appeared to be.

—

And worse—

She was hiding something.

—

Something powerful enough—

To escape even his detection.

—

"...I will observe her," he said finally.

—

The Dowager nodded slowly.

"You should."

—

Then she added—

"...Be careful."

—

The Emperor gave a faint nod.

—

"I will."

—

He turned to leave.

—

But before stepping out—

He paused.

—

"...Mother."

—

She looked at him.

—

"...Do not trust anyone completely."

—

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"...Including her?"

—

He didn't answer.

—

Because the truth was—

He no longer knew who to trust.

—

Not completely.

—

Not anymore.

—

Outside—

The air felt heavier than before.

—

The Emperor walked slowly through the palace corridors.

—

His mind—

Focused.

Sharp.

—

"...Shin Gu..."

—

Her calmness.

Her knowledge.

Her timing.

—

None of it made sense.

—

Unless—

—

"...She's involved."

—

A cold realization settled in his chest.

—

Not confirmed.

—

But—

Close.

—

Very close.

—

"...If she knows about dark magic..."

—

"...then she is either connected to it—"

—

"...or part of it."

—

His steps slowed.

—

Because if that was true—

—

Then the enemy—

Was not outside the palace.

—

Not even hidden in the shadows.

—

But walking freely—

Among them.

—

Smiling.

Speaking gently.

—

Waiting.

—

And perhaps—

Already watching him.

—

The Emperor's gaze lifted slightly.

—

"...Let's see..."

—

"...how long you can hide."

—

The wind passed quietly through the palace corridors.

—

But this time—

It didn't feel empty.

—

It felt—

Watched.