

Ghost 278

Chapter 278: Quiet Distance, Hidden Storm

Quiet Distance, Hidden Storm

The imperial palace stood silent under the weight of afternoon stillness.

Inside the Emperor's study, the atmosphere was heavy.

Scrolls covered the desk.

Ink had dried in places where the brush had paused too long.

The Emperor sat there—

But his mind was not on state affairs.

Not on reports.

Not on governance.

—

It was somewhere else.

—

At the shrine residence.

—

At her.

—

His fingers tapped lightly against the table.

A rare sign of unrest.

He hadn't returned to the palace long ago—

Yet something felt... off.

Empty.

—

A soft knock broke the silence.

"Enter."

—

The door opened gently.

Lady Chen stepped inside.

—

She paused for a moment at the entrance.

Observing.

—

The Emperor's posture.

The untouched food beside him.

The scattered scrolls.

—

His mood was clear.

—

Low.

Distant.

—

Her eyes softened slightly.

But beneath that—

Calculation.

—

This is my chance.

—

She walked forward gracefully.

"Your Majesty."

—

The Emperor didn't immediately respond.

Only after a moment did he lift his gaze.

"...Lady Chen."

—

His voice was calm.

But not warm.

—

She noticed.

Immediately.

—

Still—

She smiled gently.

"You haven't eaten."

—

"I'm not hungry."

—

Simple.

Direct.

—

Lady Chen didn't argue.

Instead—

She turned slightly.

"Bring lunch."

—

The guards hesitated.

Then obeyed.

—

Within moments—

Food was placed on the table.

Warm.

Fragrant.

Carefully arranged.

—

Lady Chen sat down beside him.

"You should eat something."

—

He didn't move at first.

—

Then—

Slowly—

He picked up his chopsticks.

—

Silence filled the room as they began eating.

—

But it wasn't comfortable.

—

It wasn't like before.

—

Lady Chen noticed.

Every detail.

—

The distance.

The restraint.

The absence of ease.

—

So she spoke.

Softly.

Carefully.

—

"Your Majesty..."

"I know you're troubled."

—

No response.

—

She continued.

"...It's because of the Empress."

—

The chopsticks paused slightly.

—

Just for a moment.

—

Then continued.

—

Lady Chen's eyes flickered.

She saw it.

—

She was right.

—

"As a woman..." she said gently,

"I can understand her."

—

The Emperor finally spoke.

"...What do you mean?"

—

"She is independent."

"She has pride."

—

Lady Chen lowered her gaze slightly.

"...A woman like her does not like being controlled."

—

The Emperor listened.

Silently.

—

"She accepted punishment..."

"...not because she was weak."

"...but because of her dignity."

—

A pause.

—

The Emperor set his chopsticks down.

—

"I know."

—

His voice was quiet.

But firm.

—

"I know it wasn't her fault."

—

Lady Chen's fingers tightened slightly under her sleeve.

—

But her expression remained calm.

—

"She opened her own restaurant."

"She built something herself."

—

His gaze lowered slightly.

—

"I knew."

—

Another pause.

—

"I didn't stop her."

—

Lady Chen looked up slightly.

—

"...You knew?"

—

"Yes."

—

His voice carried something deeper now.

—

"I knew about the restaurant."

"About the branches."

—

"I didn't say anything."

—

A faint tension filled the air.

—

"...Why?" Lady Chen asked softly.

—

The Emperor exhaled slowly.

—

"...Because if Mother found out..."

"She would be angry."

—

"And the Empress..."

"...would suffer for it."

—

Silence.

—

Lady Chen's nails pressed into her palm.

Hidden.

Unseen.

—

He protected her.

—

Not openly.

But quietly.

—

And worse—

He shared it.

—

With her.

—

Not me.

—

For a brief moment—

Jealousy surged.

Sharp.

Uncontrolled.

—

But she suppressed it instantly.

—

Her expression softened again.

—

"You care for her deeply."

—

The Emperor didn't deny it.

—

He didn't confirm it either.

—

But his silence—

Was answer enough.

—

Lady Chen forced a faint smile.

—

"Perhaps..."

"...she just needs time."

—

"She has never lived like this before."

—

"Being in the shrine..."

"Being restricted..."

—

"She must be uncomfortable."

—

Her tone remained gentle.

Understanding.

—

"Maybe she will return soon."

—

"She cannot stay away forever."

—

The Emperor's gaze lifted slightly.

—

"...I hope so."

—

Just four words.

—

But heavy.

—

Sincere.

—

Lady Chen lowered her eyes again.

—

He hopes for her.

—

Not for peace.

Not for order.

—

For her.

—

Her chest tightened slightly.

—

But her voice remained calm.

—

"Don't worry, Your Majesty."

—

"She will come back."

—

"...She has no choice."

—

The Emperor didn't respond.

—

But his gaze turned distant again.

—

Back to where his thoughts had been all along.

—

Not here.

—

Not in this room.

—

But with her.

—

Lady Chen watched him quietly.

—

And for the first time—

She realized something clearly.

—

She had his trust.

—

But not his heart.

—

And that—

Was something she was not willing to accept.

—

As silence filled the chamber once more—

She slowly stood.

—

"I'll leave you to rest."

—

The Emperor nodded faintly.

—

She turned—

And walked out.

—

Her expression calm.

—

But inside—

A storm had begun.

—

Because now—

She didn't just want his attention.

—

She wanted—

Everything.

—

And she would not stop—

Until she had it.

Whispers from the North

The shrine was quiet as always.

Tucked away from the grandeur of the palace, it carried a different rhythm of life—slow, simple, and untouched by luxury.

That morning, the Empress stood in the small kitchen area, sleeves tied neatly, hands busy preparing ingredients.

The air smelled of fresh vegetables and boiling broth.

It had been days since she arrived here.

And unlike what others expected—

She had not resisted.

She had adapted.

—

"Careful, you're cutting too fast."

A voice spoke beside her.

—

The Empress turned slightly.

A young man stood there, watching her with mild amusement.

—

"Han Yu," he introduced himself earlier.

—

Beside him, another young man leaned casually against the wooden table.

"And I'm Su Yu."

—

The Empress nodded.

"I know."

—

She had met them just a few days ago.

—

Both were different from the others in the shrine.

Not broken.

Not defeated.

—

Just... quiet.

Observant.

—

Han Yu stepped closer, taking the knife from her hand briefly.

"Like this."

—

He demonstrated smoothly.

Precise.

Efficient.

—

The Empress watched carefully.

"...You're skilled."

—

Su Yu laughed lightly.

"He had to learn after we lost everything."

—

The words were casual.

But heavy.

—

The Empress paused.

"...Lost everything?"

—

Han Yu and Su Yu exchanged a glance.

Then—

Su Yu shrugged.

"We're from the north."

—

The Empress frowned slightly.

"The north?"

—

Han Yu nodded.

"We came from wealthy families."

"Powerful ones."

—

Su Yu added,

"Until we weren't."

—

The tone was light.

But the meaning wasn't.

—

"What happened?" the Empress asked.

—

Han Yu continued cutting vegetables calmly.

"...Higher powers."

—

Su Yu smirked slightly.

"People above us."

—

"They took everything."

—

Silence fell briefly.

—

The Empress's brows furrowed.

"...That's not possible."

—

Both men looked at her.

—

"There is no one more powerful than the Emperor," she said firmly.

—

Han Yu stopped his movement.

Then—

He laughed.

—

Not mockingly.

But knowingly.

—

Su Yu joined him.

—

The Empress frowned.

"...Why are you laughing?"

—

Han Yu placed the knife down.

"Because you're from the capital."

—

Su Yu leaned forward slightly.

"...Things are different in the north."

—

The Empress's expression changed.

"...Different how?"

—

The two lowered their voices slightly.

—

"As long as you're here," Han Yu said quietly,

"...you should know."

—

Su Yu spoke next.

"In the north..."

"...people don't believe in the Emperor."

—

The words landed heavily.

—

The Empress froze.

"...What?"

—

Han Yu continued,

"They don't trust the court."

"They don't follow its laws fully."

—

Su Yu added softly,

"They follow something else."

—

A brief pause.

Then—

"...Black magic."

—

The Empress's eyes widened.

"That's impossible."

"It's banned across the kingdom."

—

Han Yu shook his head slowly.

"...Not there."

—

Su Yu's voice dropped further.

"In the north..."

"...it's everywhere."

—

The air grew colder.

—

"People whisper about it."

"They practice it in secret."

—

"And some..."

"...use it openly."

—

The Empress felt a chill run through her.

—

"...The royal family doesn't know?"

—

Han Yu gave a faint smile.

"They don't want to know."

—

Su Yu added,

"Or they can't control it."

—

Silence.

—

The fire crackled softly under the pot.

—

The Empress stood still.

Processing.

—

Because this—

Was not something she had ever heard before.

—

"...Then why didn't you come to the capital?"

"Why not tell the Emperor?"

—

Han Yu looked at her calmly.

"...Who would listen?"

—

Su Yu chuckled lightly.

"And who would believe us?"

—

The Empress didn't answer.

—

Because deep down—

She understood.

—

Without proof—

Without power—

Truth meant nothing.

—

After a moment—

Han Yu clapped his hands lightly.

"Enough serious talk."

—

Su Yu nodded.

"The food will burn."

—

The mood shifted.

—

They returned to cooking.

—

The Empress joined again.

This time—

More focused.

More thoughtful.

—

Together—

They prepared the meal.

—

Simple.

Plain.

But made with care.

—

When it was done—

The dishes were served in the main hall.

—

People gathered.

—

The usual quiet group.

—

But today—

The atmosphere changed.

—

Someone took the first bite.

—

Then paused.

—

"...This is good."

—

Another followed.

"...Very good."

—

More voices joined.

—

"It tastes different today."

"Better."

—

Han Yu smirked slightly.

—

Su Yu leaned toward the Empress.

"They'll praise you."

—

She raised an eyebrow.

"Why me?"

—

"You cooked."

—

And just as he said—

Someone spoke loudly.

—

"The new girl made this?"

—

All eyes turned toward her.

—

The Empress paused.

—

Then nodded slightly.

—

A smile spread across the room.

—

"Well done."

"Very delicious."

"You should cook more often."

—

Even the older ones nodded in approval.

—

The Empress stood there.

Quiet.

—

But inside—

Something softened.

—

Because for the first time since arriving—

She wasn't just enduring.

—

She was—

Accepted.

—

And as laughter and quiet praise filled the shrine—

Her thoughts returned briefly—

To what she had heard.

—

The north.

Black magic.

Secrets unknown to the palace.

—

Her eyes darkened slightly.

—

Because she knew—

—

This was not just a story.

—

It was a warning.

—

And something—

Was coming.