

## **Ghost 279**

### Chapter 279: A King Among Strangers

#### A King Among Strangers

The imperial study was silent.

Too silent.

Scrolls were spread across the table. Ink had dried at the tip of the brush. Reports from different regions lay open, filled with matters that demanded attention.

But the Emperor wasn't reading.

His eyes were on the same line for far too long.

Unmoving.

Unfocused.

—

"...Your Majesty?"

The attendant's voice broke the stillness.

The Emperor blinked once, as if pulled back from somewhere far away.

"...Leave it."

The attendant bowed and stepped back.

—

Silence returned.

—

But not peace.

—

His fingers tapped lightly against the table.

Once.

Twice.

Then stopped.

—

A thought—

Persistent.

Unwanted.

Yet impossible to ignore.

—

"...What is she doing now..."

—

He leaned back slightly.

His gaze drifting toward the window.

The palace courtyard looked calm.

Unchanging.

Cold.

—

"...Has she eaten?"

"...Is she resting?"

"...Or—"

His jaw tightened slightly.

"...is she still laughing with them..."

—

The image returned.

Her smile.

Her ease.

Her world—

Without him.

—

He stood abruptly.

The chair scraped lightly against the floor.

—

"...Enough."

—

Without calling anyone—

He walked toward the inner chamber.

—

Moments later—

He emerged again.

—

Changed.

—

No royal robes.

No symbols of power.

—

Just a simple commoner's attire.

Dark.

Unremarkable.

Blending into the crowd.

—

Because tonight—

He was not going as an Emperor.

—

He was going—

As a man.

—

## The Shrine Grounds

The shrine stood at the edge of the capital.

A place where people gathered for offerings, prayers, and rituals.

—

Tonight—

It was lively.

—

Lanterns lit the pathways.

Workers moved around carrying wood, arranging altars, preparing ceremonial setups.

The air smelled of incense and fresh-cut timber.

—

The Emperor stepped into the crowd unnoticed.

No one bowed.

No one recognized him.

—

And for the first time—

He walked freely.

—

His eyes scanned the area.

Searching.

—

Then—

He saw her.

—

The Empress.

—

Standing near a group of workers.

Dressed simply.

Hair tied casually.

Sleeves slightly rolled.

—

Not like an Empress.

—

Like...

Someone ordinary.

—

And beside her—

Two men.

—

Talking.

Laughing.

—

One handed her a wooden stick.

She took it.

Examined it.

Then said something—

And smiled.

—

The Emperor froze.

—

Something inside him—

Twisted.

—

Sharp.

Unexpected.

—

"...What is this feeling..."

—

His gaze darkened slightly.

—

She was laughing.

—

Laughing freely.

Easily.

—

With them.

—

Not forced.

Not polite.

—

Genuine.

—

His fingers clenched slowly.

—

"...She never laughed like that with me."

—

The thought came uninvited.

Uncontrolled.

—

The two men leaned closer.

Explaining something.

She listened.

Then laughed again.

—

That sound—

Soft.

Bright.

—

It echoed.

—

And it irritated him.

—

"...Why are they standing so close..."

—

His gaze sharpened.

—

"...Who are they..."

—

The urge rose suddenly.

Irrational.

Immediate.

—

"...I should—"

—

He stopped himself.

—

But the thought had already formed.

—

"...Punch them."

—

Silence inside him.

—

"...What am I thinking..."

—

He exhaled slowly.

—

This wasn't him.

—

But still—

He couldn't look away.

—

Watching from Afar

She moved naturally.

Helping.

Talking.

Working.

—

Not distant.

Not guarded.

—

Alive.

—

One of the men said something again.

She hit his arm lightly with the wooden stick.

—

Playful.

—

The man laughed.

—

The Emperor's jaw tightened.

—

"...She hits them?"

—

"...But with me..."

—

She was always composed.

Careful.

Distant.

—

His chest felt... heavy.

—

"...I was worried about her..."

"...Thinking if she's safe..."

"...if she's resting..."

—

"And here she is..."

—

"...laughing."

—

The contradiction—

Stung.

—

He stepped forward slightly.

—

Then stopped.

—

No.

—

He couldn't go like this.

—

Couldn't reveal himself.

—

But his eyes—

Never left her.

—

The Realization

Time passed.

—

He stood there.

Watching.

—

Until slowly—

The emotion shifted.

—

From irritation—

To something deeper.

—

"...I'm jealous."

—

The realization came quietly.

But clearly.

—

Not of power.

Not of status.

—

But of something simple.

—

Her laughter.

—

Given to others.

—

Not him.

—

His hand loosened slightly.

—

"...When did this happen..."

—

"...When did I start caring..."

—

He didn't know.

—

But he knew one thing now.

—

It mattered.

—

She mattered.

—

The Unspoken Hurt

She continued talking.

Smiling.

Working.

—

And he remained—

Unseen.

—

"...She didn't even tell me."

—

His gaze lowered slightly.

—

"...She came here..."

"...without informing me..."

—

"...I told her I would come pick her up..."

—

The memory surfaced.

Clear.

—

His own words.

—

And yet—

She had returned.

Moved freely.

—

Without him.

—

His chest tightened again.

—

"...Does she not think of me at all..."

—

The question lingered.

Unanswered.

—

Departure

After some time—

She stepped away from the workers.

Wiping her hands lightly.

—

Still smiling.

—

Still... free.

—

The Emperor turned.

—

He didn't stay.

—

He couldn't.

—

Because if he stayed longer—

—

He didn't know what he would do.

—

Back to the Palace

The palace gates opened silently.

He entered without a word.

—

The familiar walls greeted him.

Cold.

Still.

—

He walked back into his chamber.

Changed.

Sat down.

—

The same table.

The same scrolls.

—

But everything felt different.

—

His hand rested on the table.

Still.

—

"...She didn't tell me."

—

"...She laughed with them."

—

"...She looked happy."

—

Silence.

—

Then—

A quiet whisper escaped him.

—

"...Why does that bother me so much..."

—

No answer came.

—

Only one truth remained.

—

He was no longer indifferent.

—

And that—

Was far more dangerous—

Than anything else.

The Hand That Would Not Let Go

The palace felt colder than usual.

Even after returning, even after sitting before his unfinished work—

The Emperor could not focus.

The brush remained untouched.

The ink slowly dried again.

—

His mind—

Still at the shrine.

—

Her laughter.

Her ease.

The way she moved among others as if she belonged there—

Not beside him.

—

"...Enough."

—

He stood abruptly.

This time—

There was no hesitation.

—

"I will go."

—

Not as Emperor.

Not with guards.

—

But as himself.

—

Returning to the Shrine

The night had deepened further when he returned.

The shrine was quieter now, though work still continued in certain corners.

Fewer people.

Softer voices.

Dimmer lantern light.

—

He stepped in again, unnoticed.

His eyes searched—

And found her.

—

She was still there.

—

Near the wooden stacks.

Talking.

Working.

—

And again—

Those two men were beside her.

—

This time—

He didn't stay back.

—

He walked forward.

Straight.

—

The two men noticed him first.

One of them frowned slightly.

"You're new?"

—

The Emperor didn't stop.

—

He answered calmly.

"...No."

—

They exchanged a glance.

Then one asked,

"Then who are you looking for?"

—

The Emperor's gaze shifted—

To her.

—

"My wife."

—

Silence.

—

The words landed heavily.

—

The two men froze.

—

"...Wife?" one repeated.

—

The Emperor nodded once.

"She comes here often."

"To meditate."

—

His tone remained calm.

But firm.

—

"She was working."

"Running a restaurant."

"But now she wants peace."

—

A pause.

—

"I came to take her back."

—

The two men looked at the Empress.

—

Her eyes widened slightly.

—

"...What is he doing..."

—

Her heart skipped.

—

The men immediately stepped back.

"Oh—"

"We didn't know."

—

They nodded respectfully.

"No problem."

—

And without another word—

They left.

—

Just like that.

—

The space—

Cleared.

—

Only the two of them remained.

—

Face to Face

The Empress stared at him.

—

From head to toe.

—

Simple clothes.

No royal presence.

No guards.

—

"...You..."

—

Her voice lowered.

"...What are you doing here?"

—

The Emperor didn't answer immediately.

—

Instead—

He stepped closer.

—

Close enough—

That she instinctively took a step back.

—

But before she could move further—

—

He reached out.

—

And held her hand.

—

Firm.

Warm.

Unyielding.

—

She froze.

—

"...Let go."

—

She tried to pull back.

—

But his grip tightened slightly.

—

"...No."

—

Simple.

Direct.

—

She frowned.

"You can't just—"

—

"I can."

—

His voice remained calm.

—

But there was something beneath it.

—

Something she hadn't seen before.

—

Determination.

—

The Walk Back

He didn't argue further.

—

Didn't explain.

—

He simply—

Held her hand.

—

And started walking.

—

She resisted slightly.

"...People are watching."

—

"They don't matter."

—

Her heart skipped again.

—

"...You're impossible."

—

But she didn't pull away again.

—

Because—

He didn't let go.

—

Inside the Room

He led her into a small resting room near the shrine.

—

Closed the door behind them.

—

Silence.

—

The outside noise faded instantly.

—

She pulled her hand back this time—

Finally free.

—

"What are you doing?"

—

But he didn't answer.

—

His gaze dropped—

To her foot.

—

"...Sit."

—

"...What?"

—

"Sit."

—

This time—

His tone left no room for argument.

—

She hesitated.

—

Then slowly sat on the bed.

—

Still confused.

Still unsettled.

—

He knelt slightly in front of her.

—

Reaching for her ankle.

—

She instinctively pulled back.

"...Don't—"

—

"I saw you limping."

—

Her voice stopped.

—

"...You didn't use the ointment."

—

Silence.

—

She didn't deny it.

—

"...I forgot."

—

He didn't respond.

—

Instead—

He reached for a cloth.

A bowl of water nearby.

—

And gently—

Held her foot again.

—

This time—

Carefully.

—

She didn't resist.

—

Because his touch—

Was different.

—

Not forceful.

Not demanding.

—

Just... careful.

—

Cleaning the Wound

He dipped the cloth in water.

—

Then slowly—

Cleaned the wound.

—

The cold touch made her flinch slightly.

—

"...Does it hurt?"

—

"...No."

—

But her voice was softer now.

—

He continued.

—

Removing the dried dust.

Cleaning gently.

—

His brows furrowed slightly.

—

"...It's not deep."

—

"...But you should have treated it."

—

She didn't reply.

—

Because she didn't expect this.

—

This version of him.

—

Quiet.

Focused.

Careful.

—

He reached for the ointment.

—

Opened it.

—

Applied it slowly.

—

His movements—

Steady.

—

Precise.

—

As if—

She might break.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly on the edge of the bed.

—

"...Why are you doing this..."

—

He paused.

—

Then spoke quietly.

—

"...Because I saw it."

—

"...And I couldn't ignore it."

—

Silence.

—

He wrapped the cloth gently.

—

Secured it.

—

Then finally—

Let go.

—

The Distance That Changed

He didn't stand immediately.

—

Instead—

He stayed there for a moment.

—

Looking at her.

—

Not as Emperor.

—

But as—

Himself.

—

"...Why didn't you tell me you came back to palace ?"

—

Her gaze dropped.

—

"...I didn't think it was necessary."

—

"...It is."

—

Her eyes lifted slightly.

—

"...Why?"

—

A pause.

—

Then—

"...Because I was looking for you."

—

Her breath caught.

—

"...You said you would wait for me to trust you."

—

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

—

"...Then trust me enough to tell me where you are."

—

Silence.

—

Something shifted again.

—

Not loud.

—

But real.

—

The Quiet Ending

He finally stood.

—

Stepped back slightly.

Giving her space again.

—

"I'll take you back."

—

She didn't argue.

—

Didn't resist.

—

Just nodded softly.

—

Because for the first time—

—

She didn't feel distant from him.

—

And he—

Didn't feel like someone she had to protect herself from.

—

Outside—

The night remained calm.

—

But inside—

Something had changed.

—

Not with force.

—

Not with words.

—

But with something simple.

—

A hand—

That held on.

—

And didn't hurt.