

Ghost 280

Chapter 280: The Shrine of Unspoken Truths

The shrine stood at the far end of the palace grounds, quiet and distant from the noise of court life.

Tall stone steps led upward, lined with old incense burners and faded carvings of forgotten prayers. The air there was always colder—still, almost untouched by time.

It was a place meant for reflection.

For repentance.

For silence.

—

Inside—

The Empress knelt before the altar.

Her back straight.

Her expression calm.

Too calm.

—

A thin stream of incense smoke rose in front of her, curling slowly into the air.

Her fingers rested lightly in her lap.

Unmoving.

—

To anyone looking from outside—

She appeared peaceful.

Resigned.

—

But inside—

Her thoughts were anything but.

—

"...This is better."

—

No expectations.

No closeness.

No confusion.

—

Just distance.

—

She had chosen this.

—

The punishment from the Dowager Empress—

She accepted it.

Not because she believed she was wrong.

—

But because it gave her something she needed.

—

Space.

—

From him.

—

Footsteps echoed faintly outside.

Heavy.

Familiar.

—

She didn't turn.

—

She didn't need to.

—

The presence alone was enough.

—

The Emperor stepped inside.

—

His gaze immediately found her.

—

Kneeling.

Still.

Silent.

—

For a moment—

He didn't speak.

—

Because something felt wrong.

—

Not the shrine.

Not the silence.

—

Her.

—

"...You've been here long enough."

—

His voice broke the quiet.

Low.

Controlled.

—

She didn't move.

—

"...You can return now."

—

Still—

No response.

—

The Emperor's brows furrowed slightly.

—

He stepped closer.

—

"Get up."

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

—

Then—

Finally—

She spoke.

—

"I'm fine here."

—

Her voice was calm.

But distant.

—

Too distant.

—

The Emperor stilled.

—

"...What?"

—

She slowly turned her head.

Not fully facing him.

—

"I accepted the Dowager Empress's punishment."

—

"You don't need to come here again."

—

Silence.

—

The words hung in the air.

Cold.

Sharp.

—

The Emperor's expression darkened.

—

"...What are you saying?"

—

She continued, her tone steady.

"You should return to the palace."

—

"There's work waiting."

—

"No need to concern yourself with me."

—

Each word—

Carefully placed.

—

Each one—

A step back.

—

The Emperor stared at her.

—

"...Why are you speaking like this?"

—

His voice lowered.

—

"...We were getting along."

—

"We were improving."

—

"Then suddenly—"

—

"Improving?"

—

She turned fully this time.

—

Her eyes met his.

—

And for the first time—

There was no softness in them.

—

"No."

—

Her voice didn't rise.

—

But it cut deeper than anger.

—

"There was never any improvement."

—

Silence.

—

The Emperor's breath stilled.

—

"...What do you mean?"

—

She stood slowly.

—

Facing him.

—

"There is nothing to amend."

—

Her gaze didn't waver.

—

"Because nothing ever changed."

—

The Emperor's chest tightened.

—

"...That's not true."

—

"It is."

—

Her reply came immediately.

—

"You think being kind for a few days changes everything?"

—

"You think a few conversations erase the past?"

—

Her voice remained calm.

But beneath it—

Was something deeper.

—

Something he had never truly faced.

—

"I remember everything."

—

The Emperor didn't speak.

—

Because suddenly—

He knew where this was going.

—

"You hated me."

—

The words landed heavily.

—

"You never wanted to marry me."

—

"I was forced into your life."

—

"You resented me for it."

—

Each sentence—

Clear.

Unavoidable.

—

The Emperor's jaw tightened.

—

"...Yes."

—

He didn't deny it.

—

Because it was true.

—

But—

"That was before—"

—

She cut him off.

—

"And on the wedding day—"

—

Silence.

—

Her voice dropped slightly.

—

"You tried to strangle me."

—

The memory surfaced.

Clear.

Sharp.

—

Her hand instinctively moved to her neck.

—

As if she could still feel it.

—

"I couldn't breathe."

—

"I thought..."

—

She paused.

—

"...I thought I would die."

—

The Emperor's expression changed instantly.

—

"...I—"

—

"You killed her."

—

The words stopped him.

—

"...What?"

—

Her gaze didn't shift.

—

"You killed the person who was supposed to be your wife."

—

Her voice softened.

—

But not with warmth.

—

"With truth.

—

"That day—"

—

"She died."

—

Silence filled the shrine.

—

Heavy.

Suffocating.

—

The Emperor stood frozen.

—

Because for the first time—

He saw it.

—

Not from his perspective.

—

But hers.

—

The fear.

The helplessness.

The moment—

He crossed a line.

—

"...I didn't—"

—

But the words didn't come.

—

Because what could he say?

—

That he didn't mean it?

—

That it wasn't serious?

—

That he was angry?

—

None of it mattered.

—

The damage—

Had already been done.

—

"...I know I hated you."

—

His voice was quieter now.

—

"...I know I was wrong."

—

"But things have changed."

—

She didn't respond.

—

"...They have."

—

He stepped closer.

—

"I don't feel that way anymore."

—

Silence.

—

"I—"

—

The word stopped.

—

Because saying it—

Would change everything.

—

And he knew—

She wasn't ready.

—

"...I don't hate you."

—

It wasn't enough.

—

But it was all he could say.

—

Her gaze lowered slightly.

—

"...That doesn't change what happened."

—

And she was right.

—

It didn't.

—

The Emperor stood there.

—

Helpless.

—

For the first time in his life—

He didn't know what to do.

—

Because this wasn't a battle.

—

There was no command.

No authority.

—

No way to force an outcome.

—

Only truth.

—

And consequences.

—

"...I can't forget."

—

Her voice was softer now.

—

But no less firm.

—

"And I won't pretend."

—

Silence.

—

The incense burned lower.

—

The air felt heavier.

—

Then—

She turned away.

—

Facing the altar again.

—

"I'm fine here."

—

"You don't need to come again."

—

The final distance.

—

Clear.

—

The Emperor stood still.

—

His hands clenched slightly.

—

Then slowly—

Relaxed.

—

Because he understood.

—

Not fully.

—

But enough.

—

"...Alright."

—

His voice was quiet.

—

He didn't argue.

—

Didn't insist.

—

Didn't force.

—

Because for once—

He chose—

To respect her distance.

—

He turned.

—

Walked toward the exit.

—

Each step—

Heavy.

—

But before leaving—

He paused.

—

Without turning back.

—

"...I'll wait."

—

The words were soft.

—

Almost lost in the silence.

—

But she heard them.

—

Then—

He left.

—

Without looking back.

—

—

The shrine returned to silence.

—

The Empress remained where she was.

—

Still.

—

But her fingers—

Trembled slightly.

—

Her chest felt tight.

—

Not from anger.

—

Not from fear.

—

But from something more complicated.

—

Something she didn't want to name.

—

Outside—

The night deepened.

—

And inside—

Two hearts stood apart.

—

Not broken.

—

Before dawn could fully claim the sky, the shrine stirred to life.

Three forty-five.

A deep bell rang.

Once.

Then again.

The sound rolled through the stone corridors, low and ancient, vibrating through walls, through air—
through bone.

It was not loud.

But it reached everywhere.

—

In her chamber, the Empress opened her eyes.

For a moment, she didn't move.

The memory of the previous night lingered faintly—

His voice.

His words.

"I'll wait."

—

She closed her eyes briefly.

Then exhaled.

"...Focus."

—

The bell rang again.

Calling.

Not demanding.

—

Inviting.

—

She rose from the bed.

The air was cold, sharper than the palace mornings. The shrine did not pamper comfort—it stripped it away.

She washed in cool water.

The shock cleared her mind.

Her movements were quiet, deliberate.

Simple robes replaced silk.

No ornaments.

No titles.

—

Just her.

—

When she stepped outside, the sky was still dark, only a faint hint of grey touching the horizon.

Figures moved silently along the stone paths.

Men.

Women.

Some young.

Some old.

All heading in the same direction.

—

The Meditation Hall.

—

She followed.

—

The hall was vast but unadorned.

Stone floor.

Wooden beams.

Rows of simple mats laid out in order.

Lanterns flickered softly, casting long shadows.

—

Dozens of people were already seated.

Eyes closed.

Breathing slow.

—

She paused at the entrance.

Then stepped in quietly.

—

Two monks stood at the front.

One older, his presence calm but deep.

The other younger, observing.

—

The older monk opened his eyes.

His gaze moved across the room—

Then stopped.

On her.

—

Just for a moment.

—

Then he spoke.

"Sit."

—

No ceremony.

No introduction.

—

She moved to an empty mat.

Sat down.

Crossed her legs.

—

Silence settled.

—

Then—

"Breathe."

—

The instruction was simple.

—

"Inhale."

—

The room followed.

—

"Exhale."

—

Slow.

Controlled.

—

Again.

And again.

—

At first—

Her breath was uneven.

—

Her thoughts scattered.

—

But slowly—

They aligned.

—

Inhale.

Exhale.

—

The rhythm steadied.

—

The monk continued.

"Feel the breath."

"Not the body."

"Not the mind."

—

"Just the breath."

—

Her awareness narrowed.

—

The cold floor beneath her faded.

The distant sounds disappeared.

—

Only breath remained.

—

Then—

"Move."

—

The session shifted.

—

Slow movements.

Arms raised.

Lowered.

Turned.

—

Each motion deliberate.

Connected to breath.

—

Not exercise.

—

Flow.

—

Her body followed.

At first stiff.

Then—

Looser.

—

Warmer.

—

Something within began to respond.

—

A faint current.

—

She stilled.

—

The monk's voice lowered.

"Sit."

—

Everyone returned to stillness.

—

"Now..."

—

"Look inward."

—

Eyes closed.

—

Darkness.

—

But not empty.

—

She focused.

—

And then—

She felt it.

—

A subtle warmth.

Deep within.

—

Faint at first.

—

Then growing.

—

Flowing.

—

Like a quiet stream beneath the surface.

—

Her breath aligned with it.

—

Inhale—

The warmth expanded.

—

Exhale—

It settled.

—

Again.

—

And again.

—

The current strengthened.

—

Moving.

Circulating.

—

Her awareness deepened.

—

The outside world—

Gone.

—

Only this—

Energy.

—

Alive.

—

Flowing through her limbs.

Her chest.

Her core.

—

Expanding.

—

She didn't notice how her breathing changed.

Didn't notice how still she had become.

—

But the monk did.

—

His eyes opened slowly.

—

He watched her.

—

The energy around her—

Subtle—

But visible.

—

Too visible.

—

He stepped forward.

—

Then—

"Enough."

—

His voice cut through the silence.

—

The room shifted.

—

People stirred.

—

The connection broke.

—

The Empress's eyes opened slowly.

—

The warmth remained.

—

But controlled.

—

She looked forward.

—

The monk was standing before her.

—

His gaze sharp.

—

"You feel it."

—

It wasn't a question.

—

She nodded slightly.

"...Yes."

—

The monk studied her.

—

"Too quickly."

—

She didn't understand.

—

"...Is that wrong?"

—

He shook his head.

—

"No."

—

"But dangerous."

—

The word settled.

—

"Energy like yours..."

—

"Draws attention."

—

"Seen and unseen."

—

Her brows furrowed.

—

"...What do you mean?"

—

The monk lowered his voice slightly.

—

"There are things in this world that feed on such presence."

—

"Jealous eyes."

—

"Hungry forces."

—

"People who would use it."

—

Her expression grew serious.

—

"...Then what should I do?"

—

The monk reached into his sleeve.

—

Took out a small strip of cloth.

—

On it—

A few characters written in faded ink.

—

He handed it to her.

—

"Learn to hide."

—

She took it.

—

"...Hide?"

—

He nodded.

—

"Energy must not always be displayed."

—

"It must be concealed."

—

"Controlled."

—

"Silent."

—

He looked directly at her.

—

"Especially for you."

—

A pause.

—

Then—

"This is a mantra."

—

"Simple."

—

"But effective."

—

She looked at the cloth.

—

"...What does it mean?"

—

He answered calmly.

—

"Still the breath."

—

"Quiet the mind."

—

"Fold the light inward."

—

Then—

He spoke the words slowly.

—

"Hush..."

—

"Breathe..."

—

"Hide within."

—

"Return inside."

—

The sound was soft.

Almost like wind.

—

"Repeat it."

—

She did.

—

"Hush..."

—

"Breathe..."

—

"Hide within..."

—

"Return inside..."

—

As the words left her lips—

Something shifted.

—

The warmth within—

Didn't disappear.

—

But softened.

—

Folded inward.

—

Less visible.

—

More contained.

—

Her eyes widened slightly.

—

"...It changed."

—

The monk nodded.

—

"Good."

—

"Practice it."

—

"Until it becomes instinct."

—

He turned slightly.

—

"Do not let others see what you carry."

—

Then—

He paused.

—

And added quietly—

"...Not yet."

—

He walked away.

—

Leaving her sitting there.

—

Holding the cloth.

—

Feeling—

Different.

—

More aware.

—

More cautious.

—

More—

Prepared.

—

Around her—

People began leaving the hall.

—

The morning light slowly crept in.

—

The shrine returned to its quiet rhythm.

—

But inside her—

Something had awakened.

—

And something else—

Had learned—

To hide.

But not healed.

—

Yet.