

## **Ghost 281**

### Chapter 281: Morning Warmth, Midday Quiet, and News from the Unseen

The first light of dawn had already spread across the shrine by the time the meditation session ended.

The sky was pale gold.

The air still cool.

But inside the Empress—

Something had shifted.

—

The flow she felt during meditation...

Was still there.

Quieter now.

Hidden.

Just as the monk had taught.

—

"Hush... breathe... hide within..."

—

She repeated it softly as she walked.

And the energy—

Folded inward again.

—

Good.

—

She exhaled slowly.

Then—

Her stomach growled.

—

"...Right."

—

Food.

—

## Kitchen — A Different Kind of Peace

The shrine kitchen was alive with activity.

Not chaotic like the palace.

But steady.

Disciplined.

—

Wood fires burned low.

Steam rose from pots.

The scent of rice and herbs filled the air.

—

Her friend was already there.

Sleeves rolled up.

Hair tied loosely.

Arguing with a cook.

—

"No, no—if you overcook it, the texture is gone!"

—

The cook sighed.

"You always say that."

—

"And I'm always right."

—

The Empress stepped in quietly.

"...You started without me."

—

Her friend turned instantly.

"You're late."

—

"I just finished meditation."

—

"Excuses."

—

But she smiled.

—

"Come."

—

Without ceremony, the Empress joined.

—

Hands moved naturally.

Cutting vegetables.

Mixing ingredients.

Lighting flame.

—

No one treated her differently.

Not here.

—

She wasn't Empress.

—

She was—

Just another pair of hands.

—

Her friend leaned closer.

"So?"

—

"So what?"

—

"First night in shrine."

—

The Empress didn't answer immediately.

—

Then quietly—

"I slept well."

—

Her friend blinked.

"That's it?"

—

"...Yes."

—

"No emotional breakdown?"

—

"No."

—

"No crying?"

—

"No."

—

Her friend narrowed her eyes.

"...You're hiding something."

—

The Empress continued stirring.

"I'm cooking."

—

"That's not an answer."

—

"It is for now."

—

Her friend huffed.

"Fine."

—

Then—

"You look different."

—

That made the Empress pause slightly.

—

"...How?"

—

"Calmer."

—

A beat.

—

"...Stronger."

—

The Empress resumed moving.

"...Maybe."

—

Or maybe—

She was just learning—

To hide.

—

Breakfast — Laughter Returns

Soon—

Food was ready.

—

Simple.

But warm.

—

Rice porridge.

Steamed vegetables.

Light broth.

Fresh buns.

—

They sat together.

—

Monks.

Workers.

Visitors.

—

No hierarchy.

No distance.

—

The Empress ate quietly.

—

Her friend, not so much.

—

"You made this?"

—

"Yes."

—

"It's good."

—

"I know."

—

"You're confident."

—

"I'm correct."

—

A monk nearby chuckled.

"You two argue like siblings."

—

"We are better than siblings," her friend replied.

—

The Empress smiled faintly.

—

For a moment—

It felt normal.

—

Easy.

—

Peaceful.

—

Midday — Return to Silence

After breakfast —

Fatigue settled in.

—

Not heavy.

But present.

—

The kind that comes after emotional strain.

After deep focus.

—

"I'm going to rest," the Empress said.

—

Her friend nodded.

"Go."

—

"And don't overthink."

—

"...I don't."

—

"You do."

—

The Empress didn't reply.

—

She returned to her room.

—

Closed the door.

—

Lay down.

—

The silence wrapped around her.

—

And slowly—

Sleep came.

—

## The Arrival of the Unseen

She didn't know how long she slept.

—

But when she opened her eyes—

The room felt...

Different.

—

Not colder.

—

But occupied.

—

"...You're here."

—

Three figures stood nearby.

—

The ghosts.

—

One leaned against the wall.

Another hovered near the window.

The third—

Pacing.

—

"You finally woke up," Fen Yu said.

—

The general ghost crossed his arms.

"You sleep too deeply."

—

The scholar ghost adjusted his sleeve.

"We brought news."

—

The Empress sat up slowly.

"...From the palace?"

—

"Yes."

—

Her expression stilled.

—

"...Tell me."

—

News — A Scene She Didn't See

Fen Yu spoke first.

"We went to the palace."

—

The Empress listened quietly.

—

"We saw the Emperor."

—

A pause.

—

"With Lady Chen."

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

—

But her face didn't change.

—

"...What were they doing?"

—

"Eating."

—

"Dinner."

—

The general added,

"He looked calm."

—

Fen Yu smirked slightly.

"Too calm."

—

The scholar ghost spoke carefully.

"Lady Chen was... attentive."

—

The Empress lowered her gaze slightly.

—

Of course.

—

That was normal.

—

That was expected.

—

"...Anything else?"

—

"Yes."

—

Fen Yu leaned closer.

"Princess Zhi."

—

The Empress looked up.

—

"She tried to come here."

—

"...Tried?"

—

"She was stopped."

—

"Multiple times."

—

The general frowned.

"She argued."

—

"But couldn't leave the palace."

—

The scholar added,

"Security has increased."

—

"Movement is restricted."

—

The Empress's expression softened slightly.

—

"...She tried."

—

Fen Yu nodded.

"She did."

—

The room fell quiet.

—

What She Didn't Say

The ghosts watched her carefully.

—

Waiting.

—

For reaction.

—

For emotion.

—

But she remained still.

—

Too still.

—

"...You're not upset?" Fen Yu asked.

—

The Empress looked at her.

—

"...Why should I be?"

—

"You know why."

—

A pause.

—

"...I expected it."

—

Simple.

—

But not empty.

—

Because expectations—

Don't remove feeling.

—

They just make it quieter.

—

The scholar ghost studied her.

"You're hiding again."

—

She didn't deny it.

—

"Hush... breathe... hide within..."

—

The mantra echoed softly in her mind.

—

And the emotion—

Folded inward.

—

Not gone.

—

But contained.

—

A Different Strength

The general ghost crossed his arms.

"You've changed."

—

"Yes."

—

Fen Yu narrowed her eyes.

"I don't like it."

—

The Empress looked at her.

—

"It's necessary."

—

Silence.

—

The scholar ghost nodded slowly.

"She's learning control."

—

Fen Yu sighed.

"...Still don't like it."

—

The Empress smiled faintly.

—

"You don't have to."

—

The Quiet Between Worlds

The afternoon light filtered into the room.

—

Soft.

—

Warm.

—

The ghosts remained.

—

Watching.

—

Protecting.

—

And the Empress—

Sat quietly.

—

Between two worlds.

—

The visible.

—

And the unseen.

—

The past.

—

And what comes next.

—

Her fingers rested lightly on her lap.

—

Her breath steady.

—

"Hush... breathe... hide within..."

—

Outside—

The shrine remained calm.

—

Inside—

Something deeper was forming.

—

Not weakness.

—

Not avoidance.

—

But control.

—

And soon—

She would need it.

—

Because the game around her—

Had only just begun.

---

Night descended quietly over the palace.

Lanterns flickered.

Guards rotated their shifts.

Servants lowered their voices.

On the surface—

Everything was calm.

Orderly.

Untouched.

—

But in one secluded courtyard—

Stillness meant something else.

—

Inside Shin Gu's chamber, no wind entered.

No sound lingered.

Even the candle flame burned unnaturally steady.

—

At the center of the room—

A shallow bronze bowl rested on a low table.

Filled with water.

Perfectly still.

—

Shin Gu sat before it.

Eyes closed.

Hands resting lightly on her knees.

—

She had been waiting.

—

For days.

—

Ever since the Empress returned from death.

Ever since the ritual failed.

—

Failure.

The word still echoed.

Cold.

Unacceptable.

—

Her fingers twitched slightly.

—

"...It should not have failed."

—

Her voice was soft.

Barely audible.

—

The water in the bowl trembled.

—

Not from wind.

—

From something deeper.

—

Her eyes opened.

Slowly.

—

And then—

The surface of the water shifted.

—

A ripple.

—

Then another.

—

Until—

Words began to form.

—

Not written.

—

Manifested.

—

Dark.

Shifting.

Alive.

—

Shin Gu leaned forward.

Her gaze sharp.

Focused.

—

The message appeared clearly now—

"Begin again."

—

The water stilled.

—

Silence returned.

—

But Shin Gu didn't move.

—

Her lips slowly curved.

—

"...Finally."

—

The room felt colder.

—

The air—

Heavier.

—

The next line appeared.

—

"The vessel is unstable."

—

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

—

"...So she truly came back."

—

A faint laugh escaped her.

—

"Interesting."

—

Another ripple.

—

Another message.

—

"This time—no mistakes."

—

The water went still.

—

Completely.

—

Shin Gu sat back slowly.

—

Her expression—

No longer calm.

—

No longer composed.

—

Something darker surfaced.

—

"Of course."

—

Her voice carried quiet certainty.

—

"There won't be."

—

Behind her—

A shadow shifted.

—

Lady Chen stepped forward.

—

"...What did it say?"

—

Her voice was tense.

Curious.

Impatient.

—

Shin Gu didn't turn.

—

"It's time."

—

Lady Chen's breath caught slightly.

—

"...Time for what?"

—

Shin Gu stood.

Slowly.

Gracefully.

—

"For the real beginning."

—

She turned now.

—

Her eyes gleamed faintly.

—

"The first attempt was only a test."

—

Lady Chen frowned.

"A test?"

—

Shin Gu nodded.

—

"To measure her."

—

"To understand her limits."

—

"To see what protects her."

—

Her smile deepened.

—

"And now..."

—

"We know."

—

Lady Chen stepped closer.

"...Then this time?"

—

Shin Gu's voice lowered.

—

"This time..."

—

"She won't return."

—

Silence.

—

The words settled like poison.

—

Lady Chen's fingers tightened.

—

"...Good."

—

But her voice trembled slightly.

—

Because somewhere—

Deep down—

Fear remained.

—

Shin Gu noticed.

—

"You're afraid."

—

Lady Chen stiffened.

"...I'm not."

—

Shin Gu tilted her head slightly.

—

"You should be."

—

A pause.

—

"Because this path..."

—

"...has no return."

—

The candle flame flickered suddenly.

—

For a brief moment—

The room darkened.

—

Then—

It steadied again.

—

Lady Chen swallowed.

—

"...What do we need to do?"

—

Shin Gu walked back to the table.

—

Placed her hand over the bowl.

—

The water rippled once more.

—

But this time—

No message appeared.

—

Only darkness beneath the surface.

—

"We wait."

—

Lady Chen frowned.

"...Again?"

—

Shin Gu nodded.

—

"For the right moment."

—

"When their guard is down."

—

"When they feel safe."

—

"When they stop looking."

—

Her eyes lifted.

—

Toward the direction of the shrine.

—

"...That is when we strike."

—

Far away—

Inside the palace—

Another figure stood by a window.

—

Princess Zhi.

—

Her expression—

Was not the same as before.

—

No softness.

—

No innocence.

—

Her lips curved slowly.

—

"...So it begins."

—

A quiet laugh escaped her.

—

Soft.

But sharp.

—

"The Empress..."

—

"...You came back from death."

—

"How amusing."

—

Her fingers traced the edge of the window.

—

"I wonder..."

—

"...how many times you can do that."

—

Her eyes darkened.

—

"But this time..."

—

"No one will save you."

—

The wind outside picked up.

—

The lanterns swayed.

—

Shadows stretched along the palace walls.

—

Princess Zhi turned away from the window.

—

Her voice barely a whisper—

—

"...Now the real game begins."

—

And somewhere—

Between the palace and the shrine—

Between the living and the unseen—

—

Something awakened.

—

Something waiting.

—

Something—

Hungry.

—

The still water had delivered its message.

—

And the world—

Was about to change.