

Ghost 286

Chapter 286: Calm Above, Silence Below

The capital woke to an ordinary morning.

Sunlight spilled across tiled rooftops. Merchants opened their stalls. Children ran through narrow streets, chasing each other with laughter that echoed between stone walls.

Nothing seemed unusual.

Nothing felt wrong.

—

At the marketplace—

Voices rose in casual conversation.

"Did you hear about those strange incidents from the northern villages?"

"Ah, those rumors again..."

"I'm telling you, people were saying entire groups fainted at once!"

"And then what? They woke up fine. Probably some illness."

"Or just stories made up by travelers."

—

Laughter followed.

Dismissive.

Light.

—

Another man waved his hand.

"These things happen every few years. People exaggerate."

"Someone probably started it to get attention."

"Exactly. Rumors spread faster than truth."

—

Nearby, a group of women shook their heads.

"I heard something about people becoming stronger overnight."

"Stronger? That sounds ridiculous."

"Next you'll say the dead are coming back."

"Don't joke like that."

—

They laughed again.

And just like that—

The stories faded.

—

Not because they were false.

But because no one chose to believe them anymore.

—

Across the capital—

The same pattern repeated.

—

Strange whispers.

Followed by doubt.

Then dismissal.

—

As if something unseen had quietly erased the fear.

—

The Palace

Inside the palace—

The atmosphere was calm.

Orderly.

Routine.

—

Officials moved through corridors carrying documents.

Guards stood at their posts.

Servants whispered about daily matters.

—

But in the Emperor's study—

Something felt different.

—

The Emperor stood by the window, looking out over the palace grounds.

A spy knelt behind him.

—

"Your Majesty."

—

"Speak."

—

The spy hesitated slightly.

"...The rumors have stopped."

—

The Emperor's gaze did not shift.

"Explain."

—

The spy continued,

"Reports from all regions indicate the same pattern."

"People who previously spoke about strange incidents..."

"...no longer remember clearly."

—

A pause.

—

"They dismiss it as rumors."

—

Silence filled the room.

—

The Emperor's fingers tapped lightly against the window frame.

"...They forgot."

—

"Yes, Your Majesty."

—

"Completely?"

—

"Not entirely."

"They recall fragments."

"But nothing specific."

"No fear."

"No urgency."

—

The Emperor finally turned.

His expression—

Thoughtful.

Cold.

—

"...Interesting."

—

The spy lowered their head further.

"We found no explanation."

"No signs of coercion."

"No visible influence."

—

The Emperor walked slowly back toward his desk.

Each step measured.

—

"...That's what makes it dangerous."

—

The spy remained silent.

—

The Emperor sat down.

His gaze lowered slightly.

—

"...But it also prevents chaos."

—

A faint exhale left his lips.

—

"At least the people will not panic."

—

The spy looked up slightly.

"...Your Majesty is relieved?"

—

The Emperor paused.

—

"...Relieved..."

—

He repeated the word slowly.

—

"...That the streets are calm."

—

"...Yes."

—

But his eyes—

Said something else.

—

Because calm—

Did not mean safe.

—

Beneath the Surface

The Emperor leaned back slightly.

His mind moved through every piece of information.

—

The northern village.

The sudden collapse.

The unnatural strength.

—

The western disappearances.

—

The southern births.

—

And now—

Forgetfulness.

—

A pattern.

A design.

—

"...Someone is controlling perception."

—

He spoke quietly.

—

"Not just events..."

"...but memory."

—

The spy's breath caught slightly.

"...That is beyond ordinary means."

—

The Emperor nodded.

—

"...Which means this is no longer a political issue."

—

"It is something else."

—

Something deeper.

—

Something—

Hidden.

—

A Dangerous Calm

Outside—

The palace remained peaceful.

—

Inside—

The Emperor's thoughts grew heavier.

—

"...They made the people forget."

—

"Which means..."

—

"They can make them remember."

—

Or worse—

—

"...make them believe anything."

—

The weight of that realization settled slowly.

—

The Emperor closed his eyes briefly.

—

"...This is not over."

—

When he opened them again—

They were sharper.

Colder.

—

"Increase internal surveillance."

—

The spy nodded immediately.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

—

"Focus on behavior changes."

"Unusual patterns."

"Anything that does not align."

—

"Yes."

—

"And..."

—

The Emperor paused.

—

"...Do not trust appearances."

—

The spy lowered their head.

"Understood."

—

The Illusion of Peace

The spy left.

The door closed.

—

The Emperor remained alone.

—

He walked back to the window.

—

Outside—

The capital looked peaceful.

—

People moved freely.

Laughter echoed faintly.

Life continued.

—

As if nothing had happened.

—

As if nothing was wrong.

—

But he knew—

That was the most dangerous part.

—

Because when fear disappears without reason—

—

It means something else has taken its place.

—

Control.

—

Final Thought

The Emperor spoke softly.

Almost to himself.

—

"...Let them believe it is nothing."

—

"For now."

—

His gaze hardened.

—

"...But I will not."

—

Outside—

The sun rose higher.

The city continued its day.

—

Unaware—

That the silence they trusted—

Was not peace.

—

But preparation.

Chapter — The Veil That Would Not Open

Night gathered thickly around Shin Gu's courtyard, heavier than usual.

The lanterns burned low, their flames flickering as if disturbed by something unseen. Even the air felt dense—like it resisted movement, resisted breath.

Inside the hidden chamber beneath her residence—

The altar stood at the center.

Cold.

Dark.

Alive.

—

Black incense spiraled upward in slow, unnatural patterns.

Symbols drawn in ash and blood covered the stone floor.

At the center—

A shallow bronze basin glowed faintly with a dull crimson light.

—

Shin Gu stood before it.

Still.

Focused.

Her eyes half-closed.

Her fingers forming intricate seals.

—

"Come..."

Her voice was low.

Not loud—

But it echoed.

—

The energy in the room shifted.

The temperature dropped.

The flames bent inward.

—

For a moment—

It worked.

—

A shadow flickered above the basin.

A faint distortion—

As if something was trying to cross through.

—

Then—

—

It shattered.

—

The light collapsed instantly.

The incense smoke broke apart violently.

The symbols on the ground cracked.

—

The entire chamber trembled—

Then fell silent.

—

Shin Gu's eyes snapped open.

—

"...Impossible."

—

Her breath stilled.

Her gaze sharpened.

—

She tried again.

—

Faster this time.

More force.

More energy.

—

The symbols glowed again.

The basin darkened—

Then pulsed.

—

A figure began to form—

Faint.

Incomplete.

—

Then—

Again—

—

It vanished.

—

Like something had cut the connection.

—

Shin Gu stepped back.

Her expression—

For the first time—

Cracked.

—

"...Who..."

—

Her voice dropped.

—

"...is interfering?"

—

Silence answered her.

—

That ritual—

That method—

Could not be stopped easily.

—

Not by ordinary people.

Not by weak cultivators.

Not by coincidence.

—

And yet—

It had failed.

—

Twice.

—

She narrowed her eyes.

Her mind moving rapidly.

—

"...No one in the palace suspects anything."

—

"The rumors have faded."

—

"The people have forgotten."

—

Everything was proceeding exactly as planned.

—

So why—

—

Why now—

—

Was something blocking her?

—

Her gaze darkened.

—

"...There is someone else."

—

The realization settled slowly.

But once it did—

It did not leave.

—

She stepped forward again.

This time—

Not to summon.

—

But to see.

—

Her fingers changed.

The seals shifted.

—

The energy around her became sharper.

More focused.

—

"Reveal."

—

The basin darkened completely.

No light.

No reflection.

—

Then—

Something appeared.

—

A distortion.

A glimpse.

—

Two figures.

—

Not clear.

Not stable.

—

Standing—

Somewhere far.

—

Watching.

—

Shin Gu's breath slowed.

—

"...You."

—

She leaned closer.

Trying to see more.

—

The shapes flickered.

Unstable.

—

One—

Tall.

Still.

—

The other—

Less defined.

But present.

—

"...Two."

—

Her voice lowered.

—

"So it's not just one..."

—

She pushed further.

More energy.

More focus.

—

The basin trembled.

—

The figures almost became clear—

—

Then—

A force pushed back.

—

Hard.

—

The entire vision shattered.

—

The basin cracked slightly.

The symbols on the ground dimmed.

—

Shin Gu stepped back again.

Her expression now—

Completely serious.

—

"...I can't see their faces."

—

Not blurred.

—

Blocked.

—

Intentionally.

—

She closed her eyes briefly.

Then opened them again.

—

Colder.

Sharper.

—

"...Someone at my level."

—

Or—

—

Higher.

—

A dangerous thought.

—

Because there were not many—

Who could do that.

—

She turned slowly.

Looking around the dark chamber.

—

"...And they're already watching."

—

Not reacting.

—

Waiting.

—

Observing her.

—

A faint smile appeared.

But this time—

It wasn't calm.

—

It was dangerous.

—

"...Good."

—

Her voice softened.

—

"I was getting bored."

—

She stepped away from the altar.

The shadows around her stretched slightly.

—

"If you can block me..."

—

"Then you're worth finding."

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

—

"...And once I find you—"

—

Her eyes gleamed faintly.

—

"I'll make sure..."

—

"...you regret it."

—

Above—

The palace slept peacefully.

—

The city remained calm.

—

The people believed—

Everything was normal.

—

But beneath—

Something had shifted.

—

A new player.

—

An unseen force.

—

And for the first time—

Shin Gu—

—

Was not the only one in control.