

Ghost 287

Chapter 287: A Stifling Calm

Morning came to the palace—

But it did not feel like morning.

The sun rose as usual, light spilling across golden roofs and jade courtyards, yet something in the air felt... wrong.

Heavy.

Thick.

Almost suffocating.

—

Servants moved slowly through the corridors.

Maids carrying trays paused more often than usual.

Guards shifted their weight, their expressions unusually dull.

—

"...Do you feel it?"

One maid whispered.

"...Yes."

"It feels hard to breathe."

—

Another nodded.

"My head feels heavy..."

—

Across the palace—

The same whispers spread.

—

"I feel tired..."

"Since morning..."

"No energy..."

—

Even laughter felt forced.

Even footsteps dragged.

—

It was as if the palace itself—

Was weighed down by something unseen.

—

The Silent Courtyard

In contrast—

Shin Gu's courtyard was completely silent.

—

No servants moved.

No voices spoke.

—

Only stillness.

—

Inside her hidden chamber—

The altar burned faintly.

—

Shin Gu stood before it again.

Her expression cold.

Focused.

—

The basin of water before her shimmered faintly.

But unlike before—

There was no response.

—

No shadow.

No vision.

No presence.

—

"...Again."

—

She formed seals.

The water rippled.

—

Nothing.

—

Her fingers tightened slightly.

"...Why."

—

For days—

She had tried.

—

Again.

And again.

—

To locate the two figures.

—

To break through the interference.

—

But every time—

She found nothing.

—

As if they did not exist.

—

As if they had erased themselves completely.

—

Her gaze darkened.

—

"...Impossible."

—

Even her leader—

Had sent word.

—

The water surface shifted faintly.

A ripple.

Then—

A voice.

Distorted.

—

"The incidents have stopped."

—

Shin Gu's expression remained unchanged.

"...I know."

—

"Continue observation."

—

"...I am."

—

The voice faded.

—

The water stilled.

—

But her thoughts—

Did not.

—

"...Stopped..."

—

Yes.

The strange occurrences.

The abnormal awakenings.

The spreading disturbances—

—

All of it—

Had gone silent.

—

Too silent.

—

She clenched her hand slightly.

—

"...This is not a solution."

—

"...This is suppression."

—

Something had forced it to stop.

—

And she—

Had not done it.

—

That meant—

Someone else had.

—

Her eyes narrowed.

—

"...Find them."

—

She whispered softly.

—

But the altar—

Gave no answer.

—

The Emperor's Chamber

Elsewhere—

Inside a quiet chamber—

The Emperor stood facing a man.

—

A monk.

—

Dressed simply.

Calm.

Still.

—

Unlike the rest of the palace—

He seemed untouched by the heaviness.

—

"...The palace feels different today," the Emperor said.

—

The monk nodded.

"It should."

—

A brief silence followed.

—

The Emperor's gaze sharpened.

"...You did something."

—

The monk looked at him.

Not denying.

Not confirming.

—

"...I fulfilled what was necessary."

—

The Emperor stepped closer.

"...The incidents."

—

"They have stopped."

—

"Yes."

—

"Completely?"

—

The monk paused.

—

"...For now."

—

Those two words—

Carried weight.

—

The Emperor frowned slightly.

"...For now?"

—

The monk's gaze turned distant.

—

"What has begun..."

"...cannot be erased so easily."

—

"It can only be delayed."

—

The room fell quiet.

—

The Emperor's expression hardened.

"...How long?"

—

The monk did not answer immediately.

—

"...That depends."

—

"On what?"

—

"...On whether the source is removed."

—

The Emperor understood.

—

"...And it is not."

—

The monk shook his head slowly.

—

"No."

—

A cold realization settled.

—

The Emperor looked toward the window.

—

Outside—

The palace moved sluggishly.

—

But calm.

—

"...At least the people are safe."

—

The monk did not respond.

—

The Emperor exhaled quietly.

"...The incidents have stopped."

—

His voice carried slight relief.

—

"...There will be no chaos."

—

The monk finally spoke.

—

"Peace without understanding..."

"...is only temporary."

—

The Emperor's eyes narrowed slightly.

—

"...Then we use this time."

—

"To find the source."

—

The monk nodded.

—

"That is the only way."

—

A False Stillness

Outside—

The palace continued its slow, heavy rhythm.

—

Servants worked.

Guards stood.

Voices whispered.

—

But beneath it all—

Something lingered.

—

Unseen.

—

Unresolved.

—

The Emperor stood quietly.

—

His mind sharp.

Focused.

—

"...It has stopped."

—

Yes.

—

But not ended.

—

And somewhere—

Hidden—

Watching—

—

The real danger—

Still remained.

A Quiet Bouquet

The palace study was filled with silence.

Scrolls lay open across the Emperor's desk, reports neatly stacked, ink still fresh on parchment. The world of governance waited for his attention—

Yet his mind refused to settle.

The brush in his hand paused mid-air.

Unfinished.

Unfocused.

—

He exhaled quietly.

"...Again."

His thoughts drifted.

Not to court matters.

Not to the strange incidents.

Not even to the monk's words.

—

But to her.

—

The Empress.

—

He hadn't seen her since morning.

And for some reason—

That absence felt... noticeable.

—

He set the brush down.

The decision came naturally.

"...I'll go."

—

Without calling attendants.

Without announcing his movement.

—

He stood.

Changed into simple robes.

Muted colors.

Unremarkable.

—

Not an emperor.

Just a man walking through his own palace.

—

The Garden Path

The palace gardens stretched quietly under the afternoon light.

—

Unlike the heavy air in the inner halls—

The garden felt lighter.

Softer.

—

A faint breeze moved through the trees.

Flowers swayed gently.

—

He walked slowly.

No rush.

—

Then—

He stopped.

—

His gaze fell on a cluster of blooming roses.

—

Red.

White.

Pink.

—

Delicate.

Fresh.

Alive.

—

For a moment—

He simply looked.

—

Then—

He stepped closer.

—

"...She might like these."

—

The thought came uninvited.

But he didn't question it.

—

Carefully—

He reached out.

—

Plucked one.

Then another.

—

Three red.

Three white.

Three pink.

—

Balanced.

—

His fingers paused again.

—

Then his gaze shifted.

—

A few lilies stood nearby.

Pure.

Elegant.

—

He picked them too.

—

Soon—

The flowers rested in his hand.

—

Not perfectly arranged.

Not crafted by a florist.

—

But gathered with intent.

—

A simple bouquet.

—

He looked at it.

Then smiled faintly.

—

"...This should be enough."

—

The Shrine

The path toward the shrine was quieter.

—

Few people came here during the day.

—

The atmosphere was peaceful.

Still.

—

As he approached—

His steps slowed.

—

Then—

He saw her.

—

Under a tree.

—

Sitting quietly.

—

Dressed simply.

No heavy ornaments.

No royal presence.

—

Just—

Her.

—

A book rested in her hands.

Her expression calm.

Focused.

—

A strand of her hair had fallen loosely beside her face.

—

The sunlight filtered through the leaves above.

Falling softly around her.

—

For a moment—

He didn't move.

—

Just watched.

—

A memory surfaced.

—

A poem.

—

"In quiet shade beneath the tree,

She sits where time forgets to be.

No crown, no throne, no guarded wall,

Yet she outshines the court and all."

—

He exhaled slowly.

—

Then—

He stepped forward.

—

The sound of his footsteps was soft.

But enough.

—

She looked up.

—

Their eyes met.

—

A brief pause.

—

"...Your Majesty?"

—

Her voice carried surprise.

—

He didn't answer immediately.

—

Instead—

He walked closer.

—

Until he stood beside her.

—

Without a word—

He lifted his hand.

—

She froze slightly.

—

Then—

He gently tucked the loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

—

Careful.

Slow.

—

As if afraid to disturb something fragile.

—

Her breath caught.

—

"...What are you doing?"

—

Her voice was soft.

Uncertain.

—

He didn't reply.

—

Instead—

He brought the flowers forward.

—

"...For you."

—

She blinked.

—

Her gaze dropped.

—

To the bouquet.

—

Roses.

Pink.

White.

Red.

—

And lilies.

—

For a moment—

She didn't move.

—

Then—

Her expression changed.

—

Softened.

—

"...These are... for me?"

—

He nodded.

"...Yes."

—

She reached out slowly.

—

Accepted them.

—

Her fingers brushed his briefly.

—

Warm.

—

A faint smile appeared.

—

"...They're beautiful."

—

Simple words.

But sincere.

—

"...Thank you."

—

Something in his chest eased.

—

He nodded slightly.

—

"...I saw them in the garden."

—

"They reminded me of you."

—

The words slipped out.

Quiet.

Honest.

—

She froze slightly.

—

Then—

Her cheeks warmed faintly.

—

"...You don't have to say things like that."

—

He looked at her.

"...Why not?"

—

She didn't answer.

—

Instead—

She looked at the flowers again.

—

Holding them gently.

—

The breeze passed through.

—

The leaves above rustled softly.

—

The moment—

Was quiet.

—

Unhurried.

—

He sat down beside her.

—

Not too close.

—

But not distant either.

—

For a while—

Neither spoke.

—

She returned to her book.

—

He watched the surroundings.

—

But occasionally—

His gaze returned to her.

—

To the flowers in her hand.

—

To the calm in her expression.

—

And for the first time in a long while—

—

He felt—

Peace.

—

Not the kind forced by silence.

—

But the kind that came—

From presence.

—

From being—

Where he wanted to be.

—

Beside her.

—

Under a tree.

—

With nothing else required.

—

And somewhere—

Quietly—

—

Something between them—

—

Began to bloom.