

Ghost 288

Chapter 288: — A Flower and a Doubt

The palace gates closed behind the departing carriage.

The Emperor had returned.

Duty called him back, as it always did.

But before leaving—

He had done something unexpected.

—

A single flower.

—

Now—

Inside the Empress's chamber, that flower rested in her hands.

—

It was simple.

Not rare.

Not overly grand.

—

But carefully chosen.

—

Soft petals.

A faint fragrance.

—

Lian An sat near the window, sunlight falling gently over her figure.

Her fingers traced the edge of the flower absentmindedly.

—

A small smile—

Unconsciously—

Appeared on her lips.

—

"...Strange man," she murmured softly.

—

Her mind replayed the moment.

The way he had handed it to her.

No explanation.

No command.

—

Just—

A quiet gesture.

—

"...Why now..."

—

Her gaze softened.

For a brief moment—

Her heart felt light.

—

Then—

The air shifted.

—

A faint ripple.

—

And three familiar figures appeared.

Hovering.

Watching.

—

The ghosts.

—

Fen Yu was the first to react.

Her eyes sparkled immediately.

"A flower?!"

—

She floated closer.

"Who gave it to you?!"

—

The scholar ghost narrowed his eyes.

"...Interesting."

—

The general ghost crossed his arms.

"...This feels important."

—

Fen Yu clasped her hands dramatically.

"Oh—this is definitely a story!"

—

She leaned closer.

"Tell me! Tell me!"

—

Lian An sighed.

"You're all too loud."

—

Fen Yu ignored her.

"Is it a secret admirer?"

—

"Or a noble man?"

—

"Or—"

She gasped.

"A hidden lover?!"

—

"Stop," Lian An said flatly.

—

Fen Yu pouted.

"Then say it!"

—

Lian An glanced at the flower.

Then spoke calmly.

"...It's from the Emperor."

—

Silence.

—

Complete.

Sudden.

—

Fen Yu's smile froze.

—

The scholar ghost blinked once.

—

The general ghost's expression stiffened.

—

Then—

All three spoke at once.

—

"WHAT?"

—

Lian An winced slightly.

"...You don't have to shout."

—

Fen Yu floated back dramatically.

"The Emperor?!"

—

"The same Emperor?!"

—

"The one who—"

—

She stopped herself.

—

Then pointed accusingly.

"Did you forget everything?!"

—

The scholar ghost stepped forward.

"Let us review."

—

The general ghost nodded.

"Yes. Clearly necessary."

—

Lian An sighed deeply.

"...Not again."

—

Fen Yu raised her finger.

"Point one!"

—

"He ignored you!"

—

The scholar ghost added calmly,

"Point two."

—

"He favored another woman."

—

The general ghost continued,

"Point three."

—

"He did not protect you when you needed it."

—

Fen Yu leaned closer.

"And most importantly—"

—

"You almost died!"

—

Silence.

—

The words hit.

Harder than expected.

—

Lian An's fingers tightened slightly around the flower.

—

The warmth she felt earlier—

Flickered.

—

The scholar ghost continued,

"And now—"

"He gives you a flower?"

—

Fen Yu crossed her arms.

"And you smile?!"

—

The general ghost added,

"...Suspicious."

—

Lian An looked away slightly.

"...It's just a flower."

—

Fen Yu scoffed.

"No, it's not."

—

"It's a move."

—

The scholar ghost nodded.

"A calculated action."

—

The general ghost crossed his arms.

"...A tactic."

—

Fen Yu leaned in again.

"He's playing with you."

—

The words settled in the room.

—

Lian An's expression changed slightly.

—

Her earlier softness—

Faded.

—

Her mind—

Began replaying everything.

—

The past.

—

His indifference.

—

His coldness.

—

Lady Chen.

—

The loneliness.

—

The pain.

—

And then—

The present.

—

The sudden change.

—

The attention.

—

The gentleness.

—

"...Why now..." she whispered.

—

Fen Yu spoke immediately.

"Because he wants something."

—

The scholar ghost added,

"People do not change so suddenly."

—

The general ghost nodded.

"...Not without reason."

—

Lian An's grip on the flower tightened further.

—

"...Are they right..."

—

Her thoughts began turning.

Darker.

Heavier.

—

"...Was it all just..."

—

She exhaled slowly.

"...A game?"

—

Fen Yu softened slightly.

"We just don't want you to get hurt again."

—

The scholar ghost nodded.

"You deserve clarity."

—

The general ghost added quietly,

"...Not confusion."

—

Silence filled the room again.

—

Lian An looked at the flower once more.

—

It was still beautiful.

Still gentle.

—

But now—

It felt different.

—

Not warm.

—

But uncertain.

—

"...Maybe..."

She spoke slowly.

"...you're right."

—

Fen Yu nodded firmly.

"Of course we are."

—

The scholar ghost added,

"Observe before trusting."

—

The general ghost concluded,

"...Protect yourself."

—

Lian An placed the flower on the table.

—

Her expression—

Now calm.

But guarded.

—

"...I won't misunderstand."

—

Her voice was steady.

—

"...Whatever this is..."

—

"I'll treat it carefully."

—

The ghosts exchanged looks.

Satisfied.

—

But as they faded slightly into the background—

Fen Yu whispered softly,

"...Still..."

"...It was a nice flower."

—

The scholar ghost sighed.

"...You're hopeless."

—

The general ghost shook his head.

—

Lian An didn't hear them.

—

Because her gaze remained on the flower.

—

And her heart—

Now caught between two thoughts.

—

Hope.

—

And doubt.

—

And somewhere between them—

A question remained unanswered.

—

Was this real...

—

Or just another illusion?

The palace gates opened with their usual solemn rhythm.

Steel, stone, discipline—everything stood in place exactly as it should.

But the moment the imperial carriage stopped—

Something felt... off.

—

The guards rushed forward and bowed.

"Your Majesty—"

Their voices faltered.

—

Because the man stepping down from the carriage...

Did not look like the Emperor they knew.

—

His robes—

Slightly creased.

Dust clung faintly to the hem.

And most shocking of all—

His hands.

—

There was dried mud along his fingers.

—

The guards exchanged glances.

Confusion.

Disbelief.

—

One of them gathered courage and stepped forward.

"...Your Majesty, did something happen?"

—

The Emperor paused.

His gaze lowered.

—

To his own hand.

—

Mud.

Rough.

Unrefined.

—

For a moment—

He simply stared at it.

—

Then—

His lips curved.

—

A soft smile.

—

"...Nothing happened," he said.

—

But his tone—

Was lighter than usual.

—

He turned.

Walking past them.

—

The guards remained frozen.

—

Because they had never seen him like this.

—

Not as a ruler.

—

But as someone who had just... lived.

—

—

Inside his chamber—

The Emperor stood alone.

—

He washed his hands slowly.

—

The water turned slightly brown.

Then clear.

—

But the memory—

Did not wash away.

—

Her.

—

Standing there.

—

The way she had looked at the flower.

—

That faint, unguarded smile.

—

He closed his eyes briefly.

—

"...So this is enough..."

—

Just that—

Had been enough.

—

—

The next days passed.

—

Court matters continued.

Reports.

Judgments.

Decisions.

—

But something had changed.

—

Subtle.

—

Yet undeniable.

—

The Emperor listened more.

Spoke less.

—

And when he was alone—

His thoughts always returned to her.

—

The shrine.

—

The punishment.

—

The distance he had created.

—

"...I was wrong."

—

The realization settled heavily.

—

Three days.

—

He gave himself three days.

—

To confirm.

To understand.

To accept.

—

And on the fourth—

He moved.

—

—

The Dowager Empress's chamber.

—

The guards announced him.

—

"His Majesty."

—

Inside—

The Dowager sat composed.

Lady Chen beside her.

—

Both looked up.

—

"Emperor," the Dowager said.

"You came early."

—

He bowed slightly.

"Mother."

—

Then—

He did not sit.

—

He spoke.

—

"I came for the Empress."

—

The air shifted instantly.

—

Lady Chen's fingers tightened.

—

The Dowager's eyes narrowed.

"...What about her?"

—

The Emperor stepped forward.

—

"Remove her punishment."

—

Silence.

—

Heavy.

—

The Dowager leaned back slowly.

"...That punishment was decided for a reason."

—

The Emperor did not retreat.

—

"Then let me bear it."

—

Lady Chen looked up sharply.

—

The Dowager's gaze hardened.

"...What?"

—

The Emperor's voice remained steady.

—

"If there must be punishment..."

—

"I will take it."

—

Silence deepened.

—

Even the air felt heavier.

—

The Dowager stared at him.

Long.

Carefully.

—

"...You are the Emperor."

—

"I am her husband."

—

The words landed.

Firm.

Unshaken.

—

Lady Chen's face paled slightly.

—

The Dowager's expression changed.

—

"...Since when do you speak like this?"

—

The Emperor did not answer that.

—

Instead—

He continued.

—

"She did nothing deserving punishment."

—

"I allowed it."

—

"That was my mistake."

—

His voice lowered slightly.

—

"I will correct it."

—

For a moment—

No one spoke.

—

Because this—

Was not the Emperor they knew.

—

This was a man—

Admitting fault.

—

Taking responsibility.

—

Choosing.

—

The Dowager closed her eyes briefly.

—

When she opened them—

Something had softened.

Just slightly.

—

"...And if I refuse?"

—

The Emperor met her gaze.

—

"...Then I will still bring her back."

—

A quiet challenge.

—

Not loud.

—

But absolute.

—

Lady Chen's hands trembled slightly.

—

The Dowager looked at him—

Not as a ruler.

—

But as her son.

—

And for the first time—

She saw it clearly.

—

This was no longer stubbornness.

—

This was conviction.

—

A long silence passed.

—

Then—

She exhaled slowly.

—

"...Very well."

—

Lady Chen froze.

—

The Dowager continued.

—

"The punishment will be lifted."

—

"And she will return."

—

The Emperor did not smile.

—

But something in his eyes—

Changed.

—

"...Thank you, Mother."

—

—

Outside—

The palace remained unchanged.

—

Servants moved.

Officials spoke.

Life continued.

—

But inside—

Something had shifted.

—

A decision had been made.

—

Not out of duty.

—

But choice.

—

—

That evening—

Orders were given.

—

"The Empress will return from the shrine."

—

The message spread.

—

Whispers followed.

—

Shock.

Confusion.

Speculation.

—

But none of it mattered.

—

Because far away—

In the quiet space where she had been sent—

—

Her return—

Had already begun.

—

—

And in the Emperor's chamber—

He stood alone once more.

—

Looking at nothing.

—

But thinking of her.

—

"...This time..."

—

"I will not be late."

—

Outside—

The night wind moved gently.

—

And somewhere—

A path that had once been broken—

—

Was slowly—

—

Being rebuilt.