

Ghost 120

Chapter 120: the emperor finding truth

Night rolled across the capital like a blanket of ink, swallowing the last traces of sunlight. The breeze was cool, brushing gently against rooftops and rustling the lanterns that hung from shops preparing to close. The Emperor walked among these streets disguised as a commoner, yet every stride he took carried the weight of a ruler whose heart had become a battlefield.

His chest felt tight.

Not from exhaustion. Not from anger. But from something far more dangerous — something he refused to admit even to himself.

He saw her today.

His Empress.

Not lying sick in bed.

Not pale and weak under blankets.

Not suffering from the plague as he had been told.

No.

He saw her standing in the street... in commoner clothes... laughing.

Laughing with another man.

That laughter echoed in his skull, refusing to fade.

Why does it bother me so much?

He tightened his fists at his sides.

She should be laughing with him — her husband.

Not with strangers.

Not with men he didn't know or approve of.

Not with someone who wasn't her rightful partner.

Yet every time he stood before her... she sighed.

She lowered her gaze.

She acted distant, polite, cold — never warm.

But with that man...

She smiled so brightly it pierced him like a blade.

His steps grew faster, heavier.

I cannot see her ill.

I cannot see her with someone else.

Why does this feel wrong?

Why does it hurt?

He stopped for a moment in the street, trying to calm the storm inside him. His general followed silently behind, sensing the emperor's unrest but not daring to speak.

Finally, the Emperor whispered to himself:

"...I have a soft spot for her."

The admission fell from his lips quietly, but it struck him hard. His pulse quickened.

He cared.

Against his will, against his pride, against every layer of control he had built — he cared.

And because he cared, seeing her smile at someone else felt like betrayal.

But why didn't she smile like that for him?

Why did she run from him?

Why did she lie?

He forced his steps forward again, heading toward the palace with growing urgency.

He needed answers.

Back to the Palace

The palace gates opened immediately when they recognized him despite his disguise. His general fell back while the Emperor marched across the palace grounds with long, angry strides.

The moonlight cast silver shadows across the courtyards, making the palace look colder than usual.

He headed straight toward the Empress's courtyard.

When he arrived, the maid stood outside nervously.

"Your Majesty—"

He cut her off sharply.

"Is she resting again?"

The maid swallowed hard. "Y-Yes, Your Majesty... Her Majesty has been resting for four days straight..."

"Indeed," he said flatly. "Four days."

The maid froze under his icy tone.

He pushed past her and walked into the courtyard.

Silence greeted him.

A silence too perfect.

Too still.

Too empty.

He looked around.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

There was no presence of anyone sick.

No servants rushing.

No herbs boiling.

No signs of care.

Just... emptiness.

He walked inside her chamber.

A figure lay on the bed under blankets, facing away.

He moved closer, slowly, his heart pounding harshly in his chest.

For a moment — just a moment — fear twisted inside him.

What if she truly was ill now?

What if she worsened while he was gone?

What if she—

He reached forward and pulled down the blanket.

His breath froze.

Pillows.

Only pillows.

Arranged perfectly to look like a sleeping figure.

A long, dead silence filled the room.

Then—

He let out a low, humorless laugh.

"...I got fooled."

He laughed again, louder this time, although there was no amusement in the sound.

"For four days... she fooled me."

His eyes fell on the table.

All the herbal tonics he sent — untouched.

All the medicine — untouched.

All the nourishing soups and supplements — untouched.

Perfectly sealed.

Perfectly placed.

She never drank a single drop.

He closed his eyes.

The healer... he is my man.

He would never betray me.

So she must have done something.

Used something to trick him.

To make her pulse look sick.

She planned this.

She escaped.

She didn't want to see me.

Before the pain could fully hit him, something soft touched his leg.

Two small cats — her beloved pets — ran to him, rubbing their heads against his boots and meowing.

He bent down, stroking their fur gently.

"At least... you two are still here," he whispered.

The tears he didn't shed pressed silently behind his eyes.

"You're healthy. Well-fed. She must have been here recently."

He stood again.

"She fooled me... but didn't abandon you."

He looked around the room one last time, heart twisting painfully.

She wasn't sick.

She wasn't dying.

She simply...

didn't want the palace.

didn't want him.

didn't want this life.

He exhaled deeply.

"She should have told me."

He walked out, carrying a heavy weight in his chest.

Lady Chen Arrives

Just as he stepped out of the Empress's courtyard, he saw someone waiting near his own quarters.

Lady Chen.

Beautiful.

Graceful.

Soft-eyed.

Dressed in a pink gown that shimmered under the moonlight.

Her hair ornaments sparkled with jade and pearls.

She saw him and immediately rushed forward.

"Your Majesty! I have been waiting for you!"

She bowed gracefully, holding a covered tray.

"I brought your favorite dessert — almond custard. The chef in my courtyard made it. I heard you have been too busy to eat properly... so I came to check on you."

He stared at her quietly.

Lady Chen.

His childhood sweetheart.

The woman who always stood by him.

The one who never lied.

Never hid.

Never made him feel confused.

She was perfect for him.

Anyone could see it.

And he felt affection for her — but not the same kind.

Not the kind that made him restless at night.

Not the kind that made him jealous.

Not the kind that tore at his heart like the Empress did.

But Lady Chen was loyal.

And kind.

And she looked at him with warmth.

She waited patiently for him to respond.

He finally nodded.

"Come inside."

A small smile tugged on her lips.

Inside His Study

The Emperor sat at the table while Lady Chen placed the dessert before him. Her eyes brightened as he took the first spoonful.

"Is it good?" she asked softly.

"...It is."

She smiled gently.

"You must take care of your health, Your Majesty. You carry the entire kingdom on your shoulders. I worry for you."

He didn't reply.

His mind was still filled with the Empress.

Lady Chen hesitated, then spoke in a hopeful voice.

"If... if you are free for a little while... shall we play mahjong? Like we used to when we were young?"

He forced a small smile.

"Very well."

They sat together, fingers brushing the mahjong tiles, the clacking sound echoing softly in the room.

Lady Chen laughed every time she made a silly mistake.

She teased him.

She smiled tenderly.

He answered politely.

Even laughed once.

But his eyes...

They kept drifting toward the window.

Toward the direction of the Whisper Bowl.

Where his Empress was.

Where she was living freely.

Where she was smiling at another man.

Lady Chen noticed his distraction but pretended not to. She simply played another tile.

"Your Majesty, I win again," she said joyfully.

"...Ah. Congratulations."

But his voice was hollow.

She tilted her head, confused, but remained patient.

He excused himself and stood by the window once more.

Cool night wind brushed his face.

His chest tightened painfully.

Why did you run, Lian An?

Why did you lie?

Why didn't you trust me?

Do you hate me that much?

Behind him, Lady Chen watched silently, her own smile fading slightly as she realized...

His heart was somewhere else.

Somewhere she could not reach.

Somewhere only the Empress held.

But the Emperor didn't turn back.

His fingers clenched against the window frame as he whispered inside his heart:

Tomorrow... I will find out everything.

Everything she hid.

Everything she planned.

Everything she felt.

No more running.

No more lies.

Not from her.

Not from himself.