

Ghost 122

Chapter 122: silent agreement

The courtyard of the Whisper Bowl was still buzzing from the Emperor's unexpected arrival when the second wave of chatter rolled in.

The crowd of workers, vendors, and passing villagers remained gathered in clusters, whispering excitedly as they watched the "loving husband" offer fifty roses to his "runaway wife."

Someone muttered loudly,

"Look at him! Such a good man... giving flowers like that. That's real sincerity!"

"It must be that childhood friend of his—probably a shrew—who tried to create rift between these two."

"Exactly! Some married women can't keep their hands off other people's men."

"Poor husband! Only trying to make the wife he loves come home!"

The Empress's face slowly darkened.

Childhood friend?

Shrew?

They were talking about Lady Chen, who was indeed a shrew... but she wasn't the reason Lian An ran away.

This idiot Emperor was.

Still, the comments worked like a spark to dry hay. Her irritation doubled.

She snatched the bouquet from his hand—much harsher than she intended—and hissed under her breath,

"You don't need to behave nicely in front of them."

He blinked.

"You always behave good outside," she continued sharply, "but inside the palace you are always punishing me, doubting me, not trusting me."

The courtyard grew quiet around them. Workers were pretending to stir pots and write characters, but nearly everyone was eavesdropping.

The Emperor's jaw tightened.

He lowered his voice, but his tone was deep and firm.

"That is my responsibility."

She glared. "Your responsibility is to create trouble for me every day?"

"No."

He leaned a little closer.

"My responsibility is to rule impartially. I cannot favor you because you are my wife. I cannot bend the law for you. If the word spreads that the Empress faked a plague—"

His voice dropped into something darker.

"—you won't just get punished. You will be exiled. Or worse."

Her breath froze.

Because she remembered.

The ancestral hall.

The Dowager's cold eyes.

The scorching kneeling.

The humiliation.

The sharp pain radiating through her legs until she fainted.

She never wanted to go through that again.

Her throat tightened. She inhaled, controlled her expression, and lifted her chin.

"So you'll threaten me until the day I die?"

"I'm warning you," he corrected softly. "Not threatening."

All the noise around them faded in her ears.

She hated him at that moment—not because he was wrong, but because he was right.

If the palace found out the truth, she would be dragged into the ancestral hall again. This time, she might not survive.

She swallowed and steadied her breathing.

Then she changed her expression—calm, emotionless, calculating.

"I only want to help my friend," she said. "She is running the Whisper Bowl, not me. She was framed by false treason. Her family lost everything. I am just giving her recipes so she can earn money."

The Emperor's brows furrowed.

He could feel she wasn't lying.

But her next words hit him straight in the chest—

"There are people in your kingdom who are still suffering because of false treason cases," she said coldly. "And because you support certain noble families blindly, no one dares raise a voice. People suffer in silence."

His mind snapped to attention.

A memory flashed.

A merchant family.

Stripped of title.

Assets seized.

Accused of cheating the granary supply.

It was one of the fastest cases he'd ever approved.

He had believed the evidence placed before him.

He'd never questioned it.

But now...

Hearing his wife's voice, steady and confident— Hearing her speak of innocence with such certainty—

Could he have been wrong?

Could someone have manipulated the case?

He felt something uncomfortable twist in his chest.

"What is the name of this family?" he asked quietly.

But she didn't answer directly.

Instead, she said, "They are people I grew up with. If they were guilty, I would not ask you to look again. But I know them better than most know themselves."

The certainty in her eyes hit him harder than any blow.

They stared at each other—his confusion against her determination—until finally he exhaled and said,

"I will investigate."

She suppressed the smile that wanted to rise.

Good.

Her job was done.

Her friend's family would soon have their title back, their home back, their dignity back.

The Emperor, unaware he'd just been played, continued sternly,

"And in exchange, I will not reveal your fake plague to anyone. Not the Dowager. Not the ministers. Not Lady Chen."

Her stomach tightened.

Relief mixed with irritation.

"You just want to use this against me, don't you?"

He tilted his head, expression mild... too mild.

"Yes."

"Shameless."

"Thank you."

She nearly threw the roses at his face again.

Instead she forced out, "Fine. What do you want?"

He didn't hesitate—

"You will cook for me every night."

She choked. "W-What?!"

"You heard me."

"Why?"

He leaned in.

"You want me to keep your secret? Then you will cook. Every day. And when I call you, you will sit and eat with me."

She clenched her fists.

"Don't think I'm free—"

"You're very free," he said dryly, glancing at the training crowd. "Wandering around the city, running a restaurant in disguise, teaching workers, renovating buildings—"

"That's not wandering!" she snapped.

"It is," he said smoothly. "Very impressive wandering."

She glared.

He only gave that infuriating half-smile.

"So," he said softly, "is it a deal?"

Her jaw clicked.

She wanted to stab him with a chopstick.

She wanted to poison his food.

She wanted to throw him off the roof.

But she wanted even more to protect her friend and keep herself out of the Dowager's claws.

She forced a rough exhale.

"Fine," she growled. "I'll cook."

His smile widened, slow and satisfied.

But he wasn't done.

"Good," he said. "Then go and cook."

She blinked. "What?"

He pointed at the front courtyard where renovation was happening.

"My general and one hundred soldiers are joining us for lunch today."

She went still.

"...One hundred soldiers?"

"Yes."

"You want me to cook for one hundred soldiers?!"

"And my general," he added casually. "And myself. So make that one hundred and two."

Her eyelid twitched.

"Cook WHAT exactly? Air?"

"I'm hungry now," he continued calmly. "So a quick snack would be nice."

She inhaled sharply.

"You think this restaurant runs on magic?"

He tilted his head.

"Isn't this your restaurant?"

"It is NOT—!"

He raised a brow.

She shut her mouth.

Inside her mind: I swear if I was not your legal wife...

He looked around, amused at her internal breakdown.

Meanwhile, workers around them were whispering in excitement—

"Such a devoted husband!"

"Only a loving man brings flowers AND squats!"

"Ahh, these two survived a shrew childhood friend destroying them—how beautiful!"

"Shrew friend?" someone asked.

"You know! That lady who tried to steal him earlier! Good married men are always targeted!"

The Empress fumed so hard she nearly steamed.

She marched toward the kitchen before the Emperor saw steam rising from her head.

Behind her, Rong Zhen watched her tie her sleeves and begin barking kitchen orders.

For a moment, something warm flickered inside him.

Seeing her like this—alive, commanding, confident—felt different.

Better.

Real.

He looked once more at the busy training yard.

Workers reading and writing.

New cooks learning to chop vegetables evenly.

A group practicing how to greet customers politely.

Carpenters fitting beams for the private cabins.

The scholar shouting about punctuation.

The twins running about delivering ingredients.

Renovation dust rising between polished steps.

It looked like a beehive.

A lively, chaotic, blooming beehive.

"This..." he murmured under his breath, "is the world she created."

Far from the palace.

Far from shackles.

Far from politics.

Far from him.

A world she had built for herself.

He turned slightly, watching her give sharp, efficient instructions to her staff.

For the first time, he didn't feel like a king watching his subject.

He felt like a man watching the woman he had underestimated far too long.

And in the middle of all the noise, his voice softened—

"I suppose," he said quietly, "I will have to keep up."