

Ghost 167

Chapter 167: tonics

The invitation arrived just before dusk.

A palace maid from the Dowager Empress's courtyard bowed low before Shin Gu and delivered the message with practiced neutrality: the Dowager Empress wished to have dinner that evening—with Lady Chen present as well.

Shin Gu's expression did not change.

She folded the invitation calmly, thanked the maid, and dismissed her with a gentle smile. Only after the footsteps faded did she lift her gaze, eyes dark and thoughtful.

"So," she murmured to herself, "the elders finally call."

The Dowager Empress's courtyard was bathed in warm lantern light, incense curling softly through the air. Everything was arranged with meticulous care—an unspoken reminder of authority, age, and power.

Lady Chen arrived first, dressed elegantly in pale silk, her posture flawless. She greeted the Dowager Empress with affectionate familiarity, pouring tea herself as if this were her rightful place.

Not long after, Shin Gu entered.

She wore simple, refined robes—nothing flashy, nothing provocative. In her arms, palace maids carried lacquered boxes filled with porcelain bottles.

She bowed deeply.

"This concubine greets the Dowager Empress. Greetings to Lady Chen."

Lady Chen smiled warmly, rising from her seat. "Sister Shin Gu, you're too polite."

The Dowager Empress's sharp gaze landed on the boxes. "What have you brought this time?"

"Tonic," Shin Gu replied softly. "Specially brewed. One to nourish the blood and calm the spirit, another to strengthen the body during seasonal change."

The maids opened the lids. Small porcelain bottles gleamed under the lantern light, the faint herbal fragrance spreading through the room.

The Dowager Empress hummed in approval. "You always think ahead."

Shin Gu then turned to Lady Chen and handed her a silk-wrapped box. "A small gift. It helps with sleep and complexion."

Lady Chen looked pleasantly surprised. "You're too thoughtful." She accepted it, fingers lingering on the silk.

The Dowager Empress tapped the rim of her teacup with one finger.

"I heard you have not visited Princess Zhi."

Shin Gu's lashes lowered slightly. "Yes."

The Dowager Empress's eyes sharpened.

"She lost her child. Even a concubine should show courtesy and pay respects in such a matter."

Shin Gu replied softly, "Princess Zhi is grieving and weak. This concubine feared disturbing her rest. I thought it better to let her recover in peace."

The Dowager Empress gave a cold smile.

"Peace?"

She leaned back.

"In this palace, grief does not grant peace. Sympathy does."

Shin Gu remained silent.

"You live in Prince Liang's household," the Dowager Empress continued. "Whether you wish it or not, your actions will be watched. Not visiting her may be seen as indifference."

Shin Gu lifted her gaze at last, eyes gentle but steady.

"This concubine has prepared nourishing tonics and prayers. I believed actions done quietly were better than empty words."

The Dowager Empress snorted softly.

"Words or actions—both must be visible."

A pause followed.

Then the Dowager Empress said, almost casually,

"Do you resent her?"

Shin Gu's expression did not change.

"No. Princess Zhi is the rightful wife. This concubine knows her place."

"Hm," the Dowager Empress murmured, clearly unconvinced.

Shin Gu bowed again.

"This concubine understands

The Dowager Empress sat at the head of the table, her posture relaxed, her expression satisfied. To her left sat Lady Chen, composed and smiling softly. To her right sat Shin Gu, calm and quiet, her movements gentle as she lifted her chopsticks.

The dishes were rich—slow-braised meats, nourishing soups, and delicacies meant to strengthen the body. It was the kind of meal meant not just to be eaten, but to send a message.

The Dowager Empress took a sip of soup and spoke casually, as though discussing the weather.

"You two," she said, glancing between Lady Chen and Shin Gu, "are my favorites."

Lady Chen's smile deepened slightly. Shin Gu lowered her gaze respectfully.

"You understand how to behave," the Dowager Empress continued. "You know your duties. Unlike some people, you don't bring chaos into the family."

Her words hung in the air.

She set her bowl down with a soft sound.

"Now that Princess Zhi has lost the child, the situation has changed."

Lady Chen paused, her chopsticks still.

Shin Gu remained silent.

"The heir is gone," the Dowager Empress said bluntly. "The Prince Liang's courtyard cannot remain without hope."

She turned directly to Shin Gu.

"It is time for you to conceive."

Shin Gu's fingers tightened around her chopsticks for the briefest moment before relaxing.

"Prince Liang has been spending more time with you," the Dowager Empress went on. "That is as it should be. A man must look forward, not linger in misfortune."

Lady Chen nodded gently. "Mother is right. Princess Zhi needs rest. This is a delicate period."

The Dowager Empress smiled approvingly.

"Exactly. Let Princess Zhi grieve quietly. You, Shin Gu, must seize this opportunity. A child will secure your place—and strengthen this household."

Shin Gu bowed her head slightly.

"This concubine will do her best."

"Good," the Dowager Empress said, satisfied. "A woman's worth in this palace is measured by what she leaves behind."

The conversation shifted after that, lighter words filling the table once more. But beneath the calm, unspoken expectations settled heavily in the air.

Lady Chen ate quietly, her thoughts hidden.

Shin Gu lowered her eyes, her expression serene—so perfectly serene that no one noticed the faint, unreadable glimmer beneath.

Outside, the lanterns flickered.

Inside, a path was being laid—one decision at a time.

After Dinner — A Gaze That Sees Too Much

The dinner ended without ceremony.

Servants quietly cleared the table, lifting away bowls and plates that were barely touched toward the end. The Dowager Empress leaned back, clearly pleased, while Lady Chen poured her another cup of warm tea.

Shin Gu rose gracefully from her seat.

"This concubine will take her leave," she said softly, lowering her head in respect. "It is late, and I should not disturb Mother any longer."

The Dowager Empress waved her hand.

"Go. Rest well. Take care of your body."

Lady Chen smiled politely. "Walk carefully."

Shin Gu returned the smile, serene and flawless, then turned and left the hall with light, unhurried steps.

The moment she crossed the threshold, the night air seemed to change.

The Ghosts Follow

Fen Yu hovered behind a pillar, her translucent form barely visible even in moonlight. Wei Rong leaned against the eaves, arms crossed, while Li Shen floated above them both, his sleeves fluttering without wind.

They had been following Shin Gu since the previous day.

And yet—nothing.

No dark aura. No curse residue. No trace of ghostly manipulation.

"She's clean," Fen Yu muttered, frowning. "Too clean."

Wei Rong narrowed his eyes. "That's what makes it unsettling."

They drifted silently after Shin Gu as she walked through the lantern-lit corridor. Her footsteps were light, measured, never rushed. She looked like an ordinary concubine returning to her chamber after a long meal.

Then—

She stopped.

Not abruptly. Not suspiciously.

Just... paused.

Shin Gu lifted her head slightly and turned her face—just enough that her gaze swept across the shadowed corridor.

Straight toward them.

The three ghosts froze.

A cold chill ran through Fen Yu's form, sharp enough that she instinctively hugged herself.

"...Did she just look at us?" she whispered.

Li Shen felt it too. A pressure, subtle but undeniable, brushing against his consciousness.

Wei Rong's expression darkened. "That wasn't a coincidence."

Shin Gu's eyes lingered for a breath longer than necessary. Her lips curved—not into a smile, not into a frown—but into something unreadable.

Then she turned away and continued walking, her figure disappearing into the darkness.

Silence fell.

Fen Yu swallowed. "She can't see us. Only Lian An can."

Li Shen shook his head slowly. "Maybe not see... but sense."

Wei Rong exhaled sharply. "Whatever she is, she's not ordinary."

The cold lingered even after Shin Gu vanished from sight.

The three ghosts exchanged looks, unease settling between them.

They hadn't found proof.

But for the first time since beginning their investigation, all three felt the same thing—

They were being watched.

The fear followed them.

Fen Yu was the first to break into motion, her form flickering as she rushed down the corridor. Wei Rong followed instantly, no longer bothering to hide his presence, while Li Shen glided after them, his usually calm expression tightly drawn.

"That look..." Fen Yu whispered, panic creeping into her voice. "She looked straight through us."

Wei Rong's jaw clenched. "Not like a human. Not even like a normal cultivator."

Li Shen nodded grimly. "It wasn't sight. It was awareness."

They didn't stop until they reached the Empress's courtyard.

The lanterns were dim. The guards stood quietly outside, unaware of the three frantic spirits passing through them like a cold wind. Fen Yu pushed through the chamber doors first, nearly tripping over herself in haste.

Inside, everything was calm.

Too calm.

Empress Lian An lay asleep on the bed, her breathing slow and even. Moonlight spilled through the window, painting her face silver. One hand rested loosely over the blanket, the other near the pillow, her expression peaceful—completely untouched by the danger hovering so close.

Fen Yu floated closer, her voice trembling.

"She's sleeping... she doesn't know anything."

Wei Rong stood at the foot of the bed, arms crossed protectively, as if his presence alone could shield her.

"That woman... Shin Gu... she is dangerous. More than we thought."

Li Shen hovered near the window, listening to the night beyond.

"If she can sense us," he said quietly, "then she may already know the Empress is not ordinary either."

Fen Yu hugged herself, eyes glossy.

"I've never been scared like this before."

Wei Rong glanced at the Empress, then spoke with finality.

"We stay close. No wandering. No solo investigations."

Li Shen nodded.

"And when she wakes... we tell her everything."

The three ghosts remained there, standing guard through the night—silent, alert, and uneasy—while the Empress slept on, unaware that something far more dangerous than palace intrigue had just revealed itself.