

Ghost 169

Chapter 169: a ride through night

Night had already settled over the palace when the Empress finished arranging her dinner. The lamps in her chamber glowed softly, casting warm shadows on the walls. Just as she lifted her chopsticks, footsteps approached.

The Emperor entered without ceremony.

"Change into commoner clothes," he said.

She looked up sharply. "Why?"

"You'll know," he replied, tone leaving no room for argument.

Her brows knit in suspicion, but she said nothing. A short while later, she emerged dressed plainly—simple robes, no ornaments, her hair tied back. The moment she stepped out, she froze.

The Emperor was waiting.

Not in imperial robes.

Not as the ruler of the kingdom.

He stood in commoner clothes, dark and unadorned, looking younger, almost unfamiliar.

"...You too?" she asked.

He only reached for her hand. "Come."

Before she could protest, he led her out. They passed through his chamber, the servants bowing low. At the doorway, he paused and said calmly, "If anyone asks, I have a headache. I'm resting."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the servant replied without question.

Behind the heavy curtains, a hidden door opened. Cool air rushed in as they stepped into a narrow, torch-lit passage. Stone walls closed around them, and the palace sounds faded with every step.

The Empress glanced around. "A secret passage?"

"Mm," he answered. "One of many."

At the end of the passage, moonlight spilled over them. Outside, beyond the palace walls, a single horse stood waiting, its breath misting in the cold night.

She stopped short.

"One horse?" she asked flatly.

The Emperor swung himself up effortlessly and extended a hand. "Come."

She crossed her arms. "No."

He raised a brow. "No?"

"I'm not sitting with you," she said firmly. "I want my own horse."

He looked around at the empty clearing. "There is no other horse."

"Then I'll walk."

He stared at her for a long moment, clearly weighing his options. "It's a long distance."

"I have legs."

A sigh escaped him, half-amused, half-resigned. "Fine. Walk."

She took exactly three steps.

Then stopped.

The road ahead stretched dark and uneven. Night insects hummed. Somewhere far away, a wolf howled.

Her pride wavered.

With a scowl, she turned back. "...Move over."

A slow smile tugged at the Emperor's lips.

He reached down, steady hands gripping her waist as he lifted her onto the horse. The contact was brief—but it sent an unexpected flutter through her chest.

Butterflies.

Her heart skipped.

Annoyed, she shook her head sharply.

Get a grip.

He doesn't like you.

This means nothing.

She sat stiffly in front of him, keeping as much distance as possible.

Behind her, the Emperor's arms wrapped loosely around her to hold the reins.

For him, the night felt lighter.

The quiet road.

The warmth of her presence.

The simple fact that she was here—with him.

He smiled to himself, unseen.

The horse moved forward, hooves striking softly against the ground, carrying them away from the palace and into the waiting dark—toward a night neither of them fully understood, yet neither wished to end too soon.

The horse slowed as the faint glow of lanterns appeared ahead.

Market lights.

The Emperor brought the horse to a stop beneath a tall tree at the edge of the street. Before the Empress could move on her own, he was already off the horse, steadying her as she climbed down.

"Careful," he said.

"I'm not fragile," she replied quickly, even though she accepted his hand.

He tied the reins securely to the tree and glanced back at her. "Stay close. Night markets are crowded."

She didn't answer—but she did follow.

The market was alive despite the late hour. Lanterns swayed overhead, casting warm gold light over rows of stalls. Vendors shouted softly, hawking skewers, dumplings, sweet cakes, roasted chestnuts. The air was thick with smoke, spice, and warmth.

And then—

Grrrrr.

The sound was loud.

Very loud.

The Empress froze mid-step.

Her face burned.

She pressed a hand to her stomach instinctively. Traitor.

The Emperor turned slowly.

"...Did you hear that?" he asked, eyes glinting with amusement.

She stiffened. "No."

He raised an eyebrow.

"It was the horse," she said firmly. "Long ride. Bumpy. Horses get... digestive issues."

He stared at her for a second.

Then laughed.

A real laugh—low, unrestrained.

"You're hungry," he said.

"I am not," she snapped. "I ate earlier."

Another grrrr betrayed her.

She closed her eyes.

He tilted his head, clearly enjoying this far too much. "You don't need to lie. I'm hungry anyway."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You are?"

"Yes," he said smoothly. "So we'll eat."

Before she could protest, he pulled her gently toward a nearby stall.

"Two plates of dumplings," he told the vendor.

The Empress crossed her arms. "I'm not eating."

He glanced at her calmly. "Then throw them away."

Her mouth opened. Closed.

Waste food?

Absolutely not.

The vendor soon placed two steaming plates in front of them. The aroma alone made her resolve crumble. Golden dumplings glistened with oil, steam curling into the night air.

She picked up her chopsticks stiffly. "I just don't like wasting food," she muttered.

He smiled but said nothing.

They ate.

And ate well.

The dumplings were juicy, the filling rich and perfectly seasoned. Without realizing it, she finished her plate faster than him. When she noticed, she froze mid-bite.

"...I was very hungry," she said defensively.

"I noticed," he replied mildly.

When they finished, the Emperor reached into his sleeve to pay.

Then froze.

He checked the other sleeve.

Then his belt pouch.

Nothing.

He blinked once.

Twice.

The Empress watched him suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

"...Checking," he said slowly.

"For?"

"...Money."

Her eyes widened. "You forgot money?"

"Yes."

Silence.

Then the vendor cleared his throat. "Sir?"

The Emperor suddenly grabbed her hand.

"Run."

"What—?!"

He took off.

She had no time to react before she was being dragged through the crowd, her shoes barely touching the ground.

"WHY ARE WE RUNNING?!" she yelled.

"I DON'T HAVE MONEY!"

"You ordered food without money?!"

"I forgot!"

Behind them, the vendor shouted furiously. "HEY! COME BACK! THIEVES!"

The Empress looked back, horrified. "THIS IS ILLEGAL!"

"We'll repay later!"

"YOU CAN'T JUST—!"

They turned a corner, ducked between stalls, and finally stopped in a narrow alley, both breathing hard.

She yanked her hand free, glaring. "You are unbelievable."

He leaned against the wall, chest rising and falling—then laughed again.

The Empress stared.

"...You're enjoying this."

"A little," he admitted.

She buried her face in her hands. "I just ran from a dumpling stall. Do you know how humiliating that is?"

He looked at her, eyes soft, voice lighter than she'd ever heard.

"At least you weren't hungry anymore."

She glared at him—then, despite herself, laughed.

Quietly.

Under the lantern-lit sky, with dumplings still warm in their stomachs and the echoes of the market behind them, neither of them noticed how natural it felt to stand side by side like this.

Or how neither of them wanted the night to end just yet.

She stared at him for a long second, still catching her breath.

"Why are we here?" she finally asked, arms crossed. "Don't tell me this is related to barbarians, spies, or some hidden investigation."

He straightened his robe like an innocent bystander and said calmly,

"I wanted to explore the night market."

Her mouth fell open.

"...What?"

He nodded seriously. "I've never explored it properly. I thought tonight was perfect."

She looked at him as if she were seeing a rare creature. "I thought we came here for a mission."

"That too," he said lightly. "But mostly this."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. This man rules an empire.

"You dragged me out in the middle of the night, made me wear commoner clothes, rode one horse, ran from a dumpling stall like criminals—" she jabbed a finger at his chest, "—because you wanted to explore the market?"

"Yes."

She inhaled. Exhaled. Then spoke very slowly, as if explaining to a child.

"To explore the market... you need money."

He blinked. "...Ah."

"And you," she continued mercilessly, "have exactly zero copper."

He checked his sleeves again, as if hoping coins would magically appear. "I might have... miscalculated."

She laughed, sharp and incredulous. "Miscalculated? You rule the treasury!"

"And yet," he sighed, "I forgot to bring any."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Unbelievable. Truly. If anyone knew the Emperor just dined and dashed—"

"They won't," he said quickly. "I'll repay them tomorrow."

"That's not the point," she snapped. "The point is you can't 'explore' anything without money."

He looked around the bustling market—lanterns glowing, people laughing, vendors shouting—and then looked back at her.

"So," he said thoughtfully, "what do commoners do when they have no money?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You are not stealing again."

He raised both hands. "Absolutely not."

"Good."

A pause.

Then his gaze flicked to her sleeve. "You didn't bring money either, did you?"

Her expression stiffened.

"...I assumed you would."

They stared at each other.

Then, slowly, realization settled in.

They were two of the most powerful people in the empire—standing in the middle of the liveliest night market—completely broke.

She burst out laughing.

Uncontrollably.

"This is ridiculous," she said between laughs. "If the court ministers could see us now—"

He watched her laugh, eyes softening. "You laugh more here."

She froze for half a second. "What?"

"Outside," he said quietly. "You laugh more."

She looked away, suddenly aware of the warmth in her chest. "That's because outside, I don't have to bow."

He nodded. "Then... let's stay outside a little longer."

She eyed the stalls again, then sighed. "Fine. But we only look. No touching. No eating. No running."

He smiled. "Deal."

They began walking side by side, hands brushing occasionally, lantern light dancing around them—two powerful figures pretending, just for one night, to be ordinary.

And somehow, that felt more dangerous than any mission.