

Ghost 174

Chapter 174: quiet hours

The Empress's courtyard was unusually calm that night.

Lantern light spilled softly across the stone path, catching on the leaves of the old pear tree that stood near the center. Its branches swayed gently, shadows brushing the ground like slow breaths. The air smelled faintly of night-blooming flowers and warm tea.

Lian An sat at the small table beneath the tree, her sleeves loose, her posture unguarded in a way she never allowed herself in the court.

Across from her, the Emperor rested his elbow on the table, chin supported by his hand, watching her with a gaze he did not bother to hide.

This wasn't a meeting. It wasn't politics. It wasn't strategy.

Just... time.

Something rare.

"You're quiet," he said at last.

She lifted her cup, took a sip, then glanced at him sideways. "So are you."

He smiled faintly. "That's because I don't want to break this."

She paused, surprised by the honesty, then looked away, pretending to be interested in the tea leaves swirling at the bottom of her cup.

The silence between them wasn't awkward. It stretched comfortably, like a shared blanket.

After a while, he spoke again, voice lower.

"About cultivation."

Her eyes sharpened slightly. "What about it?"

"You've changed," he said. "Your presence feels different. Stronger. Calmer. Even when you're angry, your energy doesn't scatter."

She didn't deny it.

"You noticed."

"I'd be blind not to," he replied. "You move like someone who knows where she stands now."

Lian An set her cup down. "Cultivation isn't just about power. It's about balance. Knowing what to hold... and what to let go."

He studied her carefully. "And what are you letting go of?"

She hesitated.

Then answered honestly. "Fear."

That surprised him more than any lie would have.

"Fear of what?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at the pear tree, its leaves whispering above them. "Of being alone. Of being powerless. Of losing things before I even realize I had them."

The Emperor leaned back slightly, exhaling. "You sound like someone who's lived two lives."

Her fingers tightened for half a heartbeat.

Then relaxed.

"Maybe I have," she said lightly.

He didn't push.

Instead, he changed the question.

"Do you miss it?"

She turned to him. "Miss what?"

"The restaurant," he said. "Your friends. That noisy place where everyone talks at once and nothing feels like a cage."

Her lips curved despite herself.

"The Whisper Bowl?"

"Yes."

She laughed softly. "How could I not? It's chaotic, exhausting, loud... and alive."

He watched her expression soften as she spoke, the tension easing from her shoulders.

"You miss them," he said.

"I do," she admitted. "Yao Qing nags like an old aunt. The twins are impossible. The new man is too serious. And the kitchen—" she shook her head fondly. "It's a mess. But it's my mess."

He nodded slowly. "You shine there."

She glanced at him. "That doesn't bother you?"

He met her gaze steadily. "It used to. I thought... if you were happy somewhere else, it meant I was failing here."

"And now?"

"And now," he said quietly, "I realize I never tried to meet you where you were happy."

The words settled between them.

She hadn't expected that.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then she said, more softly, "Do you regret letting me go there?"

"No," he answered without hesitation. "I regret not asking you to stay—with honesty."

She searched his face, as if looking for a crack, a lie.

Found none.

The lantern flickered.

Somewhere nearby, a cat meowed.

She smiled faintly. "You're different too."

He raised a brow. "Oh?"

"You listen now," she said. "Before, you only decided."

He chuckled under his breath. "Turns out ruling a kingdom doesn't teach you how to understand one woman."

She laughed then—quiet, genuine.

It startled them both.

He stared at her, momentarily caught off guard, as if committing the sound to memory.

"I like that," he said.

"What?"

"When you laugh like that. Not carefully. Not politely."

She tilted her head. "And you're saying this... because?"

"Because," he replied, eyes steady, "I want you to laugh here too. Not just there."

Her breath caught—just a little.

The pear leaves rustled again, as if approving.

She looked down, then back up. "Cultivation teaches patience. Maybe... this does too."

He smiled. "Then I'll learn."

They sat together beneath the lantern light, not as Emperor and Empress bound by duty, but as two people choosing—quietly, carefully—to share the same moment.

And for the first time in a long while, the palace did not feel like a cage.

It felt like a place where something new might grow.

The moment stretched longer than it should have.

The Empress felt it before she saw it—his sudden stillness, his gaze lifting from her eyes to her hair. She followed his line of sight instinctively, fingers half-raising before she stopped herself.

"What is it?" she asked.

He didn't answer right away.

Instead, he leaned forward.

Her breath caught.

The distance between them closed too quickly, far quicker than her mind could prepare for. She leaned back on instinct, the chair legs scraping faintly against the stone. Warmth rushed to her face, a deep, undeniable blush blooming across her cheeks.

"W-What are you doing?" she asked, voice betraying her calm.

He was close now. Too close.

Lantern light traced the sharp line of his nose, the curve of his lips, the focused seriousness in his eyes. From this angle, she noticed things she usually ignored—the neat arch of his brows, the faint scar near his temple, the way his eyelashes cast shadows when he looked down.

He's... too handsome, she thought involuntarily.

Dangerously so.

Her heart thumped once, hard.

The Emperor paused, clearly sensing her retreat, then lifted a hand slowly—not to touch her face, not to pull her closer—but toward her hair.

"Don't move," he said quietly.

His fingers brushed near her temple, barely grazing, gentle and careful. She froze, every nerve screaming awareness. The contact was brief, light as a whisper.

Then he drew back.

Between his fingers was a small green leaf.

He held it up, amusement flickering in his eyes. "This."

She stared.

"...A leaf?"

"It fell from the pear tree," he said, tone far too calm for the chaos he had just caused in her chest. "It was stuck in your hair."

Her face burned.

"That's all?" she blurted.

He tilted his head, lips curving. "What did you think?"

"I—" She stopped herself, turned sharply away, pretending to fix her sleeve. "Nothing."

A soft laugh escaped him.

"You leaned back like I was about to steal something precious," he teased.

She shot him a glare. "You leaned forward without warning."

"Fair," he admitted. "But you're the one who let your thoughts wander."

She opened her mouth to argue—then closed it again when she realized she had no defense.

He tucked the leaf onto the table and leaned back in his seat, clearly pleased.

For a moment, neither spoke.

The lantern swayed. The night deepened. And the space between them felt... different now.

Not awkward.

Just warmer.

The teasing air faded as the Emperor's expression slowly turned serious.

He rested his elbow on the armrest, fingers folding together, eyes no longer playful. "There's something I didn't tell you earlier."

The Empress straightened at once. "About Princess Zhi's incident?"

He nodded. "Yesterday, after returning from the night market, I went to Shin Gu's chamber."

Her eyes sharpened. "Alone?"

"Yes." His voice was calm, but weighted. "I didn't alert anyone. I wanted to see for myself."

She held her breath.

"What did you find?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. "No hidden tools. No strange powders. No signs of struggle. Just an altar."

"An altar?" Her brows drew together.

"A small one," he continued. "God idols. Incense sticks. Clean. Carefully maintained. The kind that wouldn't raise suspicion. If someone looked at it casually, they would think she's merely devout."

The Empress's fingers tightened on her sleeve.

"And?" she pressed.

"And that's exactly what troubles me," he said quietly. "It was too clean. Too normal."

She understood instantly.

"If she used something... it wouldn't be left behind," she murmured.

"Yes." His gaze darkened. "If this was done by ordinary means, we would have found traces. Oil stains. Footprints. Residual scent. Something."

"But there was nothing," the Empress said softly.

He met her eyes. "Which means whatever caused Princess Zhi to lose the child wasn't done by normal hands."

A chill slid down her spine.

"Cultivators," she said.

He nodded. "Or something even worse."

Silence fell between them.

"The kind of power that doesn't need physical contact," he continued. "Something that can influence movement, perception, or balance. Something that can act within a single breath."

Her thoughts immediately went to the lake.

To her own body walking without her will.

"To the path I almost drowned in," she said slowly. "That wasn't an accident either."

"No," he said firmly. "It wasn't."

The Emperor leaned forward now, his voice low. "Whoever this is... they are operating inside my palace."

"And even your people can't see them," she added.

"Even my cultivators," he confirmed. "If they could, they would have reported it. Which means this presence can evade trained senses."

The Empress exhaled slowly.

"That explains why the ghosts couldn't see anything either," she said. "They said nothing happened. No disturbance. No signs."

"Exactly," he said. "If even ghosts can't detect it... then this thing exists on a level between."

Her lips pressed into a thin line. "Human and ghost."

He didn't deny it.

"There is something fishy about this entire situation," she said at last. "Princess Zhi. The oil. The lake. The scapegoat. Shin Gu's timing."

"Yes," he agreed. "And until we know what we're dealing with, we can't act rashly."

She looked at him then—really looked at him—and for the first time, she didn't see an Emperor speaking to an Empress.

She saw a man carrying the weight of a kingdom... and fear.

"Whatever it is," she said quietly, "we'll find it."

He studied her for a moment, then gave a small nod.

"Together," he said.

And this time, there was no teasing in his voice at all.